



PEQUOD

fall 2019

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TELL YOU SOMETHING

Radhika Vu Thanh Vy

“Mama, I have to tell you something,” she said, in her mother tongue.

It was already hard enough to talk about these things, much less in a language that wasn’t her strongest, and, on top of that, over the phone.

“Sao?” her mother replied. *What is it?*

She decided to switch to video call. She requested that her mother do the same. Now, she could read her mother’s facial expression and modify her script accordingly.

“I’m on birth control pills,” she said.

“Thế à? Ủ, có ok không” Oh really? *I see. Is it ok?*

“They make me want to throw up and don’t let me eat properly. I want to change it.”

“Ok, con đổi đi.” *Ok, change it dear.*

She had expected more questions, more strain. “I talked to the doctor. I want to change to the one that gets put in the arm. It’s called an implant. But getting it hurts and I would need a few days to recover.” A pause. This was the key moment. “I want to go with you.”

“Được. Con về rồi mẹ đưa đi làm.” *Ok, come back and I’ll take you.*

This was surprising. She didn’t expect her mother to be this receptive, especially given how much her mother cared about propriety. She was skeptical about how easy her mother made it sound. “I don’t know if they have this at home though.” Home was in Vietnam.

“Rồi để mẹ hỏi. Thẻ nào cũng có.” *Just let me ask around. One way or another, they’ll have it.*
Damn, she thought, after she hung up the phone. *That was easier than I expected.*

Radhika’s Insecurities and Doubts, Plaintiff

vs.

Radhika’s Nexplanon Birth Control Implant, Defendant

JUDGE: Plaintiff’s lawyer, you may call your witness to the stand.

PLAINTIFF’S LAWYER: I call Radhika’s Yeast Infection to the stand.

COURT REPORTER (to the witness): Raise your right hand. Do you solemnly swear that the testimony

you are about to give is the most truthful projection of what Radhika imagines to be the consciousness of the inanimate object you represent?

YEAST INFECTION: I do.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: State your name.

YEAST INFECTION: Yeast Infection. Radhika's Yeast Infection, to be exact.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: In your experience, are periods and yeast infections linked in any way?

YEAST INFECTION: Periods do not cause yeast infections, but during a period the pH of the vagina changes, which can increase the likelihood of a yeast infection.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: Has Radhika had a yeast infection?

YEAST INFECTION: Yes.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: How many times has Radhika had a yeast infection?

YEAST INFECTION: Once, just me.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: Did she get her yeast infection—you—when she was on the Nexplanon birth control?

YEAST INFECTION: Yes, Radhika was on the Nexplanon implant when she got me.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: Would you say that because periods can increase the likelihood of a yeast infection, they could be characterized as unpleasant? Gross, even?

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: Objection! Leading question.

JUDGE: Objection sustained.

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: I have no further questions, Your Honor.

“Yo,” she said, “I have to tell you something.”

“Yeah?” her best friend replied.

“I’m still on my period.”

“Really? That’s pretty long, right?”

“Yeah. I think the implant is messing up my cycle.”

“Oh. Do you need to see a doctor?”

“No. It’s pretty common for period cycles to change after the implant. Many people stop getting their period, like completely.”

“But you’re getting really long ones.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you considered period sex?”

“Never crossed my mind,” she lied.

“Yeah, well, just a thought.”

Radhika’s Insecurities and Doubts, Plaintiff

vs.

Radhika’s Nexplanon Birth Control Implant, Defendant

JUDGE: Defendant’s lawyer, please call your first witness.

DEFENDANT’S LAWYER: I call A Mouthful of Semen to the witness stand. State your name.

SEMEN: Semen.

DEFENDANT’S LAWYER: How do you feel about period blood?

SEMEN: Not a fan. No offense.

DEFENDANT’S LAWYER: Why are you not a fan of period blood?

SEMEN: Um, the smell. The mess. The color and texture is a little weird. I don’t know, blood in general just makes feel queasy. Nothing personal.

DEFENDANT’S LAWYER: How do you feel about semen?

SEMEN: I feel fine about myself. Why?

DEFENDANT’S LAWYER: That’s all, Your Honor.

“Wait,” she said, putting a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “I have to tell you something.”

He lifted his head. “Yeah?”

“I think I started my period,” she said.

He looked at her blankly for half a second, then, rolling off her, said, “That’s ok, we don’t have to do anything.”

She felt him getting up to leave.

“It’s not that bad,” she said, trying to salvage the situation. “It’s really light. We can still have sex but it’s totally fine if period sex isn’t your thing.”

“Yeah... I find it weird that period sex is even a thing at all.”

“No, I get that.”

His body was lying next to hers, but they both knew he had left the room.

Radhika's Insecurities and Doubts, Plaintiff
vs.
Radhika's Nexplanon Birth Control Implant, Defendant

JUDGE: Defendant's lawyer, please call your next witness to the stand.

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: I call Radhika's Menstrual Cup to the witness stand. Please state your name.

MENSTRUAL CUP: DivaCup but I go by Diva.

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: How do you feel about period blood?

DIVA: Love it.

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: Why do you love it?

DIVA: Because no one taught me to hate it.

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: How do you know Radhika?

DIVA: Her friend recommended the menstrual cup to her a while back but she didn't like the idea of touching period blood when inserting and removing a menstrual cup. When she got the implant and prolonged periods, she became used to the blood. Then she tried me out and felt much better about the whole situation. I help keep the periods tidy and hygienic. And less costly. Nexplanon helps keep the periods painless. It's a team effort.

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: Do you think Radhika likes her period the way it is now?

PLAINTIFF'S LAWYER: Objection! Calls for speculation.

JUDGE: Objection overruled. Please answer the question.

DIVA: I don't know if she LIKES her period, but she has figured out ways to work with it, and I know she is less apologetic about it. I think she feels more connected with her body.

DEFENDANT'S LAWYER: Thank you. No further questions, Your Honor.

"Hey," she said, propping herself up onto her elbows. "I have to tell you something."

"Yeah?"

"So I have this birth control implant," she began. She had learnt through trial and error that it was generally best to start with the explanation for why she was asking for period sex. Why she couldn't just wait a week. "Initially, I got it because birth control pills gave me really bad side effects. The implant is much better, but the only thing is it messes up my menstrual cycle. I'm basically stuck on my lightest day of my period for a month. But the period stops for one week. Like a reverse period, which kinda sucks but I like the implant because it removes my period cramps, which is a lifesaver."

“Um... Ok, so you get periods every day?”

Questions like these were promising. They showed curiosity, openness. They showed he didn’t have a pre-made decision.

“Yes, but very light ones. It’s more like spotting. And some days not at all.”

“I don’t know what spotting is.”

“Like very, very little blood.”

“Ok.”

An awkward pause. Which was normal.

“It’s fine if you feel a little weird. I used to feel weird about it too. If you have questions, like please ask, but we also don’t have to talk about this anymore if you don’t want to. I just wanted to let you know.”

He shifted his weight a bit. “Yeah, I’ve never, um, I’m new to this, but if you’re ok then I’m ok too.”

“You are?”

“Yeah. Like I still want to,” he said, “if you do.”

Boy, you bet I do. “Oh ok, uh, cool let me lay a towel.”

Radhika’s Insecurities and Doubts, Plaintiff

vs.

Radhika’s Nexplanon Birth Control Implant, Defendant

JUDGE: Defense counsel, would you care to make a closing argument to the jury?

DEFENDANT’S LAWYER: Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, the evidence you have heard proves that the Nexplanon birth control implant plays an important and positive role in Radhika’s life. She doesn’t have debilitating and painful period cramps anymore. She feels better about her body. She used to dread her periods. She hated leaks and touching period blood. After getting the implant, she masturbated for the first time with period blood and she realized it’s not that bad. In fact, it’s a great natural lubricant. She became ok with using the menstrual cup, and even learned how clenching and relaxing her pelvic floor muscles helps adjust the cup comfortably into place. She has developed a healthier relationship with her body, which has informed her conversations with her sexual partners, and has deepened her conversations with her friends. This is an ongoing journey, and she needs her team with her. I ask you to do the right thing and bring back a verdict in favor of Radhika’s Nexplanon Birth Control Implant and against Radhika’s Insecurities and Doubts.

JUDGE: Plaintiff’s counsel, do you wish to address the jury?

PLAINTIFF’S LAWYER: Yes, Your Honor. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, at this point the birth

control implant is more trouble than it is worth. It has served Radhika well for two years. She has learnt all the lessons she needs to learn, unlearned all the problematic stigmas she needed to unlearn, and now it is time for Radhika to be free of her aggravating, eternal period. I hope you will agree that the Nexplanon Birth Control Implant should be removed. I ask you to find the Nexplanon Birth Control Implant guilty of detracting from Radhika's overall well-being.

JUDGE: Thank you.

The Jury exits. The jury returns.

JUDGE: Jury, have you reached your verdict?

BLUE HILL 3

Alyssa Chesney



CALL OF THE VOID (CLIFFSIDE MEDITATION)

Sarah Warner

*you think a lot of things don't you you think of oceans pulsing salt pushing bones into sand
think of undertow swirling underworlds a world's worth of the undergrowth like the fuzzy down on her
cheeks like the curling hate of her mouth think of how you'd hold your breath in the pool and
pretend you were a spacewalker all tether-taut floating down to the cosmos to the tiles with the dead
worms washed out in the rain god bless their poor souls think of grammy come hollering she's dead
she's dead dear god look at her just lying down there think of kicking off and coming up and the
silence breaking over like a baptism think of if you'd just had a moment longer maybe you could've
been reborn could've slingshotted around saturn and into the infinite think of that chlorine
green quiet think of the violent black think of fifty foot freefalls think of the way it calls to
you crooked teeth and wet tongue crashing down think of the deafening noise the boom and then the
quiet think of the pale empty think of her think of her her her think of thinking things
thinking wet thinking her thinking dead*

ELECTRO

Allison Wehrle

Lightning cracks through the dark sky—
highlighting the rain pooled up
on the widow screen.

The trees outside my house
are split apart, seared, scarred—
twisted from lightning
bolts, tottering into the wind,
crashing down while I watch
transfixed in my room.

Electrocution haunts me.
At school, I'm dared to touch
the electric fence, to put my finger
against the pulse and feel the spark
of it course through me.

The crows perched on the trees
caw out to me,
they tell me that even they
have learned better, and
that the pain is not worth
the quick glimpse of brightness,
so I hover my hand close,
pretend to jolt,
and jump away.

Water and electronics don't mix.
At night, I plead with my ceiling—
begging not to be electrocuted
when I plug my nightlight
into the outlet. In the bathroom,
I hide all the hairdryers
and curling irons
and electric toothbrushes
in the drawers before
brushing my teeth,
keeping eye contact
with my reflection,
making a pact that no one
will drop a toaster into the bathtub
while I shower.

My dad checks the AA batteries
by licking the top of them—
a tiny shock to his tongue.
I ask him what electricity
tastes like, but he doesn't answer me.

I imagine it's like lightning, lights,
like lightning bugs,
like starlight siphoned
into an earthquake—
a symphony inside me,
in my spine, shivering
echoes of voltage through me,
I can almost feel the aftertaste of corrosion
coating my mouth like a layer of plaque—
a hint of stale copper on my lips.

Our world is a world of metal and ocean
and electricity—we are tangled
up in the powerlines—
we're stuck waiting
to see if lightning will strike twice.

Who wants to share a pool
with electric eels?

Who wants to become a storm chaser,
trailing behind thunderstorms?

Who wants to eat a mouthful
of almost dead batteries?

Who's ready for the electric chair?

FIRST SNOW

Liya Yang



THE GRASP

Maureen Jiang



THIS CAN BE IT

Vasiki Konneh

If you ask, I am ready to die.

When my mother birthed me,
she cried into God's shoulders and said

"I have killed my own child."

God caressed her existence
and they said,

"Is that not for the best?"

When I asked why I should revel in this body of mine,
God told me,

"This world will kill you.

Die loving yourself.

Is that not for the best?"

I want to tell everyone I love,

"When I am killed,

drench the American flag in my blood.

Every *inch* of it."

IN THE AIR I'LL MAKE IT

Teddy Reiner

How could I ever what I how could you even *start* to how I literally can't you didn't no no "Billy?" Carlene's face floated vaguely above me. Her brown hair brushed on my naked chest, its waves coalescing to hollow cylinders in the liberal Washington air that filtered through my apartment. She pondered my eyes and I pondered the silhouette of her face, halfway between an oval and a circle; her nose seemed to lack depth, as if it were noon.

"Yea sorry?" I had faded out for a minute, focused on us, actually, on this past week of Billy-Carlene. She was almost impossible to gauge; she'd been avoiding my texts and could only ever talk on the phone for a minute but told me she wasn't busy, just on the way to something, and acted like nothing was wrong when she came over. We were both 94% naked. I was holding many questions back.

"You're gone but you're hard." Frank Ocean's *Blonde* was on in my living room and the soundwaves forced their way through the doorframe. It sounded like a reverb-remix of the album. I had called Carlene yesterday and she didn't pick up so I texted her, she told me one second and then radio silence until a few hours ago when she showed up on my porch. But nothing was wrong and I held her ass in my left hand, flicking the LA Police Gear® tag that clung to her thong, an industrial clothing company that had seemingly branched out to intimates. Her hair still drilled through my skin. I was not happy with how Carlene had been communicating. "Can we fuck?"

"Yes," I said, managing a smile that I knew was convincing. Carlene smiled back as Three Stacks started prophesizing *Solo (Reprise)* from the living room,

"AYE"

"AYE SO NOW I'M"

Carlene climbed on top of me and grabbed my dick, breathing heavier. She leaned down to kiss me and I took off her LAPG® bra and was suddenly angrier than I was before, could not understand this violent, almost conservative purchase. Her breasts fell onto my skin and my phone buzzed.

"SO LOW THAT I CAN SEE UNDER THE SKIRT OF AN ANT"

Why was she gaslighting me? It'd been more than seven months at this point. She would come over and talk about us and love and we would fuck like three times and probably sleep together; then she would leave and go about whatever business was hers and re-appear days later, elated, of course, to see me. She held me straight and true and told me to take off her thong, and I antold her she would have to let go.

"SO LOW THAT I DON'T GET HIGH NO MORE WHEN I 'GERONIMO' I JUST GO 'HEH'"

I slid her Police Gear down and noticed the Band-Aids® and Sharpies® on my dresser that I had snuck out of work a week before, both of which were unopened. Carlene giggled.

“SO LOW MY CUP IS A ROJO MY CHOLO MY FRIEND”

She groaned through her teeth and straddled me again, pulling myself inside her for the second time that night. I was already thinking about my bike to work the next morning, and the final hill up to the Fulfillment Center that wrecked my calves for every shift. I had disappeared inside her and groaned myself.

“SO LOW THAT I CAN ADMIT”

Carlene exhaled heavily and was oscillating above me. I wasn’t enjoying this yet. She pressed on my pectorals for balance and I tried to force myself into focus but couldn’t get my head off my decreasing times up that unavoidable hill. I tilted my head for a second and saw Carlene’s red Police Gear® again, and I squinted and looked back up at her, but her eyes had located the ceiling, and I wondered if I should have worn a condom, and how much condoms usually cost,

“WHEN I HEAR THAT ANOTHER KID IS SHOT BY THE POPO IT AIN’T AN EVENT”

and I tried to appreciate Carlene’s platinum insides against my bare skin, but it felt, at best, gold-plated. My boxers were Hugo Boss®, from Carlene after a trip to Nordstrom Rack®, and they lay next to her cladding. Amazon sold both sets. More boxers and socks were scattered around the bed, most of them clean.

“NO MORE HIGH HORSES SO HARD TO WEAR POLO®”

My most recent finish on the West Coast circuit was fifth and second in the hills. My Oregon jersey was nailed to the wall in a frame, presiding over my new kit from Cannondale®, which was folded neatly on a cleared-off section of dresser. Carlene was molded around me and it felt like I was too deep.

“WHEN I DO I CUT THE PONY OFF NOW THERE’S A HOLE WHERE THERE ONCE WAS A LOGO HOW FITTING”

Carlene had posted on Instagram™ two days ago, her full figure posed outside the Balenciaga® store in Northgate Mall, a few hours after she missed one of my calls. I liked the photo but stayed on it for a while, just looking, zooming in and out and thinking about our love, our sex, everything that had transpired since we met in that very mall some months back, in the clearance section of ProRunnerSupply®.

“SO LOW THAT I COULD GIVE A FUCK ABOUT WHAT IS TRENDING”

“Fuck yes, Billy,” Carlene released, and I tried to lower myself into the mattress. I was two months behind on rent and my landlord’s patience was sharpening. Also I had to get myself up to Bellingham for this weekend’s race. Carlene was tight around my pillar and I knew my face was contorted.

“TRYNNA CUT DOWN ON MY SPENDING REGARDLESS OF WINNING INSTEAD OF PRETENDING”

I noticed the other articles of clothing on the floor, and the painting that I had leaned against my wall until I picked up more hanging-wire. “Carlene,” I moaned as I grabbed her breasts and pictured her couture-post, more than 200 likes, obviously FaceTuned® but still sort of genuine, the herringbone leggings forcing floaters into my vision and I wondered how many of those likes had entered her. My laundry basket was overflowing onto a few nickels and dimes on my desk.

“AND BENDING OVER BACKWARDS, OVER HALF OF THESE HOES HAD WORK DONE”

I had retrieved trumpet mouth-pieces made in China today. They might have cracked when I ejected them into my cart. I did not have many friends at work but some were good people. I was going to eat Frosted Flakes® in the morning. Carlene was in charge of every social-media-speech-act at one of Seattle’s best modelling agencies.

“SAYING THEY WANT SOMETHING REAL FROM THEIR MAN I’M JUST SAYING THIS WE BEING REAL PERSONS”

I started racing in high school after a family-friend told me about the little-known NCAA cycling tour that produced a few pros a year. Most guys on the Tour had skipped college to train in California, sometimes still as minors. Not to mention they were almost all European. Carlene and I had started to get into a rhythm.

“I HATE THAT IT’S LIKE THIS I FEEL FOR YOU AND I DON’T KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE WITH A SKIRT ON”

Cycling held the biggest stake in my emotional well-being. There is no purer form of solipsism than pushing back against yourself with seventy miles to go, and an entire group of savants flying ten minutes ahead and there’s no prize money, and... Carlene seemed to tune out whenever I started to talk about my qualms with the sport.

“SO PARDON ME IF I AM BEING INSENSITIVE BUT DARLING THIS ONLY WORSENS”

“Yes, baby,” I said, feigning sexual interest but still communicating authentic affection, and she rode me harder, disturbing the pattern I had developed between my waist and the bed. I wasn’t sure I’d have the energy to break out of the peloton this weekend. We were fucking in different time signatures.

“SO LOW MY HALO STAY WAY LOW IT FEELS LIKE ITS BENT”

My love for her was a bucket of oil and water in my garage, very much existent but unsure of its consistency, melancholic by nature. I had five-hundred-dollars in checking and a little over 4k in savings. There was a bonus today and I hit it, thankfully, another fourteen in the vault. I made spaghetti before Carlene came over.

“SO LOW THAT WHEN THEY THROW PUSSY OR PESOS DON’T PAY NO ATTENTION TO IT”

I could never forget Fargo. “Oh my GOD,” Carlene groaned, and I hoped it wasn’t real. It felt

alright. Dad and I drove out to Fargo two days earlier than we needed to. I had to retake three finals. There were pins in my stomach up until the whistle. I possessed the same assets I do now.

“SO LOW THAT I AIN’T NO ROOKIE BUT FEEL LIKE A KID LOOKING AT THE OTHER KIDS”

Mary Ogle consistently hit three more products than I did every shift. She lived close to work and sometimes walked. Carlene had slowed down and we found our rhythm again. This was our favorite position. It was going to rain tonight and my roof was still leaking from when I moved in.

“WITH ASTONISHMENT WHILE I’M ON PUNISHMENT WATCHING THE SUMMER COME CLOSE TO AN END”

Carlene had said she loved me a few weeks ago but I didn’t buy it. I definitely loved her. Sex with her sometimes felt like cycling, struggling until you hit a groove and then staying with it, push, push, faster with the new carbon-fiber derailleur I was trying out, Carlene was panting mad as focused on the calendar hanging beside a mirror

“AFTER 20 YEARS IN I’M SO NAÏVE I WAS UNDER THE IM-”

and remembered that Amazon hired me almost exactly one year ago from that night, the beginning of a year of minimum-wage and bonuses, of more and more pain in the thighs and an acquaintance with florescence. I continued to interview for full-time positions for three months.

“PRESSION THAT EVERYONE WROTE THEY OWN VERSES ITS COMING BACK DIFFERENT AND YEA THAT SHIT HURTS ME”

Kevin Sharp was hiding a small motor in his frame during my senior year, this was well known but the NCAA didn’t require the same level of pre-race scrutiny as the Tour did. I felt Carlene contract. You could hear a high-pitched whirr when Sharp hit the tarmac in the rain. Carlene was moaning.

“I’M HUMMING AND WHISTLING TO THOSE NOT DESERVING”

My clip-ons were on the carpet next to my doorframe, worn and chaotic with paint-chips. I had mostly tuned out André 3000 for Carlene’s utterances and my own thoughts. There was still a chance she wouldn’t stay the night but it was going to rain. She bounced on me and I tried to look interested, we had been fucking for under a minute and I knew I wasn’t going to finish.

“I STUMBLED AND LIVED EVERY WORD WAS I WORKING JUST WAY TOO HARD?????”

I did not. We broke each other’s hearts two months later.

I'M EVERY WOMAN LOUNGING

Natasha Gallagher

Bathing above grey lakes,
look at my clean lines
attended by ghosts:
corpse on corpse under pale blue sky.

All eyes rise from water
to my pedestal of polar ice,
I am indistinguishable from cool
steel of the surgeon's table.

Remove the warm weights
from my body and let
drains and tubes and chambers
pour out of me.

Finish this skin with slick polyurethane.
There are the people who take
their lawn ornaments inside when it storms
and there are the people who don't.

In the wet glaze of storm, my legs rest
on the tongue in your eyes.
I'm all heat-melted glass,
ready to be eaten.

I've taken to the calcified bubble
and you've taken the keyhole.
Every bend of this spine is for you—
Look at me, my skin slides off my face.

RIPPLE

Chris Rodiger



PICTURESQUE WUYUAN

Liya Yang



SHOPPING CART EARNHARDT

William O'Connor

My brother is in the basket,
I'm at the helm, and the shopping cart is dreaming
as it floats towards the car

where my mother is waiting, thinking
we wouldn't crash, but of course that's
what we do, into the side of the van.

My brother was fine, he's
filled with oxygen and smarts, neurons
firing off with messages of love colored purple
like revolution.

Only my ribs
were a little bruised, but that's not the first time
somewhere deep in my chest hurt

from the weight of impact, force and distance
made one, united in their flow up from my chest,
through the back of my neck, and across the top of
my head

finally lighting up my eyes where, if you time
it right- you won't- you might see me cry.
Because no angel is fast enough to swing

down low and fly alongside Fear, crashing
into the swimming pool filled with sweet mangos and what-the-hell
beneath penguin pool floats drifting under a hot sun

where two lovers, drinking daiquiris and looking up,
wonder to themselves about the ants in the planes
and how the Sky might look down upon the earth
and know where it wants to rain today.

HANNAH JO

Chris Rodiger



MEDIA NARANJA

Dervyn Harding

Aimely rolled an orange back and forth between her palms as she walked. She imagined she was molding it like clay, smoothing its bumps and blemishes with the friction of her hands. She would have loved to tear the orange open and squeeze its sweet juices into her mouth. But they wouldn't be sweet, of course—the orange trees that populate the parks and sidewalks of Spain produce unbearably sour fruit, even at their ripest. Only a tourist would be foolish enough to take a bite. Spanish oranges are supposedly perfect for making marmalade when they reach maturity in mid-December, though, and she was disappointed she would not get a chance to help her host mom make any before she left Spain. She released a heavy sigh and squeezed the orange with her right hand. Not hard enough to squish it—she would never understand the concept of destroying something just for the sake of it—but just hard enough for the gesture to relieve some of the ache in her heart that settled in whenever she remembered how soon she'd be leaving.

Aimely's departure from the small-town comforts of Bennett, Maine five months ago had felt overwhelmingly terrifying up until the very moment the plane had left the ground. Then suddenly, for the first time that she could remember, she had felt weightless. And the more distance the aircraft had left behind, the more strings she envisioned snapping and recoiling toward Earth, while she, Aimely Perkins, floated carelessly away from all familiarity. But now, with the end of the semester looming near, she felt those strings seeking her out, slithering along behind her, biding their time until the right moment to latch on.

The air was brisk tonight, capturing Aimely's breath and suspending it in the streetlamp's glow for a few seconds before allowing it to evaporate into nothingness. Though winter weather in Spain is comparable to the refreshing early fall temperatures of Maine, the crisp air nonetheless pricked at her legs beneath a black denim skirt, compelling her to shiver and cross her arms over her chest. She walked a little quicker in anticipation of the warmth that the pub's dark, color-changing lights and pulsing Spanish music would pump into her veins. She leapt off the curb and skipped across the street. As Banagher's Irish Pub came into view, the welcome sounds of slightly intoxicated bliss wafted toward her.

She was still holding the orange she had picked up on her journey, and having now grown accustomed to its specific weight and outline, she felt reluctant to discard it among the fallen fruits of another tree. Instead, she decided to tuck it into one of the inner pockets of the jean jacket that she loved so much. The amount this jacket could carry in its hidden inner pockets never failed to amaze her, and she had no problem using them to hold weird things like sour, manhandled oranges.

Aimely was late as usual, and she knew her friends would be inside already, having snagged a much-too-small table and all available chairs for their group to crowd into. The delicate figure lounging against the pub's outer wall in dark jeans and a red camisole a few feet away from the doorway was a pleasant surprise, though. Aimely slowed her gait and allowed a coy grin to surface. She shoved her hands in her pockets and shook her head at the ground once with a quick breathy laugh.

"Hey," she announced when she was about a foot away from María.

María extracted her body from the wall, using her booted left foot to propel her body closer to Aimely's.

"Hello, pretty girl," María responded in her second language, the elongated words caressing Aimely's ears.

"Is anyone else here yet?" Aimely asked, knowing the answer, but hinting at María's reason for waiting outside.

"Sí... pero quería verte antes de entrar."

"Me alegra," Aimely admitted, "I wanted to see you too"—care-free happiness written plainly in the curve of her mouth. "Qué guapa estás," she added, filling the air between them with desire.

After allowing anticipation to simmer for a moment, Aimely reached her left hand out to María's waist and placed her right along the base of María's neck, pulling her in for a kiss. María cupped both her hands under Aimely's jawline, leaving her thumbs to brush across Aimely's cheeks as she melted into the embrace.

When they broke apart, María squeezed Aimely's hands affectionately before turning toward the emerald door of the pub with a wink and slipping inside. Of course, their friends all knew there was something going on between Aimely and María—they were hardly subtle—but they liked to pretend that it was a secret between the two of them anyway. Aimely watched María disappear behind the door. Then she exhaled and dropped her weight against the wall, pressing her back against the same bricks María had occupied moments before.

Aimely remembered when she met María three months ago at an event her study abroad program had put together. María had fallen in easily with the close-knit group of American students and was automatically included in all their adventures from that day forward. But the first night that Aimely and María broke off from the group after dinner to grab a drink together in the Plaza de Tendillas was the night Aimely thought of as the true beginning of their friendship.

That night, at the bar De Tapas, they had sat across from each other at a tall, red table next to the window, each of them occupying their hands and any inevitable silences with a glass of sangria. "Tell me more about your life in America" María requested. "What is it like to live at your school?" she asked. "What do you do for fun?"

So, Aimely told her about her disorganized but incredibly sweet roommate, her favorite places on campus to read a book, the rom-com movie nights her and her roommate would host on the weekends, and her love of dance. In turn, María shared her favorite Spanish books, the American television shows she had seen and enjoyed, the Spanish word for pre-gaming—*botellón*—and her love of drawing. Each sip of

sangria strengthened the magnetic field hovering over their little red table. With the second round of drinks, the conversation wound deeper, digging into strained family relations, struggles with religion, and lessons undoubtedly learned the hard way. By the time the bartender began flipping the chairs upside-down at 2 a.m., both girls had two sweaty cylinders of ice in front of them.

“Well, I guess that’s our cue,” Aimely said. She held onto María’s eyes, unwilling to say goodnight just yet, but unsure how to proceed. María stood up and tilted her head toward the door. Lamenting the very existence of “closing time,” Aimely followed her.

“Do you have class tomorrow?” María asked, hopping out of the bar’s doorway and clasping her hands behind her back.

“Yeah, but not until 3:00,” Aimely responded between shoving her hands into the back pockets of her jeans and chewing on her tongue with her left molars.

María walked over to a bench at the edge of the plaza and plopped herself down, motioning for Aimely to join her. Aimely followed María’s lead, letting her shoulders relax into an easy smile as she took her allotted seat.

“I want to see what your school looks like. And your home,” María said.

“Okay, I think I have some good photos in here somewhere,” Aimely responded as she pulled her phone out of her back pocket and settled into the chill of the granite bench.

The glow from the streetlamps acted as a spotlight for Aimely’s spontaneous slideshow presentation of her life.

“Oh no, here’s a video of my dance performance freshman year!” Embarrassment and buzzed delight fought for control as Aimely laughed and hit play.

As soon as the dancers on screen were set into motion, she felt María’s arm reach across the back of the bench behind her. Then María’s left ankle reached over and settled against Aimely’s shin. Aimely was acutely aware of the space collapsing between them. She knew she should have felt nervous or scared—maybe even a little confused still—but after so many years and relationships tainted by an unshakable feeling of incompleteness, a long-awaited feeling of satiation swelled inside her ribcage.

The pub door opened and a familiar laugh leaked out into the street, interrupting Aimely’s reverie. She straightened up and grabbed the door before it could seal itself closed again. She was immediately submerged in the obscure luminescence and comfortable humidity she had been craving. Looking to her right, past the bar, she found her friends piled around two small round tables. Sarah raised her glass with a salutary “Ayy!” Rachel and Hannah, the distinction between their bodies blurring on top of the singular wooden chair they occupied, shouted “Aimely!” in unison and extended their arms as if she could easily join them on their communal chair. Georgia and Simon looked up and nodded their heads in greeting, but quickly resumed a passionate debate which Aimely could only assume related to some guy’s level of attractiveness. María approached the tables with a rum and coke and slid into the wooden bench seat next to Sarah, motioning for Aimely to take the remaining five inches.

“Hola, chicas,” Aimely greeted them all while squeezing onto the bench.

“How crazy is it that we’re leaving Spain in just two days?” Sarah exclaimed.

“And leaving Córdoba *tomorrow!*” Hannah added.

“Guysss,” Rachel pouted, “I’m going to miss you all so much!” She turned her head into Hannah’s shoulder and reached for Aimely’s hand across the table.

“Yo también,” agreed María, “I have had so much fun with you guys and now you’re all going to leave me at once.” The downward pull of her lips was directed at the entire table, but Aimely received a light tap against her knee under the table to communicate a secret sadness between the two of them.

“Come visit us in the U.S.” Georgia suggested, her and Simon’s disagreement having been resolved with a gentle shove and a fit of giggles a moment before.

“That would be so fun,” Aimely admitted, a bittersweet smile pulling the corners of her lips up only half as high as usual.

“Can we not think about leaving right now?” Simon begged. “We still have tonight and we cannot be all melancholy when we hit up Góngora for the last time.”

“You’re so right,” Rachel and Hannah conceded as Sarah and Georgia said “Yesss, let’s go!” and downed the rest of their ciders.

“Love the enthusiasm, guys, but we cannot roll up to the club at midnight! And I haven’t even had a drink yet,” Aimely reminded her eager friends amid everyone’s shared laughter.

Aimely ordered her usual drink—a simple Vodka with Fanta Limón—and, knowing there was no exact equivalent to the sparkling lemonade beverage in the U.S., sipped it a little slower than usual. The more they all drank, the more they wanted to dance, so at 1 a.m. they each took a shot of tequila and, tongues tingling with liquor and lime, headed to their typical nighttime destination.

Góngora was their absolute favorite club in Córdoba, and the 8€ cover charge never deterred Aimely and her friends from dressing up and dancing away from all earthly concerns for a few glorious hours. Tonight was no different. They stepped and swayed to the popular Spanish clubs songs they all loved, like “Dura,” “Está Rico,” “Mujeres” and “Mi Gente.” When “I Like It” came on, they all shouted their excitement. Aimely reached for her fellow dancer during the chorus and twirled Rachel around in circles in the center of their cluster of friends, claiming all available space in the club as their own.

By the time the seven friends fought their way back through the vacuum seal of pulsating club-goers and stumbled out onto the cobblestones of Calle Góngora at 4 a.m., their imminent departure was long forgotten, their earlier conversation a memory from some past life. Aimely reveled in the air’s refreshing sting against the dewy numbness of her blushing cheeks. She sighed as a gentle breeze lifted the perspiration off her skin, and wrapped a giddy arm around María’s waist. María turned her head and planted a quick kiss on Aimely’s shoulder before lifting her eyes to meet Aimely’s gaze. Aimely saw her own contentedness reflected in María’s emerald eyes and raised an inquisitive eyebrow at her. María slowed her gait in silent agreement.

“Hey, um, you guys go on ahead,” Aimely called out to the rest of their friends when they reached the end of the street. She didn’t bother making up an excuse, and nobody asked for one.

But Hannah whirled around. “Wait, we’re going to see you tomorrow, though, right?” she asked María, insecurity raising the pitch of her voice as the question sprang forth.

And just like that, reality snapped back into place around the group of friends.

“Yeah, you’re going to say goodbye, right?” Sarah asked, equally concerned.

Rachel, Georgia and Simon remained silent but they joined Hannah and Sarah in holding their breath and searching María’s face for reassurance.

“¡Claro que sí!” María immediately assured them. “I could not imagine letting you all leave without a proper goodbye,” she insisted while reaching her hands out to Rachel and Hannah. “We are meeting at Café Niza at noon for churros, no?” she reminded them.

“Yes, of course!” Georgia said.

“Gracias a Dios” Sarah breathed and clapped María on the shoulder.

They all allowed a collective sigh of relief to linger in the air as they stood in solidarity, each of them clasping hands with or holding onto the shoulders or back of at least one other person. Eventually, Simon—ever the master of subtlety—broke the silence by saying “Guys, let’s leave them alone now. Come on,” and winking in Aimely’s direction.

Aimely felt her blush deepen. Rachel, Hannah, Sarah and Georgia giggled and called out “Buenas noches!” before scampering down the street behind Simon.

María laughed and grabbed Aimely’s left hand.

“Ven,” she said, and proceeded to lead Aimely toward Parque Victoria with a bouncing jollity. “Disfrutamos de tu última noche en Córdoba.”

Aimely returned María’s laugh and trailed along dutifully, knowing exactly how they were going to celebrate her last night.

About an hour later, Aimely was lying across one of the more secluded wooden benches of Parque Victoria with her head safely nestled in María’s lap. Gazing up into the branches overhead, she was keenly aware of the cold air creeping back into her sobering body. She had taken her little orange out of her pocket and was rolling it back and forth between her palms for the second time that night. She could barely see the stars between the leaves of the orange tree above her, but she imagined the oranges were standing in for the stars they eclipsed.

“En qué piensas?” María asked, running her fingers through Aimely’s hair as if she could release the tangled thoughts from her head with mere tenderness.

Although she could sense María’s eyes trying to penetrate her quiet pensivity, Aimely kept her eyes fixed on the celestial orbs floating above her. After a moment, she inhaled, trying her best to contain the weight of her emotions, but failing when the air escaped her lungs with a tremor that was only half related to the nighttime temperature. The oranges in the tree began to blur and streak across the blackened sky. She wanted to answer María—she really did—but she didn’t know how to articulate the particular anxieties that had taken hold of her once again.

María didn't press her, though. Her hands continued their soothing ritual across Aimely's scalp, even as Aimely felt María's gaze shift to mimic her own. After a couple minutes of shared contemplation aimed at the oranges, María floated a new question into the air.

"Do you know what we say in Spanish to mean soulmate?" she asked.

Aimely shook her head, feeling despair like a dam in her throat and fearing the consequences of dismantling it.

"Media naranja," María answered.

Half an orange? Aimely raised her left eyebrow and released a short breath through her nose.

María laughed and leaned down to kiss Aimely's forehead. "Sí, yo sé," she declared in response to Aimely's reaction. "I do not believe that I am half a person until I meet my soulmate either," she admitted.

Aimely knew better than to overthink María's mention of soulmates. They had both agreed in the beginning that whatever they had in Spain would not continue across the Atlantic Ocean, and they were still perfectly happy with their arrangement. Something about María's words had struck home, though, and Aimely was shocked to realize that María had somehow read her thoughts better she could.

"I'm afraid to go home," she finally said.

María did not respond, but she stopped playing with Aimely's hair and reached for her hand instead. She lifted Aimely's right hand away from the impressionable orange and brought it to her lips for a kiss.

Aimely sighed. "I'm afraid this semester will start to feel like a dream, like some separate life that is not really my own and never was."

She risked a diagonal glance at María, but could barely make out an abstract familiarity of human form through the moisture in her eyes, let alone a reaction.

"I'm not sure this even makes sense," she admitted to the wavering form above her.

María's fuzzy doppelgänger nodded in silent encouragement, and the patient gesture was all Aimely needed to solidify the vague insecurities that had been plaguing her for weeks. As she straightened her gaze back to the floating fruits, the words poured out into the air between them.

"This part of me, here, with you, is a part of me I could hardly dream of experiencing before coming to Spain. And now that I know what it feels like to be this version of myself, I don't think I could live without it," she elaborated. "Once I'm back home, and I'm with my parents, I'm afraid everything will go back to how it was before, that this part of me will be left behind or pushed aside."

Aimely sat up and, hugging her arms around herself, leaned her head on María's shoulder.

"Maybe that sounds really dramatic and irrational," she whispered into María's dark brown curls.

"No, mi amiga," María finally responded, "No estás siendo dramática. You made a new life here, all on your own. It does not belong to your parents or your friends, and it may not follow the path they want for you—"

Aimely and María both looked up as three teenage girls giggled past their bench with arms wrapped around each other's waists in homogenous bliss. When a trailing scent of sangria was all that

remained of the brief interruption, María added “I, too, would be scared to return to a familiar world if I knew it might now only have room for one half of me.”

Aimely inhaled the crisp night air. This time, when she expelled it back out, she felt the weight on her heart lift just a little. When her hands had finally stilled themselves in her lap, she placed the squishy little orange back in her pocket, returning it to its home against her abdomen. Releasing her uncertainties for the time being, she used her hands instead to hold onto María a little bit longer. And as the morning sun tip-toed closer, and the two girls sat peacefully with the silence of their synchronized breathing, Aimely watched her breath become suspended in the air and coalesce with María’s before evaporating into nothingness.

Aimely woke with a start as the plane’s wheels struck the ground. Her heart hammered in her chest as she opened her eyes to the bright blue lights of the plane’s aisle. Rubbing an 8-hour flight’s worth of sleep out of her eyes, she realized she was grateful that her dream was interrupted when it was. She couldn’t quite remember what had happened, but an image of herself tied to a rotting tree with strings of varying lengths and degrees of thickness had burned itself against the inside of her eyelids and her throat scratched at the memory of an eternally silent scream. What a nightmare. She shivered, shaking the image out of her head as fully as she could. The cabin lights popped on as the plane rolled to a stop on the runway. Since Aimely’s seat was in the third-to-last row, she knew she’d be waiting a while before she could actually stand up and grab her bags. So, she stayed in her seat and stretched her arms and legs as far forward as she could. With her hands reaching the headrest of the seat in front of her, her eyes rested on the friendship bracelet encircling her right wrist. She beamed and brought her wrist up toward her face for closer examination.

When Aimely and her friends met up at Café Niza at noon their last day in Córdoba, as planned, María had arrived with seven identical red and yellow friendship bracelets.

“I want you to have something to remember me by,” she had said when she opened her palms to reveal the hand-made keepsakes representing the colors of the Spanish flag.

“Oh my god,” Georgia and Hannah said at the same time, “this is the sweetest gift ever!”

“You are just way too cute,” Rachel said with a quivering lip while Simon said “María stop, I just can’t” and wrapped her into tight hug.

“This is really cool,” Sarah said. “Thank you so much.”

Aimely stole María for a hug as soon as Simon let go and asked “How did we ever find a friend as great as you?”

When they left café an hour later, full of churros and chocolate, they all hugged some more and promised to remain in contact and to somehow find a way to visit each other in a year or two.

Aimely fingered the bracelet fondly while she waited for the plane to empty, and admired the way its colorful strings wove in and out in a playful dance.

Freshly deposited on U.S. soil once again, Aimely walked through Logan International Airport with her gigantic grey suitcase trailing along behind her and her teeming red backpack clunking against her lower spine. She reached into the inside pocket of her jean jacket for a piece of gum to counteract the airplane breath. But instead of gum, her fingers closed around the piece of fruit she had apparently still failed to part with. Chuckling at her own quirkiness, she pulled it out and looked at it. It was still fairly round and solid, but she could see the places where her hands had softened its inner flesh and convinced the tough skin to cave in just a little. After a moment's hesitation, she walked over to the nearest trashcan to throw it away. But after peering into the barrel of discarded objects, decided there was no way she could condemn her orange to such a depressing fate. *Hmmm, I can't really keep it either, though.*

"Aimely!" two aching familiar voices called out at once.

Standing next to each other about 100 feet away with their inner hands clasped together and their outer hands stretched out toward their daughter, Aimely's mom and dad seemed to her the picture of a simultaneous pride and relief which could only come from months of parental worry.

Well, I guess I'll hang onto you just a little bit longer, mi naranja. And she returned it to her pocket for what she hoped would be the last time—it would definitely start to grow mold at some point.

Taking her last easy breath of freedom, Aimely began walking toward her parents. By the time she was 20 feet away, she was practically jogging in anticipation of the warmth that would envelop her. As their arms encircled her in rigid affection, she allowed her eyes to cloud over with elated moisture. She inhaled the familiar scents of her mom's Daisy perfume and the Starbucks coffee her dad must have consumed while waiting.

"My baby," her mom said a couple times while clearly trying to make the embrace last as long as Aimely would allow. "I've missed you so, so much."

Aimely let the sappy group hug last much longer than she was normally comfortable with and said "I've missed you too" into her mom's shoulder.

"Love you, kiddo," her dad said, "Hope you had a great time. We can't wait to hear about all your adventures."

Aimely gently extracted herself from her parents' arms to meet their eyes. "I did have a great time," she said. "And I can't wait to tell you everything."

On the way home—after Aimely had said all she had the energy to say about Spain in one car ride—she took the orange and a folded-up piece of paper out of her pocket. María had slipped the paper into Aimely's hand as they hugged goodbye at Café Niza and made her promise not to open it until she was home. Unfolding it for the first time, Aimely smiled at her friend's familiar handwriting and kept smiling all three times she read it:

*Aimely,
I hope you had a safe journey home, mi amiga. I had a
wonderful time with you and I will keep you in my heart forever.
You are strong and kind and beautiful and I know you will
find happiness in whatever path your life takes.
Please stay in touch.
Tuya siempre,
María*

While her mom dozed in the passenger seat and her dad rocked out to Led Zeppelin and The Beatles, Aimely sketched the image of her little orange onto the back of María's letter in pencil. Once she was home, she would put it somewhere special, where she would see it every day and be reminded of the completeness she now knew was possible. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but somehow both halves were going to find a space in this world.

ON THE WATER

Alyssa Chesney



LETTER TO BRIDGEPORT CLUB ON BEHALF OF MY THUNDER-THIGHED GRANDDAUGHTER

Fiona Casson

Thank you very much for conducting the preliminary interview with my granddaughter. I am very grateful for you taking the time to meet with her so that she can join the Bridgeport Club.

I know that her candidacy is a long shot. She's spent the past two years living in New York City with all the Jews and lesbians and Jewish lesbians, which certainly has not elevated her reputation. Her face contorts in confusion and displeasure when I tell her to make some nice WASP friends from old families, but as I'm sure you know, we didn't start the fire, I'm just telling her the way the world works. And those strange expressions she makes certainly won't help with her skin's elasticity.

If she keeps hanging around with such fringe people and doesn't join your club, think of who she'll marry! She's already hopeless, writing poetry, subscribing to things like literary journals! When you say literary, that just is a fancy way to say "pinko" isn't it? Can you imagine? As it is, she's practically unclubbable!

I remember when I was young, I was the only Catholic girl to be invited to Cotillion in Cincinnati, Ohio. I saw how hard it was to be respected in social circles when I came from such poor breeding stock. I mean, how could you look a Mic like me in the eye and take me seriously? But I rose above all that, and I was grateful when people gave me advice so that I could better myself. They told me to cover myself up so that my skin wouldn't be ravaged by freckles, and I did. Liquid foundation is a miracle! Those caring people told me to not be rowdy and uncouth, and to instead speak quietly, and I did. They told me to work hard in athletics, to embody the Protestant work ethic, and I did. You better be sure that if someone gave me the opportunity to get into a club like Bridgeport, I would snap it up in a heartbeat.

Of course, even if she does get in, there's the problem of her legs. She has the biggest thighs and ass on a white girl that I've ever seen. She looks ridiculous in a tennis skirt; all pale and chubby, thundering around after the ball and refusing to run fast. I always tell her that she's the laziest girl I've ever met. Nothing like me, of course. In my day, I was a tennis star at my club (Kenwood, Cincinnati OH—see monogrammed reference letter below). Not that I wanted it; in those days I was very modest and shy. And of course, my legs were beautifully muscled and toned. In fact—they still are!

I've tried so many times to help my granddaughter with her appearance, she just utterly refuses to listen to what's best for her. But she's stubborn as a mule, just like her father, even has his unruly eyebrows and protruding nose, so unlike mine. I sent her my copy of a really marvelous little book called "Thin Thighs in Thirty Days" that was mine in the 80s, it worked utter wonders for me. I have enclosed a copy, in case the lovely but rather unfortunate-looking lady in the front office might need it.

To reiterate, thank you so much for conducting the preliminary interview with my granddaughter. Good lord, she needs to join this club just so that she can marry a doctor, because I have high blood pressure and hypertension from the stress she gives me. And of course, she will learn to play golf.

AMERICAN SONNET FOR MY PAST AND FUTURE LOVERS

Trisha Mukerjee

Finding dependable dick is hard. Their
jerks and berserks, squawking and squandering,
like little toy trains led astray.
Give me maximum energy, a maximus ventriloquist
who speaks layered words, a soft jibber-jabber
that soothes the smooth dimples of imperfection.
Give me clean and simple, no syphilis
A Sispheyeen trickster, who, in the vaults of night,
bursts like Capri-Sun excitement.
Dependable dick is a pacifier that excites, a plastic nipple
who will reappear, night after night.
Give me a sexophile, a carnivore, a pussi-
vore;
A puckish poker of flesh
A vorpal chicken tender
A heaving halfwit
who sings Tender is the Night; the Night is Tender
only to forget the very next day.

-Odetta

NIHILIST'S BEDROOM

Maureen Jiang



AMERICAN ARSONIST

Sarah Warner

I drank two gallons before I got here
soaked up that cola like a spark and now
I'm rumbling up real rage-like just ready
to pounce on some soft little prey
to feel life give way to
my molars grinding all this shit to dust

yeah these days I've been feeling hot
a sizzle-stone on the lakebed like
a match in an oil spill screaming

but really I'm revving I got that motor
going hard and heat right out the exhaust
cuz I burn my bridges bitch I don't
leave ashes for you

and now's when I breeze the drive-thru
got that patty on lock got that
red blood got meat got stripes and I
roll my way by with a flamethrower
fuck everybody else

and it gets a little toasty but I'm
thick skinned a little thick skulled no
shame to admit it

and it's real sweet watching how the grasslands
light up quicker than a muskrat oh
the bitch all blistered like
nothing's ever been there all
dead longer than me

so yeah I'm swimming in this
frenzy feeling real good real
sexy real like a
real good criminal
waiting for the chair

but the shock don't bother me babe
I grew up sticking forks in sockets
and hands down pants
forever chasing nuclear

UNTITLED

Sabina Garibovic



SLOW DANCING

Gaby Pranatio

I suppose I should have realized that there was something wrong with me because the turtle was getting smarter.

When I was six, my mother brought home a turtle hatchling from the daycare. Said that it had turned up overnight, as if out of thin air. The tiny thing lay smack-dab in the middle of the playroom, basking in the morning sun and would have looked just like a stray toy if it hadn't snapped its reptilian head into its shell at her approach. My mother picked it up and placed it in the center of her palm. It fit perfectly in the middle concavity, where all the lines crisscrossed. Her coworkers speculated that maybe one of the kids had brought it in their backpacks, unbeknownst to the parents; perhaps the turtle had escaped, crawled out and taken refuge in one of the dark spaces in the kiddy-sized cubbyholes. But if that were the case, someone would've come and claimed it. No one ever did. So they were for weeks stuck with this little turtle, carapace patterned as if finger-painted with dots of cadmium yellow. They didn't really know what to do with it, and one of the coworkers said that according to her husband, a GP, turtles were carriers of salmonella, and who knows where the turtle had been before it turned up here? So then no one wanted the turtle. Eventually, my mother, feeling bad for it, as was her nature to pity unlucky things, stole it away in her canvas tote bag and brought it home. She named him Trevor, after my grandfather who died before I was born.

After a little research on the internet, we discovered that Trevor was an Eastern box turtle and that he was a male (he had a long, thick tail whereas females typically have shorter, thin ones), or else his name would have been an issue. However, we quickly found out that Eastern box turtles weren't the best for keeping in captivity. They were prone to many problems, such as refusing to eat, puffy eyes and carrying infections. Not to mention, it was strictly forbidden in our state to keep them as household pets. So there was that mystery of who had acquired him in the first place and by what means. Despite everything we had read, we shrugged it off and decided to keep him anyway, because we didn't know where else he could go and plus, how much of a hassle could keeping a little turtle be?

I've never had any other pets. The past twenty-eight years of my life, not a single bird, dog or cat besides the turtle. There was a phase where I wanted an axolotl, but my mother said, No, we have the turtle at home. I always thought I'd be rid of him along the way one day. It wasn't that I particularly wanted Trevor out of my life—it was more so that I had been subconsciously preparing myself all along for his inevitable disappearance from my life someday. He'd probably run away, disappear, or have something unfortunate befall him along the way, as does happen to small animals. But turtles don't run away. Of course they don't. And Eastern box turtles live until a hundred or more in captivity, if they don't

get sick. My unlucky mother has since then passed from brain cancer, but the turtle remains. He'd grown to be about the size of an adult human brain. Sometimes I imagined that that's probably what was hidden beneath his shell—a large brain. At this point, he'd probably outlive me as well.

Meanwhile, Trevor is getting smarter. That brain beneath his shell is swelling. I keep him in a rectangular glass box and I'm not sure exactly when it started happening, but he was escaping during the night. I'd turn his UV lights off and made sure he had enough food for the night, but find the glass enclosure empty by morning. He was always easy to find, though, splayed in the middle of any room, in a small patch on sunlight. He was never under the couch or in any place that would make him hard to find, like he's smart enough to know that that'd be detrimental to his wellbeing.

Just this morning, I found him lounging on the kitchen floor like he owned the place. He was stretched out, belly resting on the floor, so that his feet were splayed out before him in opposite directions. He looked rather ridiculous, more so because the markings on his shell were the exact same shade of the yellow rug he lay on. My mother had knitted that rug for a long past Christmas present.

At the sound of my footsteps, he swiveled his head lazily to look at me, biding his time. I was reminded of a documentary I had seen once about Genghis Khan, who treated all his visitors, though they had travelled far and wide to see him, with the same inflated indifference. I stared into the turtle's beady eyes, and something moved beneath them, reflecting off a hard light. Was it hostility? He held my gaze and his ancient mouth crusted open—

In that moment, I was convinced that he would say something. That we'd have a conversation about how dreadful the weather was today. The mouth continued to gape, a tiny black hole set into wrinkled skin. Then it shut again. I made myself some coffee and left for work.

I had noticed Carol from marketing since the day I started working at the office. I thought she had a beautiful mouth, of all things. If I leaned back in my chair at the right angle, feigning a stretch, I'd catch a momentary glimpse of it—the way it pouted in frustration or the smile lines that oftentimes formed, cupping the edges of the red mouth. After much deliberation, I finally steeled myself to find her in the break room, where she took her customary hourly tea breaks. She was a tea drinker, you see. I asked her out to dinner, which she agreed to with a small smile the shape of a waning moon.

The waiter took our orders and we launched into obligatory small talk, recent office dynamics and the like. Along the way, we started talking more about ourselves. She thought the stories about Trevor were particularly funny, and in the pit of my stomach, I felt a faint, tugging hope about the direction in which our relationship would follow. Feeling light, I called the waiter and ordered some wine for us.

Halfway into the meal, she just wouldn't stop talking about her fibers. She was full speed into telling me about the recent seasonal fiber tour she had travelled to Milwaukee for, right after she had finished up talking about the sweater she had knitted from some rare organic yarn.

The more she talked, the more I felt a visceral reaction within me. In that moment, I could only see my mother in her, my mother's hands knitting through hers, and the thought of it seized me with such

electricity that my spine straightened like a rod. In my head, I had only the image that the same fate would take hold of this woman as it had taken hold of my mother. I thought I might throw up.

“Would you mind if we talked about something else please, Carol?” Some external force seemed to have pulled the words out of my mouth. “I’m sorry—it’s just—my mother was a big knitter, and all this is just reminding me of it. Of her. Before she died. I’m sorry.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry.” The edges of her mouth pushed downwards, and I noticed the uneven streaks of lipstick mixed with food grease. “I’ll shut up about it now. If I had known, I wouldn’t have—

“No, it’s nothing. Really. It’s fine. Can we just carry on like this didn’t happen?”

We finished the rest of our spaghetti in awkward, fragmented talk. The disruption hung heavy in the air; there was no coming back from it. The wine came late, right as we had split the bill and put on our coats to leave, and I asked for it to be sent back.

That night, the words I had said to Carol ricocheted off the inside of my head many times, then proceeded to swim around in loops. Why did I always ruin everything? It seemed like I couldn’t live in the moment without the memory of my dead mother continuously catching up to me, and there was nothing I could do to unclench its grip. Maybe I was losing the ability to muster a socially acceptable level of functioning in the world. I sent Carol an apology and asked if we could redo dinner some other time? A response never came.

I awoke to a splitting pain coming from between and behind my eyeballs. It was like a bubble of air had slowly grown in that space while I was asleep, and suddenly exploded, causing the folds of my cerebral cortex to be uncreased. I had never been in so much physical pain in my life—with my eyes shut I convinced myself that there was a knife wedged between my eyebrows. “Oh God, I’m going to die,” I said to no one in particular.

Forcing myself up, I reached for an aspirin from my bedside drawer. Every movement felt like there was a coin rattling around and scraping every surface on the inside of my skull. I could barely see with all the pain, but for a brief moment, I thought I saw a familiar reptilian shape in the doorway before I collapsed back onto my bed and squeezed my eyes shut.

“She was your one shot out of your doomed lifetime of loneliness and you ruined everything. You know that, right, Arthur?”

I wanted to protest but couldn’t even respond through the intense vibrations that were raking through my skull. The pain had taken over every single nerve in my body. I knew nothing else but the pain for what felt like ages, until the edges of my consciousness blurred with the release of sleep. Before it swept over me completely, I cracked my eyes open and looked at the door. Trevor wasn’t there anymore. In my dream, he and I knitted a big, yellow blanket together from angora wool and went to sleep beneath it. The next morning, I spilled scalding hot coffee all over myself, including my white dress shirt. The experience of it depressed me so much I called in a sick day at work and lay all day in bed.

As the weeks passed, the headaches only increased in frequency. I had to talk to Phil from human resources because it had started interfering with my concentration and work, and I suppose I was being particularly dismal and apologetic, because he looked concerned and asked me if I needed to talk to someone? I scoffed a no but then thought that there might be actually be something wrong with me. I made a doctor's appointment, which is something I don't normally do. I couldn't help but feel like my life was unraveling strand by strand, like a sweater Carol would knit in reverse.

"The headaches are getting worse and worse. It's like—it feels like there's constantly someone knocking on a doorway, hidden somewhere in my head, but I don't know where the doorknob is, so obviously I can't open the door to answer it. But this unwanted visitor is just knocking away, all damn day, and I can't explain why I can't open the door. Sometimes, the visitor will get angry enough and kick the door down. Those are the worst headaches."

"How frequently do you get these headaches?"

"It used to be once a month, but now a single night doesn't go by without me having one."

The doctor asked me to do some balance and vision tests. I obliged, lifting my hands up when he asked me to and reading numbers and letters from a screen. I didn't know what any of it meant, feeling very much like a circus animal performing circus tricks to a lone, critical spectator. The doctor wrote a long, convoluted sentence on his yellow notepad.

I said, "And it doesn't help that Trevor seems out to get me."

"Trevor?"

"He's my pet turtle. He's getting too smart for his own good. It feels like he's just mocking me, all the time. The other day, I laid him upside down on his shell. He lay there, looking at me angrily and I thought he wouldn't be able to get the right way up, but somehow, he did it when I wasn't looking. I came back in the room and he was walking around all fine and dandy again. I thought the physics of it would've made the feat impossible."

The doctor looked at me for a while, and I couldn't decipher the look on his face. He scribbled some more on his notepad, but it was all illegible to me. I had the thought that being in a doctor's office was a good metaphor for things as they currently were—everyone is always asking you a bunch of questions that you don't know the reason as to why you're being asked, and nothing really makes any sense at all.

After a while, he said, "I suspect that you may have a glioma."

"A what?"

"A glioma. It's one of the most common types of brain tumors. In your brain and spinal cord, your nerve cells are supported and protected by these other cells called glial cells. Unfortunately, these cells, like any other cells, are prone to experiencing uncontrolled cell growth, meaning that they can be a recurrent cause of cancer in the brain." I didn't understand why he was talking like I was back in high school biology class. "In the tests I asked you to do earlier, you appeared to have problems with balance and vision. Moreover, coupled with the headaches and your family history of brain tumors, I have reason to

believe that you have a tumor located in your brain, specifically in an area that controls vision and balance. These symptoms are commonly attributed to gliomas. Do you think you've become more confused lately, or has someone told you that you seem different?"

"You're telling me I have brain cancer?"

"Well, we don't know for sure yet. It may be benign," he put some more lines and squiggles down on his notepad. "But as for now, listening to your symptoms and acknowledging your family history of brain tumors, I'm referring you for an MRI."

"Will I die?" I asked in a quiet voice.

The doctor said no and proceeded to supply me with fake, comforting words that doctors are specially trained in to give to their patients. Then he told me that this condition was associated with personality and mood changes, and rarely, neurobehavioral complications that included psychosis, and that I should ring him up if I experienced any of that.

When I got back, I made some more coffee. Trevor was in the kitchen, smack-dab in the middle of the pantry. The sun hit his shell like a spotlight. His little clawed feet shifted back and forth, and I noticed with bewilderment that he was swaying in tiny shuffling steps. The little guy was *dancing*; I thought. Good for him. From the back of my head, I heard the opening tunes to John Mayer's *Slow Dancing in a Burning Room*.

"Nice moves, Trevor." I said. "Am I interrupting you right now?" We had been conversing more frequently these days, it seemed to me. I couldn't recall talking to him as much when we were younger. Maybe he was in a more agreeable mood these days?

"Well, actually, you kind of are. I'm trying to practice my dance moves. What's up with you?"

"Sorry. I just have a lot on my mind right now. You know, what I was thinking? I wish I could just be my own person without carrying all this extra baggage. I mean, all people do is give us so much extra baggage. If not for them, I'd achieve so many more things in my life. I guess you wouldn't know, since you're a turtle."

"Don't underestimate me, Arthur. I'd know more than you'd expect me to. After all, I've watched you for twenty-eight years."

"You're the only one left on my side now, Trevor. If you're even real. The doctor would probably say that you aren't. That you're a hallucination induced by my glioma. Glioma. I didn't even know that was a word until today."

"I am real. The voices in your head aren't. Then again, are the thoughts in your brain even real? What is real?"

"Trevor, I don't have the mental capacity to be having this talk with you about what is real and what isn't right now. But you know, what do you think it's like to have someone in your life just once?"

"Don't ask me, I'm just a turtle. I don't have neurotransmitters in my brain that allow me to feel human emotions like loneliness."

I realized after the craniotomy that I had forgotten to have someone take care of the turtle during my stay at the hospital. I was bedridden for many days afterwards, with the doctor and many nurses weaving in and out multiple times a day to check on my condition. I wasn't sure how many days I lay in bed. I thought about calling someone to check on Trevor but realized I didn't really have anyone I could ask.

Many thoughts ran through my head during those few days. Sometimes they rushed through in a stream, other times, they'd loop around my head a million times until they were gone, and then I couldn't even remember what had so occupied me just moments before. In a feverish state, I couldn't stop thinking about the one time I cut my finger with a kitchen knife while chopping ginger. I couldn't even remember what dish I was trying to make. Probably one of my mother's recipes. But I cut my finger and so much blood seeped out, and I thought about how our hearts are always pumping blood, working so hard to keep us alive even though the brain says, I just want to die. Liquid is always flowing beneath our skin surfaces, all the time. With all that liquid inside of you, wouldn't you hear it sloshing about all the time? I remember holding my bleeding finger up to the light of the room, and seeing the cut perforating my finger at such an angle that I was reminded of jagged rocks at the coast. It horrified me and at that same moment, I came to the conclusion that this was simply the way I was—jagged, punctured at just the spot that held the integral something to lifelong human contentedness, and I would always remain this way.

When I was released, I couldn't find Trevor anywhere. I looked everywhere I could think of, but I knew he was gone. If he had wanted to be found, I would've found him. At that moment, I was gripped by a fear that Trevor had never existed all along, and the tumor in my brain had falsely convinced me of his existence all my life.

Weeks later, a package arrived at my doorstep. I brought it inside, reaching for the scissors on the kitchen countertop. Inside was an empty turtle shell, carapace patterned as if finger-painted with dots of cadmium yellow. The note that came with it said, "You're welcome for the brain."

AND DOWN WE GO AGAIN

Sarah Warner

you are dancing disremembering
of that listless dark of the sun a pinhole

in some damp curtain of

you draped and alone slick

and burning of going up up like

the apple and now suspended

silvered you beat red and hard and

ripe caught in the second of downfall

agape and uncanny like the mouth of a child

skin plucked hot plucked virginal

lyres slinging sunlight lips spitting solace

ready to split

UNTITLED

Joseph Bui



PROVIDENCE IS AN OBJECT

SOPHIE FINK

I am in the box. I have always been in the box, except once, I remember, I was held outside of the box as we bounced up and down a dusty road. We is me and my box mates. There are two of them, in the box with me, and together we slurp the watered-down food poured into the trough when the sun comes up. The sun stays outside and so the walls are cold and the floor is wet and we are damp. The person comes again later, with potatoes and salty water. We eat, desperate, as she enters our box, pours buckets of water over the floor, and sweeps out our waste. When the sun disappears, I lie down on the concrete and dream of food.

The sun comes up and I am hungry. A person comes into the box and I am calm until he loops a rope around my neck and chest, tying it securely so that I cannot escape. I squeal and run in circles because what else am I supposed to do? He pushes me outside the box.

There are plants here, right at the tip of my nose, and so I wade into them until I am immersed, knee deep, in greenery. As I snack, I hear the familiar sound of food splashing into the trough in the box. I decide that it is not a bad thing to be outside the box, to eat the green plants and walk in the dirt underneath the warm sun.

There are white clouds in the sky. I wander towards the trees beneath the clouds and hear a noise like water pouring endlessly into a trough. The sloshing becomes louder, chaotic, but still I do not see the giant bucket.

The person yells and runs towards me. He yanks on the end of the rope, the rope that I had forgotten was pinching my neck, and I start to move. We walk along a dusty road until we reach another box. Along one side of the box is a wooden post. I am tied to the post, but this is better because there is both shade and sun. I lie down with only my head in the light. There is a patch of grass just beyond my nose. It tastes warm.

Many people arrive and I stand up and start to walk in circles around the post. They untie me and drag me away from the grass. Hands push me into the dirt, pressing hard on my legs, shoulders, and rump. I thrash and squeal, loud and terrified. A face appears above me, blocking out the clouds. A piece of metal slips out from beneath a sleeve. I cannot move. The metal disappears from my view and then I feel pain in my chest. Such pain, pushing deeper and now my heart is bleeding. I scream. There are no thoughts except the feeling of blood leaving my body, thick and heavy. My eyes cannot close. Another person stands off to the side, watching as my cries turn to whimpers, as the fear becomes hazy, as my veins are emptied until I cannot breathe, until there is nothing left, until I am a corpse.

After I am dead Carlos blowtorches my body. Then, using kitchen scrubbers and old rags, everyone rubs away the burnt hair, making sure to get under my chin and behind my ears. Maribel slits open my stomach, pulls out my intestines, stomach, heart and other organs, and drains out the pool of blood into a pink plastic bucket. Carlos and Ernesto hang me by my mouth on a hook outside the house and begin cutting neat, evenly spaced lines down the length of my body. They peel off strips of skin and put them in a bowl held by little Miranda. When they are done, Miranda runs into the kitchen and hands the bowl to her mother. Maribel takes out one of the pieces of skin, already cooked by the blowtorch, and smears a small handful of salt against the backside. She passes it back to her daughter, smiling as the girl tears off a mouthful of the tough skin.

Carlos is making quick work of my flesh, slicing off hunks of meat until only my head and ribs remain. Patricia, their neighbor, walks up the road carrying a basket of tomatoes on her back. Maribel leans out of the kitchen door, "Patricia, do you want any pig? No one has claimed the shoulders yet!"

In a matter of hours, my body has been divided. People stop by on motorcycles to pick up my flanks, my thighs, my back, taking them home to eat with rice or corn. Maribel hacks at my ribs with a machete, separating the meat from the bones. Miranda squeals when a piece of gristle launches into the air from the force of the blow and lands on the floor by her feet. Ernesto and Carlos leave for the afternoon to fish in the river, beneath the waterfall, and when they return Maribel has made soup from my feet and ears for dinner.

How to Build a Cocoon, How to Kill a Cocoon

Anonymous

My boyfriend Neville and I were enthralled by Oliver for two reasons: 1) Neville had kissed Oliver at a Halloween frat party, in a sauna, with tongue, the night before we met, and 2) I was convinced that Oliver was gay. Oliver's name was Bella back then, a girl with long, blonde hair, and I knew she was into girls. I just knew it. Plus, she'd been posting the creepiest photos from some hippie hiking trip.

We were lying in Neville's freshman dorm room. I was wrapped in his soft, blue, freshly cum-stained sheets, staring at a Daft Punk poster on the ceiling. It was stuck to the wall with flimsy scotch tape. The poster looked ugly and disproportionate, like it could fall on us at any minute.

"Yo, this is exactly what I'm talking about." Neville shoved his phone in my face, and I stared at a picture of Bella on snapchat. Her hair was freshly cut, right up to her shoulders.

"Oh my god, how's your ego right now?" I asked.

"Nah, chill, chill."

"Why does it scare you so much?"

"It doesn't," he said. "I didn't even want to kiss her, maybe she spiked my punch." he shouted, giggling at the thought of someone taking advantage of him.

"You probably should've fucked her," I said.

"Yo, chill with that. It's actually weird how much you're pushing it."

I pulled the sheets to my mouth, muffling my laughter. I loved that her sexuality made him seem less masculine, made him seem sort of powerless. It knocked him down a few pegs.

Sometimes, when I saw Bella walking around campus, I ran through a list of questions in my head. I wondered if she knew me, if she even wanted to. What questions she would ask me if I promised to answer. I couldn't figure it out, but something got me so excited.

I remember lying in my driveway for hours before leaving.

I was driving back to school for my sophomore year. I arrived late that night. I felt tired. I felt older, too, like I was allowed to take up more space, so I laid down on a couch in the common room. I saw everything upside-down. I watched the doors swing open, and my eyes met someone's legs. I looked up, and I saw Bella.

She smirked. She waved at me. She sat down in the chair across from me.

Her hair looked even shorter this year. We sat in silence for forever, until I couldn't stand it any longer.

"You hooked up with Neville."

"Wait, what?"

"Neville, my boyfriend."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry, I forgot."

She sat there for awhile, fidgeting. She changed positions a hundred times – squatting, putting her legs all over stuff, planking, impersonating an airplane. She did a few pushups, I think. I pretended to look at my phone, but I really just clicked on my camera and watched Bella squirm through my phone screen.

"I need some fucking tylenol," she said.

I pretended not to hear anything, but I felt her stare. My chest was thumping; I think she could see it rising and falling. She put her hands on her knees like a soccer coach. She got close to my body and looked straight into my eyes and said this:

*hey sorry for before I was rude but this place just makes me feel restless;
you wanna go streaking with me?*

A few years later, during my senior fall, I had this huge photo of Oliver on my wall. Leo took the picture for a photography class sometime sophomore fall, and I found it this year in a black leather case, along with fifty or so black-and-white profiles. I seethed with anger as I sorted through them. I hated Leo's friends. I thought about how Oliver used to scoff at these people; how fucking pretty they all were.

When I got to the portrait of Oliver, I remembered how I felt the day it was taken. I was lurking just outside the frame the whole time. Leo begged Oliver to model for her, but Oliver didn't really like Leo, didn't really feel like doing her any favors, so at first Oliver refused to smile. I hoisted myself onto Leo's shoulders as she kneeled on the steps, steadying her camera. I was trying to make Oliver laugh.

The picture started to feel like a shrine, so I tore it down; that's why Oliver left, so I wouldn't have to make a shrine for them. Before I took it down, people always had to say something when they caught a glimpse.

"That was her *peak*, dude."

"A shrine for the old Bella."

"What's good with her now?"

Some people said it was a memorialization of Oliver's femininity. I said yeah, or mine, but that made people want to stop looking me in the eye.

I combed through the photos on Leo's bed. She was folding her laundry, but she came over once in awhile to look over my shoulder. She kissed my hair, and I felt her breath on my head. Rose sat on the floor,

cutting frilly pink rabbits from a magazine with pillows on the cover.

I keep on trying to explain why my critique of this place is the most precise, the most thought-out. For awhile I've been relying on the notion of a pencil case to articulate my point (people here care more about pencil cases and binders and color-coding than expanding their minds), but lately I keep on asking my classmates for pencils, and they won't stop rolling their eyes. I think they might be watching me. I assume there's a little man outside my window at night. He's watching me take off my clothes. I want to see all of you naked, already. I want to know exactly the type of shame you feel after watching porn.

When Oliver left, so too vanished my sense of being on the outside and for once looking *out*, looking *out* and not *in*, at some future vista where my body was backed by other bodies, other minds, free to understand its impulses. I met queerness through my friendship with Oliver, but when I was left alone, I didn't know how to trust it. I wondered if their freakishness had just stuck to me arbitrarily; without Oliver, my body felt alone and loose and untethered to its queerness. I felt like some dog.

I needed a container for everything I'd so stupidly exposed. And so when Oliver left, I started thinking about someone new. Lately in my mind I've been calling her SL. There's this book I like – it's called *White Girls* – and the author names his love object "Sir or Lady" (SL). The infatuation he describes is the same infatuation I felt for my own SL:

I listen to Sir or Lady detailing this or that movie scenario and look for myself in every word of it. I don't want to exist too much outside his thinking and regard. I'm convinced Sir or Lady's movie tales are his way of telling me he and I are one... When I can't find myself in what Sir or Lady says, the world as I know it is nearly washed away by wave after wave of ocean-gray fear: how can he have a thought, a feeling, without me? How can I be a we without him?... I've spent a fair amount of time trying to apprehend — in the blind, awkward, and ultimately solipsistic way many of us strive to articulate why the beloved has become just that — how SL came to fill my mind like no one else on earth.

*How can he have a thought, a feeling, without me?*² When SL and I started spending time together, I shed my own filthy shell for some fresher flesh. I felt aloof, disjointed, but also impossibly lucid, and I looked everywhere for clues that would make me feel less alone. I dug for meaning that would disrupt my senseless thought spirals so that everything I read, everything I watched, every piece of music I listened to were all chaotic appeals for a mirror in which I could view my own experience. Sometimes, with SL, I felt like a fairy. She was the most flawless version of normal a person could be, was still somehow mystical at the same time, and to be normal, to be *on the inside*, was precisely what I needed, even if it meant sometimes stumbling and splashing to catch up with SL, sometimes muffling all the lopsided parts of myself I'd excavated with Oliver. SL was part of the Leo crowd; part of the Neville crowd; SL was at the very center of people who made Oliver feel restless. And so I kept my feelings for her to myself. If you're anyone who knows anything about staying on the inside, you know to keep quiet on this type of thing.

Has anyone at this school ever seen one of Eva Wö's Instagram stories? The sun is always shining like it's California; you'd never guess Philadelphia. Her hair is rusty, in a good way, how the leaves look during the first week in October. Hints of blue, even. She's sitting in a chair and she's kind of dancing, kind of smiling, she's dancing and smiling like the camera is a person she hasn't seen in awhile. Like she can't wait to tell you such a good story.

We both slept in. That is because I did what SL did, and SL slept in. I get a funny feeling on my birthday – pangs of shame, a weird clumsiness. It wasn't my birthday but it could have been; I had lately been feeling wobbly. In the morning I could hear her stir.

She played music from her phone, sunny and light music, and I thought about what I would do with my face if she could see it. There was a wall between us which I sometimes recalled, and so I practiced small-town dance moves. I drummed with my fists. I played air guitar, silently, and reminded myself that I could not do these things around her.

"Wanna make pancakes," I called out.

"Can't," she said. "I have a meeting."

I never knew how to move when the sting of her words reached me. I sat in bed with a hood over my head. I cocooned myself between the covers. I started at a space in the hallway. I waited for SL's body to swallow up the space and for just one moment, there was unbelievable color and light, golden, dappled light that a person only notices after evening summer showers, when the leaves are still flapping against the last glittery raindrops.

"See you later, Jules."

I told SL how I felt because I didn't know how else to unstick myself, how to climb out of the cocoon. I miss the way she would look at me when she told a story (the Eva Wö look). When I spot her on campus now, she looks so foreign to me. It's like seeing a photo of myself at a weird angle, or hearing my voice on video. It is killing a spider and seeing the legs up-close for once, wiry sticks paddling in slow-motion until they stop, dead now and ready to inspect (careful), looking so fresh and grotesque and so, so crooked; a two dollar bill; a pair of sandals I own on the body of a stranger. I feel like a voyeur when we pass each other casually. This version of SL seems so liquidy, so alive. Maybe it's just the angle from which her face meets mine, but she seems to be hurtling from the earth. When I walk away and some memory of SL emerges, it's always mixed with shame and, somehow, that's the version that crystallizes and endures. It sits there and rots (it's waste now).

The photo itself: the size of a laptop screen. Oliver's seated with their knees in the air but you can only see the tip-tops. Their hair is at their shoulders; hands draped over their legs. The way a camera makes the body slouch into its most usual position. I can see how tan they are. Oliver's smile is involuntary, like there's an acorn in their cheek, but their eyes, their eyes tell a different story, make them look a little like a bunny, make me want to climb into the frame with them. In which case I'd wait for Oliver to wrap their arms around me, and then I think I'd let go of all the tension I've been holding. I think I'd go slack.

SELF

Teddy Reiner



