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PTERODACTYL

Couch Guy eliminates the dark energy. He preaches renewal. He's Couch Guy because Paul The Upholsterer upset people. People's limitations and their desire to transcend are not lost on him. This neighborhood is on a schedule of revitalization because of him.

He is capable of the most intense eye contact you've ever experienced in your life. He says, "You exist touching fabric. For your soul, update it."

He worships the spit tack. The first time his daughter saw him spit tacking she was stunned, speechless. There he was, his entire left cheek swollen with tacks. Then there he was again, moving a tack out with his tongue, then between his lips, then the magnetic hammer touching his lips and taking it. Every inch on a couch was touched by his lips and no one knew! His daughter spent school mornings telling girls named Madison and Chloe about this magic but the girls either didn't hear or didn't care.

He worked an office job once. During a meeting he had a breakdown of sorts. The email had said "Reducing Rush Job Requests: 1:30 Meeting, Conference Room (the little one)." The guy scheduled to lead the meeting didn't show up because he got a rush job request. The irony was lost on everyone including his boss who, for the third day in a row, was bleeding from the head. No one knew why the boss was bleeding from the head so much. But he was bleeding a good amount for a head wound. The bleeding lasted days until it suddenly stopped and was just a square scab on his head. Couch Guy was living in a meaningless fog. He sat on depression stained office furniture. On multiple occasions, while waiting for the elevator to leave work, he heard a woman inside a passing elevator crying.

The only visitors to the garage are customers and his daughter, Christy, who hates him for being Couch Guy. She doesn't understand his life anymore. She's dating a man named Jon who loves hand-to-hand combat. Couch Guy has never met Jon, or a human who loves hand-to-hand combat. But they exist. Christy is in love with Jon.

The customers come daily. Once, after a night when Mercury was in retrograde and daylight short, Couch Guy's driveway was broken streams of chairs, sofas, recliners and couches. Boat cushions embroidered with HE WHO DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS were stacked next to the garage door, and when Couch Guy touched them he felt clinical depression. A woman passing by walking two white dogs asked if he was having a garage sale and Couch Guy said no, this is

just how I live.

Dale has skin cancer and drives a Prius. He's Couch Guy's number one customer. Dale believes in the dark energy inside his bar stools. So when Couch Guy says to him, "These bar stools have false beliefs, the previous owner most likely committed suicide," Dale nods and mumbles back, "I know, the bar stools hate their life."

Dale is the original owner of the bar stools. He owns the most depressing furniture in the neighborhood. He's what Couch Guy refers to as an open soul trying to cleanse but surrounded by garbage. Couch Guy will help Dale through clean slates of furniture.

"My Prius is too quiet," says Dale.

Couch Guy has special gloves and a special mask, both bright yellow, so the dark energy won't infect him when he tears apart the bar stools. Last week Couch Guy opened up a chair and found a piece of paper that said I'M LIVING A HALF LIFE IN SARASOTA FLORIDA. Inside the chair were cat shit and a silver key with a baby's face.

"You ever have looping thoughts?" says Dale.

Couch Guy says, "I have a mantra. I center myself when I work and repeat the mantra to achieve my level. That's my looping thought."

Dale's looping thought is *fresh lobster in every bite*. It's from a TV commercial. He's tried to erase it with green tea, baths, music, jogging, and even eating pasta, slowly, with imitation lobster. At night when the commercial comes on he quickly turns the channel and hopes the commercial isn't on the other channel, which has happened, twice before.

"It's a store run day," says Dale. "Ready?"

Dale brings Couch Guy to the grocery store once a week. Couch Guy buys vegetables and fruit. It's all he ever buys. When Dale buys Cool Ranch Doritos Couch Guy explains to him how the Cool Ranch Doritos double sadness. This sadness then has nowhere to go and expels from the skin and into the furniture we sit and lay on. He tells Dale to buy watermelon. He hands him garlic to eat raw first thing in the morning.

At the checkout a man is insisting on paper bags inside of his plastic bags. Couch Guy takes a deep breath and instructs Dale to do the same. When the man takes his receipt he doesn't move. He stands there, running his finger down the prices. Dale takes three insane breaths. His body shakes. His fists are clenched and Couch Guy carefully unfolds each finger.

On the drive home Dale says, "Fresh lobster in every bite. That's my looping thought."

"Replace it with pterodactyl," says Couch Guy.

“Is that a mantra?” says Dale. “Pterodactyl. What a word. Pter-o-dac-tyl.”

“Yes,” says Couch Guy. “It’s a word with four rings. Repeat it often.”

Before Couch Guy leaves the Prius Dale likes to show a viral video.

Because Couch Guy never watches television the videos are shocking and funny. He allows the images to enter his head before destroying them with mantra and work.

Dale hands Couch Guy his phone. The Prius hums. Couch Guy taps the screen with his finger.

The video shows several people running across a bridge as a train approaches.

“This is so fucked,” says Dale, leaning over.

The people running are a film crew for a movie called *Midnight Rider* that was denied access to shoot a dream sequence on the bridge. The video has three million views. It doesn’t directly show a woman dying but people watch the video because a woman definitely dies. When the camera shakes and then tips upside down the last thing Couch Guy hears is the train whistle so loud it feels like the phone is going to explode in his hands.

“The director is in jail,” says Dale. “He didn’t care they didn’t have a permit.”

Couch Guy replays the video. He understands the many flaws in humans, but the video hammers in something deeper and more awful. He says, “But they could have made it off the bridge.”

“Trains are fast,” says Dale.

“No,” says Couch Guy, playing the video for the third time. He concentrates on one person in the video he can’t see being hit by the train but knows was hit by the train. She is young and beautiful and wearing a man’s, her father’s, silver watch. “She would have lived but she decided to carry the film equipment,” says Couch Guy. “Look, even the bed. She tried to save these things, just things, before saving herself.”

“Sick,” says Dale.

Couch Guy works at night by hanging construction lamps around the garage. Bad dreams live inside Dale’s bar stools. Couch Guy works in his bright yellow mask and gloves until the seating area for Dale is soft with positivity. But the problem isn’t the furniture. The problem is Dale. His surrounding life is toxic. His furniture is an innocent bystander.

Dale puts his bar stools into his Prius with care. He’s on a juice fast and has given up the local news. Before driving away Dale asks Couch Guy over for dinner. He wants to thank him for improving his life. He feels bad that Couch Guy has stopped cashing his checks. Dale has the sneaking suspicion that Couch Guy himself is completely depressed.

Dale lives with his wife Rebecca and two boys named Oscar and George. The house is worth a million dollars. Because there is new construction and a good school system the house is increasing in price, which gives Rebecca great pleasure. Knowing the future is worth more excites her. She has an office and an exercise bike and a garden and she uses none of it. She shows Couch Guy each room and explains the cost of things. When Couch Guy taps a black leather ottoman with his foot he tries to remain positive. Dale, walking behind them, follows on the tour of his own house.

During dinner Dale's sons call him "bald asshole" and throw spaghetti. A few strands of spaghetti stick to Dale's face as he eats his salad with flax seeds and bee pollen. Rebecca, for some reason, has changed into a dress with rising tulips and applied red lipstick for the dinner. She says the dress costs 700 dollars but she found it online for 85. When Couch Guy looks at the dress he can see something is wrong with it because it's crooked. Most of the surrounding objects are knock offs of expensive brands and each has a fatal flaw that Rebecca and no one else in the family seems to notice. They enjoy living this way because it makes them feel superior to other, lesser, people.

"Is it Liz Claiborne?" says Dale.

"I wrote a short story for my English class," interrupts Oscar. "I wrote that I was old, like you Dad, but I had a good job and hair on my head and I was happy because I did something with my life. Then you showed up trying to break into my mansion because you were homeless. So I shot you in the face with my machine gun. Then I kicked your face into the sun. In the story your face is all messed up and shaped like a football. The sun eats your face and then throws it up."

"Did you get anything wrong?" says Rebecca.

"I got an A," says Oscar. "But there was extra credit! So I did a poem about Dad's face, how much it hurt, while it was in the sun, and I got an A++."

"It's Rachel Gilbert," says Rebecca to Couch Guy. "The dress."

"Rachel Gilbert," repeats Dale. "That's a nice name."

After dinner Dale drives Couch Guy back to his garage. Couch Guy holds the black ottoman on his lap. The ottoman has a poisonous aura.

"I've been using pterodactyl," says Dale. "I'm not thinking about fresh lobster in every bite anymore."

"Good," says Couch Guy.

Before Couch Guy leaves the Prius he tells Dale to leave his family. "They are causing you great suffering. Look at this ottoman."

"But it's my family," says Dale. "We're putting in a pool next year."

"They are killing you," says Couch Guy. "You will die because of them."

"You live in a garage," Dale says. "You don't know what it's like."

"Everything you touch is infected," says Couch Guy. "I can't cleanse the furniture if they are making the furniture sick on a daily cycle. Don't you

understand what you have to do?”

Dale's near crying so he revs the Prius's engine which sounds like a clogged vacuum cleaner. At one point, it actually sounds like it might break. Dales revs the engine until Couch Guy is inside his garage. Then the Prius, with a crying Dale inside, silently drives away toward a house worth a million dollars.

Couch Guy can't sleep. He imagines green silkworms and snowy mountain air. He plans a trip to Colorado.

Remove yourself from this dark energy, thinks Couch Guy, while looking at the black ottoman. Let your mantra become you.

Couch Guy hums his mantra and tries to sleep. He doesn't sleep.

Outside, a woman is holding a loveseat over her head. It's pretty amazing to see someone holding a loveseat over their own head. It's not that the woman is incredibly strong, just the loveseat is cheap and made of plastic. Real furniture has weight. The woman is crying because she has no one in her life, zero people want to be around her. When the crying woman emails her daughter "Your Mother Wants To Take You Out For Frozen Yogurt" the email is immediately deleted because the daughter has set up a filter to have it immediately deleted.

"Hey there," says Couch Guy, walking down his driveway. "It's okay," he says. "I know, life is hell."

The woman throws the loveseat as far as she possibly can, which isn't far at all. She has to duck and move backward so the loveseat doesn't land on her neck. When it hits the pavement a cloud of depression and dust blooms from it. Even in the dark, Couch Guy sees the colors muddy orange, charcoal black, and bruised eggplant. This haunted aura expands like a dome before popping and leaving only weeping. It's a deeply troubled loveseat. The woman runs away. The air above Couch Guy is dusted with hanging colored specks.

He can't figure out who the woman is. He knows most of the neighborhood because he's constantly working on their furniture, their lives. He's never done a loveseat before. She's a ghost, thinks Couch Guy, ghosts are real in the world and I've seen one.

He fixes the loveseat with new foam, springs, tacks from his mouth, and his most spiritually enlightened fabric. It's a swirling pattern in monarch butterfly colors.

In the evening he places the loveseat back into his driveway and before bed he looks out the garage windows and sees the woman sleeping on the loveseat. A ghost who comes back to the new and living, thinks Couch Guy, cool.

He puts on his special yellow mask and special yellow gloves because Couch Guy believes this woman could be more dangerous than her loveseat. Her

emotions contain black holes. He walks down the driveway and kneels at her side. He gives her a mantra, which she begins mumbling in her sleep.

His daughter says she's coming for dinner. Jon too. They are getting married in Vermont on the greenest hill in the northeast.

For the dinner Couch Guy rearranges his entire life. He moves the furniture he's currently working on into the backyard. The loveseat remains in the driveway. The woman has gone somewhere. He unfolds a kitchen table painted black and white that has to be held up in the center with a piece of wood. There are three chairs that Couch Guy quickly re-does to match the table using his most idealistic fabric. He mops the garage floor and dusts the work areas. He places a television on a table to further the appearance of being normal.

Jon gives Couch Guy a pillow embroidered with dandelions and kangaroos. It's a family heirloom he slept on as a child. The pillow has a name, Chucky. Jon wants Chucky re-upholstered with the words Alabama Crimson Tide and the picture of a snarling elephant.

They eat raw vegetables and fresh fruit. Couch Guy realizes Christy has previously informed Jon on his eating habits so he doesn't say anything offensive. Jon eats an apple but what he really wants is flesh. He gives Christy a few looks. He's uncomfortable, but becomes more comfortable as he drinks from a six-pack of Michelob Ultra.

"Any chance you're into hand-to-hand combat?" says Jon. "MMA stuff?"

"Daddy is a pacifist," says Christy. "He's a Buddha or something that fixes furniture. Isn't that right, Daddy?"

"Spinning back fist, throat chop, running knee, arm-bar take down, guillotine choke hold, neck crank, calf slicer," says Jon. "I could go on. You break an arm, that guy remembers you. 12-6 elbows shouldn't really be illegal, nah. That's when you're on top of a guy and he's on the mat and you drive your elbows straight down. Like this."

Jon's t-shirt says TAP, NAP, OR SNAP, THE CHOICE IS YOURS. His arms, compared to the size of his head, don't make sense. Couch Guy once read a study about men whose eyes are too close together. How they are bonkers. The space between Jon's eyes is terrifyingly short. Couch Guy hums his mantra. Christy and Jon are in love and are terrible people.

"Thinking of changing my name to War Machine," says Jon. "Impose fear before entering the octagon. So, what do you actually do all day?"

"I fix furniture," says Couch Guy. "It's what I care about and who I care about."

"So you've never been in a fight," says War Machine.

"No," says Couch Guy. "I live as simply as I can."

War Machine smiles the smile of the easily offended. "Nothing simpler

than a fist to a face.”

Couch Guy thinks, It’s true, I’ve brought my daughter into a world of forever expanding absurdity.

“I talked to Mom,” says Christy. “She says you’re incapable of loving another person. That you care about helping people but you can’t get close. She says she will always think of you as a limited person. She said that when you lived with us she was the happiest when you left the house. That she couldn’t wait for you not to be there so she could be herself. I wanted you to know that.”

“Ba-Boom,” says War Machine.

After dinner Couch Guy can’t remember if he spoke or not during the dinner. He breathes deeply and exhales while repeating his mantra. He imagines his daughter as a little girl on a swing he pushes from the front marrying a man named War Machine. It is unbearable and unbelievable. But it is happening. He breathes in deeply again and when he exhales he starts crying. He keeps repeating his mantra but it can’t stop the crying.

Inside the Chucky pillow is intense childhood abuse. It oozes pain. The interior stuffing disintegrates when pulled. The air in the garage turns dark purple.

He calls Christy and says she can’t marry War Machine. He is the most toxic of souls. He will fail her. He will hurt her if they occupy the same fabrics.

“Too late for that,” says Christy. “We put a deposit on the green hill. It’s love.”

“Honeymoon in Orlando,” says War Machine.

He is on speaker phone. He hangs up before their words can infect him. But Christy and War Machine don’t realize Couch Guy has hung up. So they yell into the phone for a few minutes and for hours after feel good about the yelling.

The woman on the loveseat comes back and this time she doesn’t leave. She lives on the loveseat for two days. When she curls up in the center of the loveseat she is cradled by the wings of a monarch butterfly.

Her name is Gwen and she wants her daughter to love her but that will never happen because her daughter hates her more than anyone else in the world. Couch Guy and Gwen bond over this.

Together they drag the loveseat into the garage. Gwen spends the night. He shows her the Chucky pillow. It’s a layered void like no other, he says. He will repair the Chucky pillow to take away an object of dark energy living in the world and replace it with one of possibility and white light.

“Such a small but beautiful gesture,” says Gwen.

“Not much else we can do,” says Couch Guy.

Gwen is a person always unraveling. Even her hair looks like it wants to be anywhere but on her. She says, “But is the pillow really that bad? I mean, it’s a pillow.”

“The worst,” says Couch Guy. “The nine circles of hell are here.”

Gwen smiles and rubs his back. She has a massage license from 1995 but never worked a day in a salon because of men, lying naked, on a table, in the dark. “That bad? Come on.”

“The devil’s dark star,” says Couch Guy.

The phone rings and it’s Dale. It’s been a while. He hasn’t been bringing his furniture to be re-upholstered, which means everything in his house is throbbing with negative energy. Which means Dale is filled with black goop sticking to his bones.

“Hello?” says Couch Guy. “Everything okay?”

In a few minutes Dale is going to kill himself. But before he kills himself he wants to know why his mantra is pterodactyl.

Couch Guy considers running to Dale’s house but it’s too far. Also, a person can kill themselves pretty much anywhere these days.

He says the word isn’t important, but the sound it makes as it’s repeated. “Think of the syllables as rings,” says Couch Guy. “And the rings expanding inside your mouth and up and around your head. Wear your mantra like a crown.”

Dale says he hates dinosaurs, especially ones that fly.

“Is there another dinosaur that flies besides a pterodactyl?” says Couch Guy.

There’s a childhood story here but there isn’t time. The explanation and attempt at humor isn’t good enough. Nothing is ever good enough.

“Keep with the mantra,” says Couch Guy. “Bring me your living room sofa.”

“Thank you and I’m sorry,” says Dale.

When Dale kills himself he splits into three versions. One version is him in a casket and his son’s making fun of him. When they leave his funeral they drive his Prius in a reckless manner. Another version is Dale as a cartoon, living in a pink house with gold furniture constantly upholstered by green silkworms. The cartoon version of Dale talks in expanding speech bubbles and he walks with balloon limbs. In this version Dale shines and lives a real life. Four white rings rise from Dale’s back and disappear into the kitchen chandelier.

“But that’s what you whispered to me,” says Gwen, after Couch Guy explains what just happened. “That’s my mantra. You said it was special. But it’s not

special at all, now is it.”

“I’m sorry,” says Couch Guy.

“Is that your mantra too? Are we all the same word?”

Couch Guy is silent.

They have a fight. He says everyone has a pool of acid inside them and she’s no different. He says something very mean about her hair. When she says, then what about you, he doesn’t respond. He can’t stop thinking about Dale, how Dale was always the woman in the train video. He never had a chance to help him because he was always holding onto an object and was never going to let go.

Gwen leaves with her monarch butterfly loveseat. Couch Guy watches her from the open garage. After she pushes the loveseat down the driveway she picks it up. She holds the loveseat above her head and walks away.

Couch Guy walks through the park at dusk. He doesn’t know why he does this besides it’s a short cut back to his garage. A single white man should never walk through a park and playground near dark. A group of teenagers crowded on a picnic table smoking weed tell him to fuck his own face. He waves hello. He is terrified.

A woman is pushing a baby in a swing. The baby looks terrified. The baby is too small for the swing. The baby is gripping the metal ropes. It is helplessly moving through the air. The mother is on her phone and pushing the baby too hard. Couch Guy imagines the baby falling forward and being brained. He stops and stands a little too close to the baby.

“Last night was a super blood moon,” says the woman. “And today they found water on Mars.”

“Maybe next they’ll find aliens,” says Couch Guy.

“You think?”

“It’s possible. My mother didn’t believe in God but also said there had to be more than this.”

“More than what,” says the woman.

Couch Guy points to the group of teenagers on the bench then waves his hand across the neighborhood. A man is spraying white foam onto his truck tires and three friends are watching him. There is nothing else.

“Can you push?” says the woman. “That’s the big dipper up there. I love the big dipper.”

He pushes the swing in a style that makes the baby smile. The attentive and gentle move he hasn’t forgotten. The woman walks into the baseball field with her phone raised to the sky. She stands on second base. It’s not the big dipper at all. It’s just some random stars in a nice shape.

Couch Guy crouches and pushes the baby. “I did okay, didn’t I?” he

says. The baby spits on herself. She has a necklace with a tiny silver key on it. Not a surprise, there is also a piece of bacon on the baby's shoulder. "I was there for you," says Couch Guy, "when you really needed me and you will never know it."

THE FOLK BAND IN OUR CHEST

It was the summer of sunflower. The summer I braided you beneath the pecan tree. The summer the schoolhouse burned and the dogs howled from the field as if their throats were what the flames licked. The nights were molasses black, so slow and sweet. The folk band in our chests plucked the same song and my heart was a busted drum and the strum was summer's fruit so our ears bloomed honeysuckle and nectar dripped down our necks. My hands were cymbals you hushed into your blue jeans. You autographed my skin and I screamed for an encore, but nothing graced the stage, save a single apple core absent the seeds.

TO OUR DREAMS.

2000 X 3000 PIXELS.
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY.

FABRICE POUSSIN.





KINGDOM OF THE TREE.

2000 X 3000 PIXELS.
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY.

FABRICE POUSSIN.

MAYBERRY

The first BB hits the pink frosted angel food cake that Aunt Bee delivers to the county jail.

The second nicks the glass between Barney Fife's gray eyes.

The third misses the screen entirely, bulleting through the television's thick rubber power cord and causing the entire black and white scene to disappear.

Rexford Bird inhales from his disappearing joint and loads his BB gun with metal beads again. He walks to his hotel window overlooking the parking lot and parts its peach curtains, the fabric still hot on his fingertips from the day's sun. He looks out at the stream-lit distance, Interstate 40 running east through the rest of Tennessee. He steps back and lifts his gun into the air.

He shoots the fourth BB into the sky as his own voice spills out as a stranger's, throwing itself off the second story balcony.

"I love everyone, in a way," he yells to the cars streaming out across the distance.

With the fifth BB, he takes aim at his own blue '73 Stingray parked in the lot before panning to the **VACANCY** sign. On the sixth, he tries to take out the sign's **A**'s but the pellets just ricochet.

Rexford pulls an empty pack of cigarettes from his back pocket, shakes and crushes the packet, tosses it to the tarmac below. He levels the gun at the flip-top but he doesn't shoot.

"You should know me," he yells, "do you hear me?" He lifts his arms up to the purpling sky. "You should know me . . . can you hear?"

A piece of a small branch falls from a sycamore tree planted on a grass island in the center of the lot, its leaves upturned by a summer storm pressing in on the city.

A teenage boy on a yellow skateboard jumps the fallen branch, his board's wheels landing evenly on the pavement. His younger brother follows him, swerving around the tree on a black Schwinn banana-seat bike. They ride across the mostly vacant lot, stopping under the *Vacation Motor Hotel* sign where neon splinters flash through the **H** before going dark again. They listen to Rexford Bird on his balcony.

"What the . . ." the boy on the skateboard says before he stops rolling all together. He points to what he sees on the balcony— a man staring out at the interstate, a bit in love with everything, in a way, at this moment in time, at least until a chill runs through him, beginning in his thin legs and ending in a knot

inside his stomach. And then the feeling is gone.

Rexford walks back inside his room and lets himself fall backwards onto the bed. He covers his face with a pillow. He hums *The Andy Griffith Show* theme song into its feathers. He throws the pillow off the bed, stares at the pebbled ceiling and lifts his arms from the mattress, holding his BB gun up to an imagined aquamarine sky that isn't there when he opens his eyes.

The seventh BB lodges in the ceiling.

Rex gets up and puts on his high school letter jacket. It's not his really, but was bought by his mother at a Salvation Army in Sylacauga, Alabama— two years ago.

Outside, the brothers coast in circles around the parking lot's cement island, the branches of the sycamore casting half shadows across their sunburnt, freckled faces, neither of them supposed to be here at this time of night, and they wouldn't be if they hadn't of been kicked out of the movie theater across the street for not paying for each of the films in a marathon series, staying through *Batman* and *Batman Returns*. They would be in *Batman Forever* now if their plan had worked but instead they're killing time before facing how much trouble they'll be in when they came home this late, increasingly making themselves later and in more trouble, both having decided 1 AM will be their curfew this morning this July 3rd morning.

Rexford exits out of the hotel's lobby and the boy on the bike rides toward him.

"You asked if we heard you?" he asks Rex.

Rex stares at the boy as the other now does a kick-turn on his yellow skateboard, skating in squares around Rex.

"I suppose," he says, "and you heard me?"

"How old are you?" the boy steps off his board and turns toward Rex.

"30," Rex says, "today."

"You were yelling like you were going to die or something," the boy on the banana-seat bike says.

"Maybe I was," Rex says. "Maybe tomorrow, maybe today, who knows? I don't." He looks from one boy to the other. "Do you?"

The boy on the skateboard shrugs and rolls himself back and forth with his wheels digging into the concrete. He examines Rex's jacket. "You're not in high school," he says, "why are you wearing that?"

But Rex doesn't answer.

"We need some alcohol, guy. Can you get us that? Real stuff, not just beer," the boy on the bike tells him.

"I don't think so," Rex says.

“What the,” the boy on the banana-seat declares. “I’m in pain, I need to drink. I found out I have astigmatism yesterday.”

Rex looks at the boy’s thick black glasses sliding down his nose. “That doesn’t mean you’ve got to drink,” he says.

“He has to wear glasses,” his brother says, “he needs to drink.”

“I can’t,” Rex says. “I’ve been sober going on two weeks now.”

“A whole two weeks? Oh man,” the boy on the yellow skateboard laughs.

Both boys laugh as they circle Rex now.

“See that empty wine bottle over there?” Rex says as he aims at a wine bottle rolling across the lot in a gust of wind from the north.

The boys nod.

Rex takes the BB gun from his coat pocket, squints, aims, and hits the bottle while it’s still rolling; the eighth BB shatters the glass.

Mr. Donut is open until 1 AM.

When Rex opens the door it is five minutes till 1.

The woman behind the counter barely sighs when he pulls his gun out and BB pellets flood from his pea-green fuzzi pocket and across the black and white tiled floor.

“I’m so sorry,” Rex says, sinking to his knees and reaching out to try to pick up each pellet individually.

“Never mind that. Never mind me,” he says. “OK, just forget about me. Go back to whatever it was that you were doing.”

He waves his gun in the air and announces, “I’m not going to hold up the place anymore.”

The woman behind the counter, the only other person in the donut shop, tells him that her name is Cynthia. She says that the drawers have been emptied for the night, honestly, and their baker took the bank bag in to the bank. She says she is alone here.

Rex puts the gun back in his pocket.

“I’m calling 911,” she adds.

“That’s OK, that’s all right,” Rex sits on a stool. “But before they get here, I want to know, really, I do, have you ever seen *The Andy Griffith Show*?” Saying this, he taps a spoon against the counter. “Cynthia? Have you ever?”

Cynthia’s hands shake slightly as she pours him a cup of coffee. It splashes out onto the saucer. She pushes it out on to the counter, towards him.

“Yes,” she tells him. “Several times.”

“I’m going to Mayberry,” Rex tells her. “I’ve decided it in my mind. It seems like such a nice place, hell, even the jail there seems like such a nice place.”

“It does seem nice,” Cynthia tells him. She picks up the rotary phone beside the cash register. It was her idea to have it there, for decor.

"I've never known where it is," she tells him.

"I discovered that it's in North Carolina when I was watching it today, the show," Rex tells her. "And I need gas money for going that far," he sips his coffee. "That," he adds, "and cake donuts. Are there any of those left?"

Cynthia puts down the phone and fills a paper bag with vanilla donuts, the frosting crumbling along their edges. She fills another bag with cherry. She pushes the bags across the counter toward him.

Rex takes a vanilla donut out of the bag and examines it. He smiles. "Can you not call them though, actually, Cynthia? Do you have to call the police?" He looks at her now. "I don't want the police. They're not like they are there."

"Well," Cynthia says. She runs her fingers over her collarbone, like she always has when she's nervous, like she has since she was a little girl. "You have to understand my position."

Rex turns his eyes down to his coffee and slowly lifts them again.

"See, they'd probably keep me weeks though, because I don't know anyone here to bail me out. I was in the Federal Narcotics Farm at Lexington in Kentucky for a while; the same one as William S. Burroughs' son was in once."

Cynthia nods as though this means something to her, though it doesn't really.

"For what?" she says.

"Drugs," he draws circles on the countertop with his fingers, calloused from making license plates while he was away.

"Oh," Cynthia says, moving her hand to her mouth. She looks at him looking at his donut. "I won't, OK. I won't call the police."

She lifts her hand off the phone, he laces his fingers together between hers.

"You're different," he tells her, letting go of her hand. He pulls a napkin from the metal holder and lays it on the counter, folds the edges.

Cynthia holds her hand back on top of the phone. "I'm different from whom?"

"I don't know, most women working alone at night who get held up, almost, by a man with a BB gun, I'm supposing."

"Well, tell you the truth I've seen a lot worse," she says. "In fact, we're some regular magnet for late night crime in this place."

Rex empties the last of his pellets out his pockets and arranges them in his saucer.

"Like what?" he says.

"This man, last December, he came in at our busiest time, right after the night shift when all the police come in, you know."

"The men in blue," Rex nods.

"Yes, and this man, he was a combat veteran of some sort, and he walked in. He walked right in with an old WWII grenade strapped to his stomach. You

know what he said?”

“What?”

“He said he was going to die for our gluttonies.”

“He said that?”

“He did.”

Rex begins eating his first donut.

“So he pulls the tab, and nothing happens, not a sound. So, since then, I’ve felt fine about staying here because I know that we were blessed that day.”

Rex wipes crumbs from his lips.

“I wouldn’t have shot you,” he tells her.

“If you did, it wouldn’t have been fatal.”

“No, not likely,” Rex nods.

“I think you were probably directed here because a power greater than yourself knows you couldn’t harm anyone, that you’re harmless even if you don’t know it,” she tells him.

“I saw your sign all the way from down the street there. The neon drew me in. I’m sort of a moth, I think. I like bright signs.” Rex pauses to look at Cynthia’s wide-open eyes. “But OK, a something greater than myself— I’ve heard of that.”

“Something knows us,” Cynthia says.

“You really believe that?” he asks her. He pushes his BB’s around the ridged white ceramic of his saucer with the tips of his fingers.

“I do,” she tells him.

Cynthia begins punching out on the vintage machine the shop still uses, and clocks out as she does every Monday - Saturday, 1 PM - 2 AM.

“I’m sorry,” she tells him, “I really need to close up. Actually, we’re closed two minutes ago.”

“I’m Rexford Bird,” he says, “Rex.” He stands now, half a donut in his hand, crumbs on his jacket. “That’s what my name is.”

“So we’ve closed, Rexford Bird.”

“Cynthia, what if you just come with me? Tonight?” He looks at her, doesn’t move his eyes off of her. “What do you say? I believe we’re suffering here,” he says.

“We’re suffering?” Cynthia says.

“I want to take you with me to Mayberry, North Carolina,” he says. “In Mayberry, North Carolina we will never suffer again.”

“Oh, what a line,” Cynthia tells him, “but I’m not really suffering, Rex.”

“Yes, you are,” he tells her, “yes, you actually are, Cynthia.” Rex stretches his arm across the counter and touches the plastic ID tag pinned to her white, long-sleeved cotton shirt, fingerprint bruises beneath them:

“You are.”

Cynthia looks down at his fingers, the scars on his wrist, and his hand there, on top of hers.

“Maybe,” she says, “but Mayberry is just a line.” She looks at him now, not feeling afraid at all, anymore. “But it’s a real good line, Rex,” she folds the tops of the paper donut bags over themselves twice. She turns and begins to fill more sacks with leftover donuts for him, instead of throwing them away like usual.

“Oh God, but what a line,” she tells him. Cynthia lines four white bags on the counter, creasing their tops down again, while Rex picks up a red broom from behind the counter and begins to sweep the BBs out of the door, rolling them out on to the sidewalk and down into an open drain.

DECLARATION

The tourist wearing the straw hat
is smuggling mangos across the border.
They're Mexican mangos. *Real mangos*,

as my mother would say. Smooth, juicy,
and inexpensive. But what does he know
that hasn't been seen before?

He won't be asked what he carries,
where he was born, what side of the line
he calls home. Under the layers of clothes

and crumpled newspapers, the mangos
sweat their sweetness. Obedient, silent heads,
just like the rest of us.

SNITCH

I.

They found him with the head
of a marigold crammed inside his throat.

Handprints and scratches adorned his broken neck,
his perfumed breath was the ideal bait for strays.

II.

The town felt sorry, though not sorry enough.
At school they made an announcement,

hired a widow to bear the loss, swallow
the murmur. A garden was planted.

No seed or scent twisted free. I warmed my feet
in that ground, waiting

for an ear to listen. A mouth to bloom.
For eyes only I could identify.

III.

I was once taken to the outskirts of town
where I was pushed face first into the cold,

desert dirt. Reduced to crumbs for two shivering hours.
Frightened and ashamed,

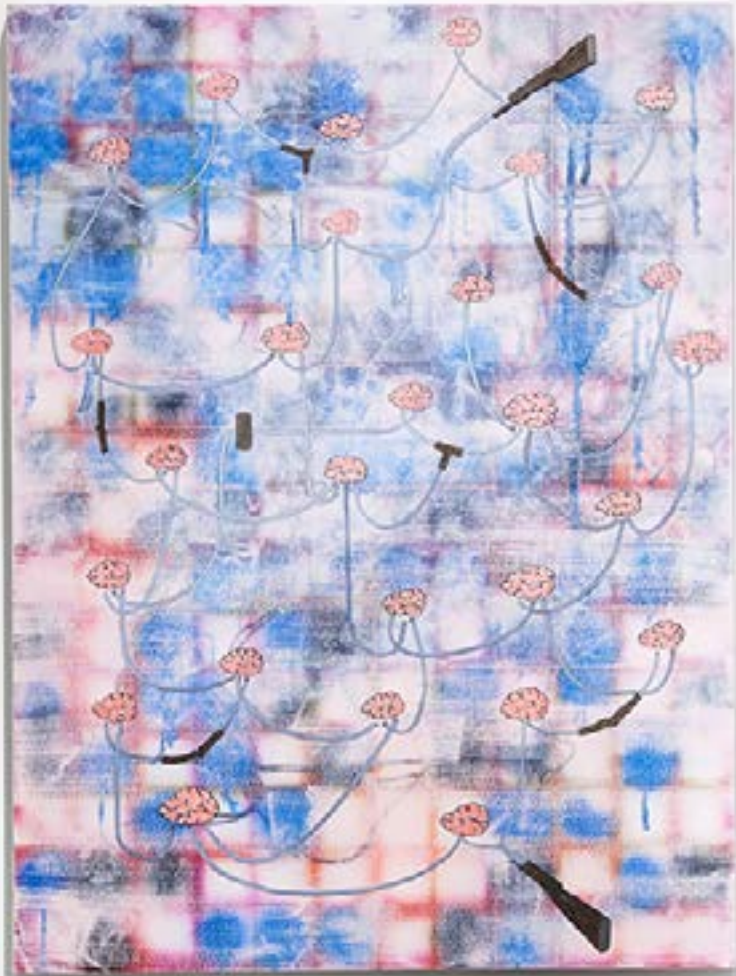
I watched as they gathered up
my teeth like crushed petals.

ANONIMO

How lucky we were to have someone
praying for us, face deep in folded, caring knuckles.

I tasted blood inside that roach smeared rest stop.
The news talking about a kidnapped brother, the country

remains foreign, though, if left behind I could survive. Yes,
find a way to bend my tongue into the shape of a handgun.



BRAIN WEB.

48 x 36 IN.

OIL, AIRBRUSH AND ACRYLIC ON WOOD.

HEUI TAE YOON.

GOOD NIGHT.

94 1/2 X 62 X 10 IN.

OIL, AIRBRUSH, ACRYLIC, NEEDLE, THREAD, PENCIL, FELT AND WOOD ON
LINEN.

HEUI TAE YOON



THE VAMPIRE OF CALLUM COUNTY

As soon as Lindsey got home from school she took the jeep out to Quapaw Lake. She didn't tell her mom, because her mom wasn't even home, and okay, maybe also because her mom *probably* wouldn't have let Lindsey go, since Lindsey only had her driver's permit, but like, whatever. It wasn't like Lindsey was taking anyone with her. This was gonna be *her* story.

So she drove out to the lake, using one of the hunting backroads because the interstate was blocked by State Troopers—which Lindsey only knew because Billy, a guy she'd dated like forever ago last year, had an uncle who was a Trooper, and he told her that he told him they were trying to keep people away from the area, and no way was Lindsey letting some lame douche cop turn her away. True love was on the line, okay?

The trailhead parking lot was empty, which it kinda would have been anyway because it was off-season and the water was down in the lake, but it was even more empty because of the attacks, and old people and families got scared or whatever about this stuff—but Lindsey wasn't scared. She was excited, and started hiking with her chin high and this expanding feeling in her chest, like she couldn't get enough air or had just gotten over a hundred likes on a really good selfie.

By the time she was three miles in, though, it was mid-afternoon and she was walking a little slower. She wasn't tired, and she'd hiked Quapaw since she was a kid so she knew the way to Shady Cave, but her iPhone had died, and hiking to her girl T-Swift was *so* much more motivating than walking around listening to birds and leaves falling and shit. And three miles was like, a *lot* of time to think.

The thing was, everyone was saying the campers were killed by an animal—a wildcat in the woods. But Billy said his uncle said there was something not right about the bodies, that they were mangled but they'd been missing blood, too. *And* Lindsey's dad had been hunting on the other end of Quapaw right before the first attack, and he'd caught a glimpse of something from his deer blind. He'd said it was real pale and moving unnaturally fast, and that didn't *sound* like a wildcat, and anyway, no one had seen a wildcat in Callum County in like a hundred years, so why would one show up now? It wouldn't. Hashtag *dub*.

Her friends thought she was joking and laughed it off, but they'd never read the books and hadn't even paid attention during the movies, so Lindsey can't even with them. But Lindsey had, and she'd done like, research for this shit—she'd gone to the library and everything. Shady Cave was the only spot around the lake that fit. It was in the right area, it was the right size, and it was called Shady Cave

for a *reason*—the trees had grown just right so there was never any open sun around the cave, ever. She'd shown the evidence to her Tumblr friends and all of them agreed with her. If there was a chance she was right, she had to go for it. She couldn't let the haters get her down.

By the time Lindsey stood outside Shady Cave, she still had that feeling, that tightness in her lungs, but she was nervous now, too. The cave wasn't big, not something you'd see on Planet Earth where you'd find like, an underground salt river and blind salamanders inside. It was just some big boulders that had fallen together like a billion years ago and left a few gaps between them. At the entrance was a black pond swarming with gnats, and it was totes gross but Lindsey *knew* in her heart this was the spot. She gathered her courage and repeated to herself, in the immortal words of Stephanie Meyer: about three things was Lindsey was absolutely positive. First, there was a vampire in Callum County. Second, Lindsey was like, seventy percent *positive* he was living in Shady Cave. And third, Lindsey was going to find him and fall unconditionally in love with him.

She took a deep breath and entered the cave. It was dark inside, which she should have expected because like, how else did the vampire keep himself safe from being found out? She needed to be smarter than that. She needed to be prepared, because what if he was being wrongfully accused or like, hunted by another bad vampire or werewolves? She had to be on her A-game to save him so he wouldn't move on before he could get to know her and fall in love. Except, the cave was cold, and when she tripped and put a hand on the wall to catch herself it was wet and slimy, and it's not like Lindsey could even use her iPhone flashlight to avoid stepping on stones and sticks and all the other stuff that was rattling and crunching under her feet. She could have killed herself for not thinking this through more... and then it was over.

She'd reached the end of the cave, and—nothing. Shady Cave, her best chance, her *only* chance, was empty, and Lindsey was heartbroken, because all the signs had been there and she'd been so *sure* she was right, and this was the worst day of her life and then—

Then she heard the noise.

By the time Lindsey turned around, it was right behind her. Her eyes had finally adjusted to the dark so she could see—oh god, she could *see* it, with its cloudy dead eyes and yellow teeth and its breath that smelled like garbage. Lindsey had wanted a vampire, but not *this* kind of vampire, she hadn't even thought of *this*—and oh *god*, her mom always said the book was stupid, putting stupider ideas into her head, and Lindsey *hated* admitting her mom was right but now she'd never even get to tell her. Even worse, now that she thought about it, Lindsey's Tumblr friends were all probably still in junior high and Lindsey was in high school, like why the *fuck* was she dumb enough to listen to preteens?

Lindsey was *so* over this, but it was too late. The thing was all up in her face—which, *rude*, but she couldn't even say that, because it was reaching for her, and it was tearing at her with its sharp, dirty claws, and Lindsey screamed and screamed but there was *literally* literally nowhere to run.

By the time it disemboweled her and started gulping blood from her femoral artery, there were, for once, no more words left.

AND AGAIN THE MAGNOLIA

In the year of the horse
my experience of your
silence grows
more ornate.
It fills a silo with broken
satellite dishes,
a hung-up feeling.
The magnolia posted
up outside my door
is going bottoms up—
it flies in the face of your
absence, flaunts it.
Tonight the wind is my pep
rally, knocking the highest
blooms from their high
horses, overturning the lawn
chairs, push brooming a can
down the street. And again
the stupid magnolia goes
stupidly showboating
into the stupid night.



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GOUACHE AND INK ON PAPER.

RITHIKA MERCHANT.

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RITHIKA MERCHANT.



AN INTERVIEW

Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi's debut novel, *Fra Keeler* (Dorothy, A Publishing Project, 2012), is about a man who purchases a house and begins to investigate the death of the previous owner, the eponymous Fra Keeler. However, the investigation is less about a death and more about death itself, along with other questions of human experience as disturbing as they are commonplace. For me, reading *Fra Keeler* is like entering the mind—my mind—for the first time. This dark, obsessive book reveals and interrogates the many, often strange assumptions one must make to go on living for a day. And for the narrator of *Fra Keeler*, this interrogation leads to dangerous places.

It was my privilege to have a conversation with Azareen Van der Vliet Oloomi about *Fra Keeler*, her writing process, and her teaching experiences.

James Ashby
Interview Coordinator

JA: *Fra Keeler* is a troubling novel, but it is also quite humorous, especially when the narrator gets fixated on something as simple as a dirty skylight or a slice of bread: "Because bread—I thought, coming back to my moment of repose—an honest slice of bread and a walk in the canyon must be among the greatest of morning rituals!" What motivated you to bring these moments of humor into a story concerned with questions of causality, madness, and death?

AVDVO: I don't think those things are at odds with one another. In fact, there is a long tradition of literature that explores questions of death and causality by employing stream-of-consciousness and humor. In *Fra Keeler*, the humor puts into relief the narrator's powerlessness and irrelevance. The narrator struggles against that irrelevance throughout the novel. In a way, his laughter is an acknowledgement of the absurd theater of life; it springs from the notion of having to go on despite not knowing if one can, or how one should go about the business of living. I'm thinking of Beckett's lines: "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." I suppose I find our smallness—when measured against the immensity of what we are asked to endure—to be

incredibly, tragically comic.

JA: After his walk, the narrator says, “After all, the canyon had helped me to gain perspective. I had seen a bird, a stream, a sparrow, slept leaning against a rock listening to the sound of trickling water. What more could a person want?” Of course, this sense of perspective is short-lived for him. But how would you characterize your own relationship with nature? Or the relationship between nature and language?

AVDVO: I think of myself as being both of and apart from nature. I am completely intimidated by it; I’m in awe of how reactive and resourceful the environment is. It’s a tightly woven fabric—shift one thing and all the other parts will eventually register the change. Language functions in the same way. It’s alive, has an ecology, and is both resilient and accommodating to change. In other words, we are deeply entangled with nature: it acts on us and we act on it. This tension becomes palpable halfway through *Fra Keeler*, when the narrator goes on a long walk through a canyon. The walk represents a climactic moment in his thinking process—it pushes the atmospheric disturbance, which has been building up, over the edge. The canyon is not just the setting that frames the scene; it causes the final chain of events to unfold; what comes after it is brutal, savage.

JA: In your interview with *Hoc Tok*, you said that you wrote *Fra Keeler* with your “eyes closed in six-minute spurts over the course of a year.” What does your writing process look like for your current projects? Does your process have certain advantages/disadvantages?

AVDVO: I’m not sure what you mean by advantages/disadvantages. I tend not to measure my process in those terms. In my experience, the novel imposes the process—not the other way around. You, as the writer, have to yield to it. Some novels require more time, or more layers of excavation, and there really isn’t a way of speeding things along without shutting down certain key aspects.

The project I am currently working on happens to be much longer than *Fra Keeler* and, in some ways, it’s more complex. Over the last few years, I have accumulated post-its, index cards, notebooks, and wall-sized posters full of notes. I also have several versions of each chapter and, as the novel progresses, I go over these meticulously to see what needs to be brought back and what needs to be discarded. But none of this guarantees results beyond the organizational and pragmatic. For me, the most important thing is to sit

in front of the page long enough to enter the web of the novel and lose track of time and space, the way I did when I was writing with my eyes closed. That sense of bewilderment and drift, of disappearing into the writing, is what keeps me returning to my writing desk day after day.

JA: Do you consider *Fra Keeler* or your other creative work to be political on some level? What do you think of the notion that all writing is political, or at least should be political?

AVDVO: I think language is political. It has the power to construct and deconstruct, to create and annihilate. That being said, I think the minute you impose absolutes on writing, it stops giving back—it withers away, becomes purely cerebral. I am interested in writing that is complex, honest, layered; the kind of literature that traverses multiple dimensions of feeling and thought and is capable of containing the complexity of what it means to be a person in the world.

JA: You teach in the M.F.A. program for creative writing at Notre Dame. How has your experiences with writing impacted your approach to teaching, and vice versa?

AVDVO: Teaching in an M.F.A. program allows me to inhabit writing at all times and to share it with a community of colleagues and students who are devoted to writing as a practice. I'm immersed in a constant conversation about literature. In fact, two years ago, I taught a seminar for M.F.A. students called *Introspection and Voyage: Examining Narrative Across Time*. We read *The Divine Comedy*, *Don Quixote*, and *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* alongside works by Kathy Acker, Jorge Luis Borges, Ana Kavan, Lynne Tillman, Sei Shōnagon, and others. I designed the course with the intention to explore “the genealogy of radical literature.” We read texts that range from the medieval to the contemporary and that engage with literary traditions from around the world. It was a fantastic and rigorous class, and one I look forward to teaching again in the coming years.

BREATHE

Lewis had been wanting some of that nitrous for hours. He'd had this dream—a predawn dream—that must have had something to do with his father dying because he couldn't get the hospital stink out his head. He'd woken up with his jaw burning, a back tooth singing with pain.

He had switched years ago from a perfectly fine dentist over on Divisadero to Ed Karr here in Noe Valley just because Karr had nitrous. The drywall guy Lewis had been working with at the time swore by it. Nitrous messes with your head and in the best possible way, he'd grinned. Said Karr was pretty free with the stuff. Free was right. Floating free, his head plastered up against the ceiling, beige walls tingling. Lewis crossed one work boot on top of the other.

"The doctor will be right in," a voice called. He caught sight of the blonde woman who had shown him the room and disappeared. A new dental assistant, Lewis supposed. She hadn't been here three months ago.

He flipped through the ancient *National Geographic* she'd left him, planets colliding on the cover, violent oranges and purple flying. He pulled up a sock and pushed it tightly down again. Four Advil hadn't kicked back the pain much. Where was old Karr?

Outside, branches with hanging green things pressed up against Karr's picture window as if they wanted in. Wild fruit maybe. Lewis closed his eyes and reopened them. Helena would know. His wife must have spent half the years they'd been married in the backyard tending one thing or another. San Francisco's amazing, she said. Green even in January. Helena knew the names of living things. He knew about houses, built dozens. Knew how to get a frame up fast in the rain, slam in one nail after the other, hang a door so it closed with a satisfying, hard click.

Karr walked into the room. "Lew," he said, "How's it going?"

Lewis lifted himself off the chair enough to shake Karr's hand. "Not bad, Ed." His dentist's palm felt moist as always, spongy.

Karr sat and swiveled the stool closer. His hair lifted in gelled strands that swept across his head in a buoyant curve. "Big win for the Warriors last night. Did you catch the game?"

"Nah. I had to work. It's busy."

"That's a good thing in construction, right? Busy?"

"Right." Lewis stared out the window.

"So— this tooth." Karr flipped on the dental light and Lewis opened his mouth. He felt a sting of pain.

“Crown, definitely,” Karr said, glancing at the chart. “Bruxing seems to be a factor. Are you having trouble sleeping, Lew? Jaw pain?”

Lewis folded his hands tightly over his chest. “No.”

Fuck if he was going to say anything. The grinding had started the day his father was admitted to the ICU and gotten worse since. Whole days went by he could hardly chew. Karr wasn’t the only one who’d stared, wanting to know what was wrong, or in Helena’s case, why he was so sad, so angry. In the beginning, he’d blurt out his father had just died. *Sorry, they’d say. I’m so sorry for your loss.* Helen looked at him with sad eyes. Well, the last thing he wanted was Karr’s pity.

A few months ago, pedaling through Golden Gate Park, he’d looked over and saw Karr riding next to him. “Gorgeous day,” Karr said, slowing down. But even that had been too fast. Lewis sucked in his breath so it wouldn’t sound like it was coming hard, shot the breeze—for a second—until Karr passed, and waving, rode out of sight. Down by the windmill, there was his dentist again. Christ. What could Lewis do but try to ride alongside. Get winded all over again.

An invitation had come. Beer at Karr’s place, which turned out to be a condo on Nob Hill with two bridge views. He and Helena lived in Bernal Heights alongside 280. After a few Jolly Pumpkins, Karr showed Lewis his training bike set up in front of the big screen, the custom Fuji-Sportif for zipping across the Golden Gate, the mountain bike he used to climb up and over Mount Tam. Twice in one day. In the spare bedroom, Karr had stashed Speedplay cyclers, portable tool kits, screw-in spike cleats for the occasional pickup soccer game, and water bottles in glass, enamel, and stainless steel. Shit.

Before things had always been straightforward with Karr. Lewis saw him once, maybe twice, a year. Got his teeth worked on, and the nitrous when it came to anything serious. Now Karr was friendly, asked questions.

“Ed,” Lewis said. “What would you say to getting the nitrous started?”

“Sure.” Karr looked where silver tanks usually stood. He frowned and called over Lewis’s head to someone in the hall. “Molly?”

The blonde reappeared, said she’d be right back.

Karr turned and began opening one cabinet drawer after another. Instruments clinked. Lewis picked at a pin-size hole in his T-shirt.

“Mr. Dellmeyer?” He looked to see Molly staring at him. She was amber-eyed, with thick white blonde hair pulled into a long braid that ran down her chest. She inched one of the steel tanks closer. “Ready?”

He nodded.

She gently positioned the gray mask over Lewis’s nose, its two arms spreading in opposite directions. “How does that feel, Mr. Dellmeyer? Is that comfortable?”

He inhaled deeply. “Yes.”

“Good.” Karr clipped a white bib under Lewis’s neck and buzzed the chair

flat. Lewis drew in another breath.

Hands were moving above him now, sharp instruments passing between Molly's delicate fingers and Karr's muscular ones. "No, this," they were saying, and "Yes, that." All those instruments, Lewis knew, would end up in him. His mouth didn't seem big enough. His whole body, hardly big enough.

"Open please, Lew."

Karr smiled and Lewis sent a half-smile back, not to Karr's eyes, but his teeth, the whites of which looked uncomfortably familiar. Lewis felt his mouth open.

Another one of Karr's routines. First nitrous, then the needle. Lewis's head sank into the headrest, the base of his skull expanding. Karr stretched over him, holding the novocaine-filled syringe just out of sight. "Quick pinch, Lew," he said. Karr's hand dove down and Lewis felt the slow jerked plunge in his gums. His forever-bleeding, forty-nine-year old gums.

"You all right, Lew?" Karr said, the needle still in Lewis's mouth.

His tongue had turned thick. Better to nod, Lewis thought, which he did. His head fell further back on the headrest.

"Ran into Helena and Toby the other day by Union Square. What's Toby in now, eighth grade?"

Here Lewis didn't nod. Didn't need to. He knew Karr would go on. And on. Last time, he'd talked about cycling. All the problems with the Tour. Today, he started in about Toby. How he remembered seeing Lewis and Helena right before Toby was born, how huge Helena had been, not that huge was bad, and later, the surprise of running into the three of them at Mission Rock Cafe, Toby big and pink, and Helena, exhausted. Understandably exhausted. He was all for kids, had plenty of kids as patients, but as for being a father, that he'd pass on. Marriage, too. Lewis didn't want to know why Karr had never married. Maybe he'd never found a woman perfect enough. Or liked to fool around. None of Lewis's business, really. "But you and Helena," Karr said, "you've been together a long time. You have a good marriage."

Helena, Lewis thought, the tight line of her mouth this morning, expecting something. Hell if he knew what. "You're not the only one," she'd said, "who's got to get to work, you know." Yeah, he'd forgotten to drive Toby to school. Big deal. Suddenly he was yelling, screaming things he couldn't quite remember but knew for certain weren't too swift. Something about how she had to have everything be perfect, go perfect, and if perfect was what she needed in a husband, she'd better go look someplace else.

He hadn't always been the kind of guy who screamed, but a guy who would, occasionally, leave a hot cup of Earl Grey on the nightstand so Helena could have it there first thing in the morning, a guy who'd spent hours in Holly Park one Sunday morning riding Toby back and forth on his bike, holding the back of the

seat until the kid could keep a wobbly upright going, a guy who once at San Francisco State—where he'd studied math for a hot minute before heading into construction—had stood outside Helena's dorm window in the night fog singing "Dear Prudence" at the top of his lungs just to hear her laugh.

Only this morning, he'd said nothing, nothing about the cracked tooth, his hours spent staring sleeplessly up at the ceiling. He'd just tossed the toast he'd burned in the trash and stuck his head deep in the refrigerator as if he were desperate for something. Toby yelled he'd get himself to school and slammed his way out of the house. Tob. Tall for fourteen, tall and too skinny with a beaky face that, Lewis had to admit, looked a lot like his own at that age. He hadn't wanted Toby to storm out like that. But what could he do? Helena had launched in, why was he always shouting, always forgetting, so tired, irritable? She was sorry his father died the way he did, but why couldn't they talk about it? Just talk. Why not, Lewis thought now, letting the blue of Karr's eyes examine him. Talking was okay. Talking was fine. But yelling—he'd say this to Helena this—something yelling felt so hellaciously good.

He sighed out a breath.

"Just another moment here, Lew."

He looked up to see Karr's face half-hidden by the hand he still had in Lewis's mouth. Pain shot up behind his cheekbone.

Last night, just as he was falling asleep, Helena had slid her palm along the small of his back, the faintly hairy triangle she claimed to love. All he'd been able to do was mumble, "Let's not," and move his exhausted body, his wrinkled dick to the other side of the bed.

"Should be fine now," Karr said, extracting the needle. "Good and numb."

Lewis blinked. The pain now was happening to some distant body far below his. Numb was not the word. Good, not the word. Couldn't give a damn, better. This was what he'd come for.

"Ready?" Karr had put on thick magnifiers, glasses that blurred his eyes to a big, much darker blue.

Lewis motioned with his head yes.

"Close your eyes, Lew. You know. Debris can go flying."

Colors floated across the back of his eyelids. Soft yellows, granular blue. Which turned into electrified green. The drill started up. The sound rose to a bone piercing whine that cut into his skull and wrapped itself tightly around his brain.

Breathe Lewis, a voice somewhere inside him said. Not his voice really, but a weird combination of him, the nitrous, and what? He wasn't sure. Something bigger and at the same time smaller. But a voice he listened to when it got going in his head.

He inhaled.

Exhaled.

The colors ran and shapes formed. Women. Long hair flying in the wind. Palm trees thrashing. Rain. The *National Geographic*, he remembered, the page open here in the chair. Not the story about planets colliding, the other one. Women throwing themselves on a wet casket, faces twisted with grief. Men's arms holding them back. Men everywhere. Lewis felt his memory working backward, thoughts reaching.

"Turn a little to the right, please, Lew," Karr said. "That's fine."

Lewis turned, breathed. Now he was floating, sinking, bobbling again against the ceiling as if such a thing as a drill didn't exist, as if a dead father, an angry son, didn't exist. In. Out. In. His body hollowed, air filling his fingertips. He became a long tube of effervescent breath. His brain glowed.

"Suction, please."

When Molly sucked out his mouth, her arm touched his. Then, the soft tip of her braid. He couldn't help thinking about that hair, the light hair on her arms, the fine line he imagined running past her waist. Her pubes, were they blonde, too? Out of another darkness in his brain, something else rose, women, different women, lying on the thick, low branches of trees, all of them blonde every place a woman could be. He must have been all of fourteen, that magazine open, too, the page stretched so he could see everything. Lionesses, the women looked like, cheetahs half-hidden in leaves, ready to pounce, ready for anything. Lewis felt something at the core of him swell, press against the zipper of his jeans. A nice firm press. Definitely firm. He would have smiled but there was a hand in his mouth.

"A little wider please, Lewis. That's fine."

Then— his father had burst in, ripped the magazine out of his hands, thrown it across the room, his eyes glittering with anger or was it shame. His father's arms, Lewis remembered, the long dark force of them, the black hair. This! his father yelled, spitting the sound, This is how you spend your time! Well, time is something you're not going to have much of anymore, buddy. Time is going to get pretty scarce around here, what with all the chores you'll be doing, all the weeding and raking and mowing and hauling—

Lewis felt hard bits of metal—or tooth?—hit the inside of his cheek. He closed his eyes tightly together. Who cared. He wouldn't think about his father, the yelling, rage, disappointment. He'd focus instead on his tooth, what was left of the molar, caught in the light of the drill that was attached to an arm attached to a human being.

"Open your eyes now, Lew."

The drilling noise stopped, the air felt strangely empty. Lewis's eyes opened. He saw latexed fingers mounded in his mouth, Karr's brown head, and the edge of Molly's nearly white one. The light above his head glowed, the one-eyed light. He brought in another breath. His arms and legs softened, became as distant as the arms and legs of the two bodies moving around him. He remembered dead leaves

and grass stretching across the lawn in perfect piles. Perfect, or else redone. Decades passed. He and his father never spoke of what had happened that afternoon. Suddenly it seemed his father was in the hospital with pneumonia. Which by three o'clock the next morning had gotten worse. Much worse. Lewis blinked.

"A little more to the left, please."

His eyes looked past Karr's. In the fluorescent diamonds of the light lay something. A question, maybe. A dream question, the kind you recognize instantly the moment you enter the dream, but one that slips away as soon as you're awake. Lewis felt his lungs fill, rise like wings from his chest. He turned.

"That's fine." The drill started again.

Was this how his father had felt at the end? *Turn left. Right. Open your mouth. Close.* People leaning over him, pressing forward, too. *No. Yes. Good. Fine.* A white bibby thing under his chin, too. His father's mouth open, pink, no teeth, like a bird's. A bird too old and sick to bite anymore. "Water?" he asked his father. Lewis had been surprised at the way he'd cared. "Would you like some water, Dad?"

No, nothing by mouth, the nurse had said. Not even water. Your father could choke and that would be dangerous, his lungs what they are. But when the nurse went off to wherever she was always going off to, Lewis couldn't help it. The old guy needed something. So dry and gray there in the hole of the hospital bed. His freckled hands on the sheet, splayed open. Here, Lewis said, holding out some day-old 7-UP. Just a sip, Dad. Just a little bit. But his father *had* choked, coughing, his face turning a violent purple, a color like blood but bloodier, his eyes bulging, his yellow hands jerking as if every little jerk was a syllable or a word or something that he, Lewis, his son, should be able to understand, at least a little. Lewis was sure he'd killed him, his father, and the nurses—all the nurses—would come rushing in, see his father thrashing, swing their heads around and stare at the plastic straw still in Lewis's hand. How could you do that? Kill your own father?

Some blade-thin part of himself wondered if he had wanted his father dead. The thought swirled through his brain. But his father had gone on to live. At least for two more days.

No— He wouldn't let himself think like that. Because it was his father who'd tried to kill him! In the garage that time. About his taking off for Amy's, or the D in typing, or ramming the station wagon into the fence. One of those things, probably all of them. He remembered the carving knife in his father's hand shooting up like a silver finger, the blade wet, shining under the fluorescent lights, the knife he remembered his mother had just washed up so it must have been Thanksgiving or one of those sorry holidays when he was supposed to hang around all day and gratefully watch his father pour down one drink after the other until the littlest thing—a lost shoe, nicked door—would set him off, anger rising in his face like blood in a cut.

Only this time, Lewis decides he's taking off without a word. His father's in

front of him yelling, You get back in the house. Now! Lewis keeps walking and—then his father’s lunging, missing, missing, lunging, the sucker so wasted he can’t even keep the knife in his hand, metal clanging on the concrete floor, sound splattering, his father’s fist crashes into Lewis’s chest, tumbling him to the floor so all he can do is kickkickkick at his father’s skinny legs and Lewis sees how easy it is, how sad a forty-nine-year-old man really is, so he jabs his foot one more time good and hard and knocks his father over, their bodies rolling, heads butting, hands clawing, and all that rage right down to the core spewing open and oh-so-fucking free, and before he knows it, Lewis is running, anywhere at first, then to Ocean Beach, empty this time of year, cold, where he spends the whole day and then night on the freezing sand, broken shells digging in his ear so he can’t sleep.

In the morning, he decides to go home—the old man has to be cooled off by now—so he picks up one sand-filled shoe, then the other, the other, the other, until in the distance he hears the whine of a motor. His father for fuck’s sake is mowing the lawn, mowing like it’s June and not November, making patient, straight rows as if his life depended on it, as if the grass isn’t brown and stubbly, his father dead set against looking at him, determined to make this one day like any other.

“Lewis.” Karr’s voice sounded far away. “We’re ready for the temporary. I’ll just need a minute to prepare.”

Karr’s thick magnifiers were off, his eyes still and waiting for Lewis to say something. Molly had vanished.

“Okay, Ed.”

But Karr didn’t turn back to the sink as Lewis had expected. “I’ve been meaning to ask you, Lew.” Karr buzzed the chair up some. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” Lewis sucked in a breath. “We’ll be done soon, right?”

Karr nodded. “I mean, since your father passed.”

It took a moment for Lewis to register these words. Passed, he hated that expression. “Me? Fine.”

“Are you grinding more at night?” Karr’s tone was calm and insistent.

“I’ve always grinded at night.” Lewis adjusted the mask. “Nothing new.”

“Two cracked teeth in three months. That’s not a good sign, Lew.”

Lewis looked at his feet, way down at end of the chair. He could almost see the sand of the lot where he’d been working yesterday rising off the tips of his work boots. Karr had Weejuns at the bottoms of his legs, loafers polished to a high glow. Asking was one thing. But getting into his business, that Karr shouldn’t do.

“I’m fine,” Lewis said firmly. He watched Karr turn around.

But the question pressed up against the light, refusing to let Lewis go. Was this how he’d felt at the end? Not his father, but him, Lewis. He remembered his chair pressed into the hospital bed, staring at his father’s mouth, the toothless mouth warped by the hard cone of the oxygen mask, the mask not yet removed.

His father's green-blue eyes were flat, all the way open. His chest, no rise, no fall, no nothing.

But was it nothing? Because his father's body was still there, his fingers on top of the white sheet, the freckled hands Lewis remembered now not hitting, punching, grabbing, but magically reaching out to catch even the wildest pitch, the crazy balls his boy self would lob high over his father's head. His father fielded every curve, every furious grounder, all the pop-ups, the up up and aways. Nothing had to be perfect then. The blue dream of night would come on, stars slipping between the trees, and still, they would play. Was that the dream last night? Lewis remembered hands, old, young, hands swinging forward, reaching back, one, then the other, and the other, and all the others until they became a fleshy blur, the satisfying dark smack! of the ball flying somewhere above so high and hard and sweet. He remembered his father's mouth. Open, there on the bed. Refusing to close.

"Just another minute, Lew. We'll have you as good as new."

His boss had wanted him back on Monday. Two days after the funeral. He had to practically beg for the rest of the week off and then his boss thought he was so fucking swell. The house had to get up, didn't it? The joists rolled, windows installed, and walls trimmed. "But you go ahead, Lew. Take the whole week."

"Open wide," Karr smiled down, holding the small tooth between his fingers.

Lewis opened his mouth as much as he could. He felt Karr's hand again.

It'd gone fast that week. Too fast. People said all kinds of things. Not just *Sorry*, but *He's at peace now. For the best. You're in our thoughts*, Lew. None of them had any idea who his father was. Who he—Lewis—was. Helena didn't know, her own parents were still alive and kicking. How could he explain—answer the questions she kept asking—when he didn't know himself? He kept trying to nail it, frame his feelings neatly in hate.

Then the good would come.

The good would come when he was least expecting. The smallest thing could bring it on, the sight of a wild pitch across a grassy field, a blue collar flipped up against the wind, wrinkles on the back of a stranger's hand.

Lewis blinked, harder this time.

When Karr fit the new tooth over the stump of the old, a sour taste ran down the back of Lewis's throat. He'd forgotten that bitter taste, tried hard not to breathe. But his chest rose and fell as if it were someone else's chest.

"You all right, Lewis? We're nearly finished here."

Lewis felt something wet roll out of the corner of his eye. It slid toward Karr's hand, his busy hand. Breathe, Lewis told himself. Keep breathing.

Now tears were burning their way down his throat, dripping inside his ribs. Lewis twisted his fingers tightly together. This should not be happening. Maybe alone, or at home with Helena and Toby someplace downstairs. Not here. Not

now.

A second tear slipped out.

Karr dabbed at its wet line with a corner of the white bib. He looked closely at Lewis. "Are you sure you're all right?"

Lewis stared up at Karr, his eyes wide and hard to read. Maybe old Karr wasn't so bad after all. The way he knew things. Lewis went to say something, but instead of a tongue he found a thick mass wadded in his mouth, dry as cotton.

"Yeah," he finally managed.

"Good. Let's let you clear." Karr switched the nitrous to oxygen, and lifted the mask away. The chair buzzed and suddenly Lewis sat upright, his ankles below knees, Karr's picture window once again before him. The first tear fell in a crooked line down his neck, erasing itself silently under his T-shirt. Brilliant edges turned into right-angled walls, beige surfaces. His once delicious breath became flat, ordinary. He couldn't feel half his face. But his fingers—Lewis tapped the armrest a couple times—his fingers were there. Spongy, but there.

"That's it, Lew. You're all set." Karr flipped the light up and away.

Lewis nodded, turning not toward Karr but the window. The branches growing against the glass looked different, darker green. And it wasn't fruit hanging off them, but the buds of something just now coming on. A wind tossed one back and forth. Helena could tell him what these things were. Helena, Lewis sighed. And Toby. They would be home before him, the house quiet. Too quiet. *Sorry*, he'd say, right there in the living room or kitchen or wherever they happened to be. Sorry about everything. What they'd say back Lewis had no idea.

He eased one foot out and felt for the floor.

FROM HELEN OR MY HUNGER

I do remember language, Helen

I can't change it

Memory is the name of this next life and the next

There is no peace in the icon

When I try to focus on its rosewater, its blood

I am altogether soaked in it

I feel hunger like a dark streak, a trick

a key word for something left outside the room

I dream new limbs

I come to my own gender like an epithet

Somewhere else I remember my thigh

as the ocean, as a green shawl

One thick line on my shoulder

blonde body hair on olive skin

Spills I have never refused

I want to call our version of things timeless,

but you tell me this is something longer

and thick with cycles

FROM HELEN OR MY HUNGER

Who am I to be solid by
Running through
my coal-mining family
I know it, ask myself
what mediates a distance
what does it mean when a word
is left rammed and humming,
separated from its future
and how long will you have to sing
Each line comes aching intact
Like a brittle fig I see you
I live with you in my spring body
in the ravine between ancestors
Between the orphaned haze
of my grandmother when I saw her
sideways, in a thin picture
and later, opened-mouthed, crystalline



LONG BEACH, WA SPECIALTY 1.

2784 X 1913 PIXELS.
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY.

KEITH MOUL.

LONG BEACH, WA SPECIALTY 2.

2784 X 1913 PIXELS.
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY.

KEITH MOUL.



THE BUSINESS OF DOLDRUMS

The whistle, like a far off cartoon anvil propelling toward me, comes from out of town. I can't see anything through the tornado's debris: tree branches, cars, and things unrecognizable. I was only supposed to stop into Cleveland for the night and now my car isn't where I left it. All around me I smell gasoline and it's a comfort for a moment and then the whistle is shrill and grating.

The trees and debris begin to rustle and are slowly pushed out from the road, bulldozed by a great train. A gleaming gold stone grille breaks through the leaves and parades forth about six boxcars straight for me. I tremble at the beauty of the train. It is emblazoned in a maroon red and led by a great gold eye. The billowing smoke steams forth from the train's spout and leaves a brilliant cloud in its wake.

It barges forward and I am pushed out of the road in awe of the train and the very first car stops in front of me. A conductor steps out and shouts, viva Cleveland. He pulls off his porkpie hat and I stammer a hello. The light from inside the train illuminates the one eye this man has. And I don't mean he's missing an eye, no he was and is a Cyclops. The suit he wears is blue like noon. Unbuttoned, his jacket flaps even though I don't feel any wind. *Hello*, it says to me. Above its smiling face is an illustrious mustache and the one eye. I imagine the left eye growing tired of the right and then stretching across to engulf it. When it blinks, there is a small breeze from the weight of its lashes. It smiles again, *name's Theodore*. And then it extends a hand, *but you can call me, Ted. I believe you know my cousin Philip. He sent me*. I don't know a Philip, I tell him. *Shame*, he says, *I think I'll call you Ish, you look like an Ish to me. Ish Taylor you are now and forever remain. Will you come aboard?*

I try and think of an excuse, but here I am with nothing to do really. Other than ravage through the wreckage in search of my car. And I say, not really. *First we have something to do*, Ted says, *I saw a little farm up a ways and I think it would be the best start for our little—what shall it be called? Adventure, sure, sure. Our adventure*. I begin to tell him I'm not interested in him or his train, but the longer we talk the quicker I forget my words. And then we're sitting around a card table playing poker and we're both naked. Well, only sort of naked. Ted wears a cloak made of pig's skin. The front legs are draped over his shoulders and the pig's head is pulled over Ted's. I wear a sheep's skin, but my hood isn't on and we're both dripping in blood. The smell nauseates me so I pull the sheep's head over mine. Ted shuffles and deals out the first hand, we're playing Texas Hold 'Em. He discards from the top and lays out the first three cards and none of them help me. *I need a*

woman, Ted says, *I'm a young man, Ish. I don't need to settle down, just have some fun. Like that girl back in Brookline.* He stops and shuffles the cards again and taps them on the maple table. Or at least it looks like maple, it's a lighter wood and it smells like syrup. The room is covered in burgundy and it feels like velvet on the soles of my feet. The walls and ceiling look like they're covered in a softer fabric and then Ted blows out the candle between us.

Have I told you about that girl? Ted asks me. He describes the dye in her hair and the maroon it left around her scalp. *I called her Miriam,* Ted says and he tells me that she brought him home and undressed him. She put on a Fleetwood Mac album and it played the song "Landslide" over and again. While they lay in bed together, breathing heavily she asked him to choke her. *No kidding,* Ted says. He relights the candle and cups his hands together like he's making a shadow dove. *She kept telling me to choke her until she couldn't speak and for three days and three nights we had sex just like that.* Ted tells me they never broke from the routine. *Then she asks me if I'm a breast man and I am and she says breasts are like hubcaps.* This woman told Ted that her breasts were irrelevant, like hubcaps. *They don't do a damn for the car, but they look a hell of a lot better with them, she told me.* Discarding from the top, Ted plays another card—my hand does not suggest optimism. *Ain't that something?*

It sounded awful, I tell him. And he tells me I have it all wrong. He stands up and leaves the room. When he comes back he has a portrait in his arms and it is of a naked woman with red hair. *This is Miriam,* Ted says. *I have that song stuck in my head. I can't stop thinking about her. She's driven me mad.*

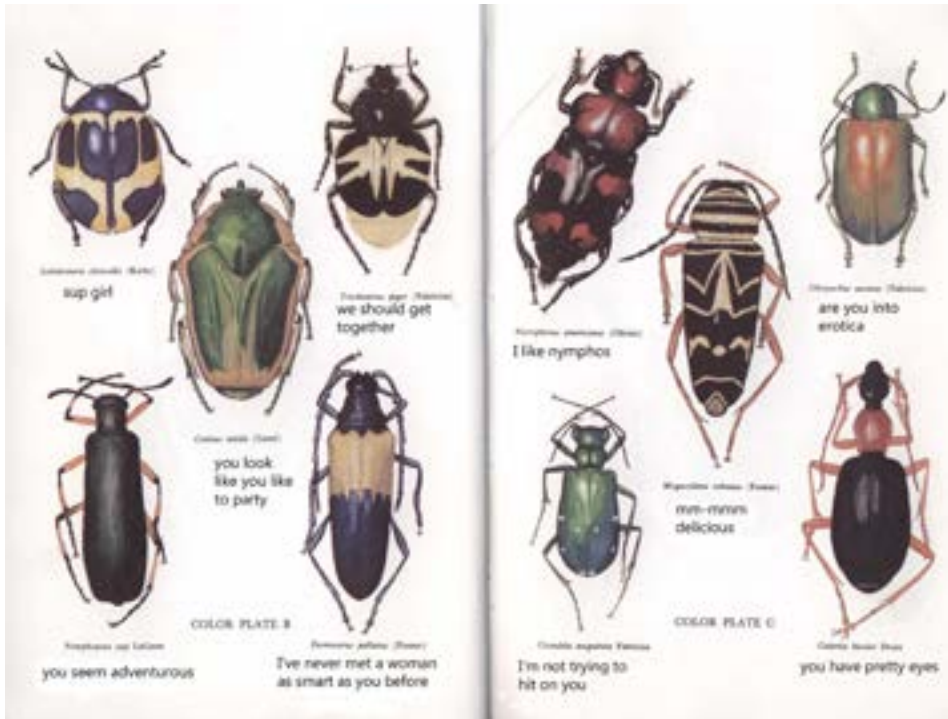
I tell him I think I should get going. Ted asks *you got somewhere to be?* I tell him no and he makes me stand so the portrait can sit down in my place.

BETLES 1.

10 1/2 X 8 IN.

ILLUSTRATION FROM *A MANUAL OF COMMON BETLES OF EASTERN NORTH
AMERICA*, TEXT ADDED IN PHOTOSHOP.

JESSY RANDALL.





Saperda tridentata Olivier
you seem like
a sensual
person



Languria bicolor (Fabricius)



Tetraopes femoratus LeConte

I feel really
vulnerable
around you



Phanera vindex MacLeay

I've been told I'm a good kisser

COLOR PLATE D



Chlaenius striceus Fennel

you could totally
be a model



Trichodes nuttalli Kirby

lookin good

BETLES 2.

5 x 8 IN.

ILLUSTRATION FROM *A MANUAL OF COMMON BEETLES OF EASTERN NORTH
AMERICA*, TEXT ADDED IN PHOTOSHOP.

JESSY RANDALL.

WINNEBAGO

Lila couldn't see the man and the girl clearly because they always sat or stood where the dry trees were thickest, and because they always arrived right when the sun skimmed the creek water like a giant glinting stone, flicking light into Lila's eyes and making it hard to look at anything too long without a fit of blinking. From the little Lila could see, the man was older than the girl. The girl was a lot older than Lila, but didn't look old enough—the drifts of her voice not high enough, her dress not long or serious enough—for Lila to privately call her anything but the girl. Often, the man and the girl sat just by the creek bed. Lila could hear that they were talking, but couldn't hear what they were saying. Often too, they would lie down together, and then, trees hiding them—the oaks and maples that Lila has been so surprised to see growing out of creek bed sand, not soil—Lila could see even less. Sometimes the man and the girl would play music from their RV. Today the man took out a harmonica and began to play it. He played it until Lila heard a sound like a cactus wren startling from a tree, then a sound like arguing. Silence. And then the shrill harmonica again. Lila tried whistling along quietly, but she didn't know the song so her whistling was always a note behind, always an eerie echo playing catch up. Lila was sitting on the other side of the creek and stacking twigs and smooth pebbles until the stacks toppled, every now and then glancing up at the man and the girl. She did that until her mother called her for dinner, at which point Lila stood up, brushed herself off, and pushed her way out of the small thicket of smaller, spindly trees to their campsite.

Her mother and her mother's boyfriend were sitting on the picnic table, their feet on the table's bench. Her mother waved Lila over with the hand holding her cigarette.

“What were you doing over there?” she said. “Spying on people?”

“No,” Lila said.

“No,” her mother repeated in a singsong imitation that wasn't how Lila had said it at all.

“Hey Lila,” her mother's boyfriend said.

“Hi,” Lila said.

Her mother's boyfriend and her mother laughed. Lila could see they were swaying. Her mother's boyfriend was shaking his hand on his knee, the beads on his wrist running into each other making the soft noise of wood.

“You know what I think? I think you were something wild in your past life. Like a crow or something. Something talkative and mean.”

Her mother closed her eyes, suddenly seeming to become clearheaded, and

put her hand on her boyfriend's shoulder, as if to steady herself. "Don't tease her. She hates it." She turned to Lila. "Lila," she said, her face serious.

"What," Lila said.

"We're doing potatoes and eggs for dinner. You want to make the eggs?" Arbitrarily, eggs were the only food Lila's mother allowed Lila to make alone. Her mother stubbed her cigarette into the pickle jar of creek water she and her boyfriend were using as an ashtray, and lowered herself off the table to the dirt. She was barefoot. "Here, I'll get to fire going again."

Lila followed her mother to the campfire, keeping her eyes on her mother's dirty, calloused heels. Her mother was beautiful, except for her feet and her hands. Lila watched her crouch down and poke the fire back to roaring with a long stick, until it licked the skillet that was on the grill.

"There you go, little missy," her mother said. She handed the stick over to Lila. She stood up and walked to her tent. Her boyfriend stubbed his own cigarette out, got up off the picnic table and followed her.

Lila knelt down and wrapped three potatoes in foil. Potatoes and eggs were practically all they were eating. Baked potatoes and scrambled eggs and dried bulk cereal. Along with apples and canned green beans, for the last two weeks those had been their staples. She cracked six eggs into the skillet and stirred the yolks and whites around with a fork. Bending over the fire this way made her face sting and back hurt, but she liked cooking the eggs. It was exercising a survival skill. Her mother had a habit of asking her, like she was chiding her for not being more prepared, just how Lila thought she'd survive if one day her mother just up and left? Her mother only asked that when she had alcohol on her breath and an unfocused expression, and when her mother was like that, Lila obstinately wouldn't answer. The eggs were a solid mass now. Lila could hear her mother and her boyfriend laughing from inside their tent. She made up a plate of eggs for herself and went to the picnic table to eat, too hungry to wait for the potatoes.

The campground situation was supposed to be temporary. Nobody was around for miles, and there were no showers or bathrooms here, no amenities, so no fee to pay. Lila didn't think she'd mind if the situation turned out to be permanent. She'd been pulled out of school, where she was below grade level in reading and where the math she was expected to know wasn't what she'd learned at her last school. In gym class she learned too late that all the girls were already shaving their legs. They looked at her like she was some kind of bug in the changing room. That was always happening: she was always behind in everything. Not that she felt sorry for herself, only mad. What was she missing that they had? If anybody teased her and somebody else defended her, she spat that she could take care of herself. And she could. Out here at the campground, here in the desert somewhere near a town named Strawberry, by the near-dry creek, she was. Every morning, her mother started up the truck and left— Lila didn't know where she went, except that it

wasn't the Waffle House anymore, but probably still Phoenix, maybe to look for a new job, maybe to smoke cigarettes with her boyfriend— and Lila was left alone. There was plenty to do. She had her sleeping bag to zip up and roll up in her tent. She had to wash up in the creek, soaping and rinsing her body and face. She had lunch to eat—three apples. She had the brown lizards with their beady eyes and the dust and red dirt and gnarled trees to look and poke at, the sharp rocks and how the sun hit them.

And then there was the girl and the man. Lila should have assumed that the man and the girl had been coming to the creek long before she and her mother had set up camp. But in Lila's mind they'd arrived the same day as she had, materialized only in the moment she had noticed them. Here was one thing she knew that nobody else did, and maybe it was for this reason that she felt a compulsion to stay close, a painful tug like sadness or gravity, inevitable.

Every morning Lila had been dipping her hand into the creek and closing her eyes, concentrating on whether or not the water was warmer. Come summer, her mother had said, even up here where there were oaks and maples, the sun would be too hot to stand. There was a possibility of them staying with her aunt up north. This was the first time Lila had heard of an aunt. The water filming over her fingers felt the same temperature as the air. It was April. Not too, too warm yet.

The creek water and the woodsy, sharp air and the peeling bark on the trees that grew around the creek like wrung hands—did they twist that way because they had to suck their nutrients out of sand?—they were all dreamily warm, warm whether her palm was at her side or dipped in the water or pressed against rough bark. Warm like sleep, and for hours while her mother was away Lila strayed dreamily far from the campground. Yesterday, her mother hadn't come home, and she wasn't there when Lila woke up this morning either. She walked down the dirt road, then a cracked asphalt road, trailing her hand along a sloping rock cliff. She walked in a different direction and squeezed herself between large boulders, through tall bunches of spiny bushes that pricked her like a spider legs. If she blurred her vision, she saw orange, brown and red. She turned her face up to the wide turquoise sky so the sun would press her eyelids with the pressure of fingertips. The world was primary colors, and simple. When she opened her eyes, the desert around her leaked back as blobs of light and shape. Then it snapped into focus and the parched world was back again. Lila made her way back to the creek, picking up her feet carefully when walking through the rocks.

Almost sunset of another day, and her mother hadn't returned. No mechanic rumble of the truck, no mother with a new bag of groceries, or her boyfriend, or gas station coffee and handful of free flavored creamers that Lila could drink one by one or pour into an anthill and watch ants swarm and drown them

selves in a pool of milky sweetness. But the man and the girl had come, dependably. Lila crouched on the edge of her side of the creek and watched them.

She could hear watery, thinned music, and after a few minutes of listening, Lila thought it sounded familiar, which she disliked immediately. She knew the man and the girl because she had made everything up about them, because they were only how they looked to her. Whereas the music she hadn't made up, just recognized. In a fleeting moment of panic, she despaired they were slipping away from her. But maybe the music they had in common was a good sign—maybe it meant something. Her mother's boyfriend was big on dream interpretation. If Lila told him she dreamed of falling into a volcano—the fragmented rubble of dream logic around her: a birthday party, a person turning into a vulture when she looked back, a pervading anxiety that she was late—he would tell her she was afraid of death. Which was wrong—she barely thought about death, not even when someone mentioned it. So maybe you're returning to a past-life fear of death, her mother's boyfriend said, or your present self's looking at your past deaths and you're scared. Fear is weakness, Lila. You can smell it. It's why your mother can't hold down anything, jobs, people, apartments, whatever. Take that as a lesson. He'd closed his eyes like he'd done the deed of imparting all his wisdom and the effort had exhausted him. Once, during an argument, Lila had heard her mother say to her boyfriend that he was full of shit. Maybe, but Lila also thought privately that maybe dreams were as good a guide to picking the thing to do next as any.

To hear better, she stood up and grasped the oak branch above her with two hands, leaning forward on the balls of her feet. She caught the muffled sounds of conversation, saw a flash of gold—a bracelet, or maybe the low orange sun on hair. Her mother was gone and there was nobody to call her back. No school, no mother, no mother's boyfriend. What else was in the world besides her? Nothing, if she didn't want it there. What would she do without them? She felt a shiver of thrill and cold through her. Then, with the exaggerated decisiveness of someone faking having a plan, Lila let go of the branch and she stepped down into the creek bed. She crossed it—the water was low, barely lapping above her ankles, and it splashed up to her elbows as she waded through it, cooling her—and then there she was where the girl and the man were half-sitting, half-laying, and she was looking down at them. While they looked up at her. Now she could hear their music perfectly, Joni Mitchell, she did recognize it—from her mother's car stereo.

"I like your music," Lila said. She tried loosening her posture, shifting her weight from her left foot to her right.

The girl was toying with her long hair, and Lila noted all the warped lines that made her up—her long skirt, her billowing shirt, her coral bead necklace. And the man too—him and his long hair, which was longer than the girl's. He was all lines too, but they were larger, and longer. He had a

couple lines in his face, too, and he was dressed like a salesperson in a store that sold expensive jewelry. A suit that now had red dirt on it. The music was coming from a Winnebago. Lila hadn't seen it through the trees, and now she could see inside its open door, the edge of a kitchenette, red cloth covering the window.

How easy: that she had only needed to take a few steps forward to strip what was alien and distant from its distance. It almost made her physically recoil. It was the shock of scraping a knee and seeing the blood flood out—suddenly seeing your insides, that rawness, the gore you knew but couldn't really believe was there until you saw it for yourself, when you saw how close it always was to running out, it only took a pinprick. Lila always felt dizzy when she saw blood. She shifted her weight again.

“And who do we have here?” the girl said, smiling up at her. “You know,” she said, turning to the man. “Nothing surprises me. Wasn't I just saying that? I was just thinking about a little girl”—she directed herself back to Lila now—“just like you.”

Lila didn't know what to say.

“Frannie?” asked the man.

“She's just like her,” said the girl.

“I don't know,” said the man.

“Well, anyway.”

“I'm Lila,” Lila said.

“Sit down,” the man said. He said it kindly, gesturing toward the part of the blanket where there was room for her. Lila sat down cross-legged and picked up a leaf to play with. She rubbed it between her fingers and it released an astringent scent. The man and the girl didn't offer their names.

“Listen to that,” said the man, pointing toward the music. “Here, I'll turn it up.” And he got up and disappeared into the Winnebago. The music got louder.

“Oh,” said the girl. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, and her foot, which was close to Lila, began to move in time with the music. Her head moved too.

Lila experimented with closing her eyes too, to try feeling as good as the woman looked like she felt. She tried absorbing the slides from high to low notes so they were a part of her. It didn't do anything. She opened her eyes.

“Hear that?” the man said, returning. “There. Wow. Isn't that spectacular.”

“We hear it,” the girl said, suddenly sounding impatient.

The man had decided he would cook a full English breakfast. The girl laughed. “What? You don't even know what that is.” But the man insisted, telling the girl and Lila that they just so happened to have everything they needed in the fridge—and not much else.

When Lila got her plate, she ate quickly, one item at a time—there were beans, bread, sausage, and tomato. She was sitting next to the girl on the couch inside the Winnebago. The man was sitting on the floor, leaning against a ledge of drawers and cabinets, knees close to his chest. The inside of the RV was only a little larger than Lila's mother's tent.

When they finished eating, the man collected their plates and took them outside to wash. "Wash them in the moonlight," he said to no one particular on his way out. It was dark now, the sky a deep indigo, and the light inside was dim yellow. The girl turned to Lila and took her hands.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"About what?" Lila said.

"What's your first impression. Don't think about it—just say what comes to mind."

"I think—" She felt stuck.

The girl frowned. She looked at the door, then pulled at the cloth hanging over the window behind her, readjusting it.

"I'll tell you something," she said, looking Lila directly in the eyes. Lila straightened up. "I'm telling you because you remind me of my little baby sister, who looked just like you, and who drowned in a pool. She was a perfect angel. And you look just like her, and I think there's no such thing as coincidences."

Lila put the idea away to consider later.

"So I'm going to tell you that Tim and I have been thinking of driving this thing to Santa Monica, and just now I thought that maybe we can do it tonight. I have a friend who moved out there and has some land, and she's always told me I'm welcome. It wouldn't be too hard to set up a life there. I think we'd be happy. Tim knows how to surf. If you want, you can come with us." She gave Lila a searching expression. "What do you think of that?"

"I think it sounds fun."

The girl's expression turned distraught. She ran a hand through her hair—tugged it through, because it got caught in a knot. "No, you don't understand," she said.

Lila wondered how to jump this new barrier, how to turn this new unknown out. All she'd had to do was walk to get here. What next?

"I can understand," she said.

The girl scoffed, but then looked repentant, and touched Lila's hand. "Just ask him to show you pictures of his kids. Him and his wife are in all of them. Look at him when he shows you. His face is the same when he points to his wife and when he points to his kids. Sixteen years married. Four kids, one adopted. It'd touch your heart, the way he looks at them. You'll see."

The girl had a road atlas laid out on the counter, and was leaning over it.

Lila was sitting cross-legged on the couch. When the thin door opened and the man climbed into the Winnebago, the girl said to him, not looking up, "I know you have your smartphone, but this is better. But you can check it to see how long it'll take us to drive there, and what time we'll arrive if we leave in an hour and a half."

The man stood next to her and carefully flipped over the page of the road atlas the girl had been looking at. Then he flipped it back. "I like this old thing too," he said. "We talked about that. That's a thing we have in common."

"Yeah," the girl said. "I know that. That's true."

"We'll get there in the morning," the man said. He leaned over the map, and trailed his finger along a line. "Sure, we can make it."

The girl was looking at him carefully. And the man's face was placid, blank, smiling.

The man and the girl seemed to have forgotten about Lila. It seemed impossible to her: here she was, a strange child in their Winnebago, and they were going about their plans like she wasn't even there. She was aware of their every gesture, while they gave the impression that she was invisible to them. The discrepancy was unbearable. You belong to me, she wanted to say, though she knew that wasn't right. She wondered if her mother had come back yet—she couldn't have, or she would be out looking for her. Or maybe not. Maybe she'd just gone to sleep, forgetting, maybe slipping back into a time before Lila was born. It was like she'd heard her mother's boyfriend say once: imagine every moment in your life plotted on a two-dimensional surface, and you can move back and forth like you're walking on a tightrope. She wondered if there was a trick to it, if you had to have good balance, if the risk to returning to the past was falling, and what would happen to you if you fell. Maybe it was like the sensation of falling she sometimes got when she was on the border of wakefulness and sleep. She bet her mother was good at it.

"Hey," the man said to Lila, crouching down in front of her. The girl joined him.

Lila pulled back a little. "Hi," she said.

"You coming with us, or are you staying?" the man said.

Lila searched both their faces. "I don't know," she said.

The girl smiled at her.

"I'm not sure," Lila said.

"Well why not?" said the girl. "What are you afraid of? We're nice people. You know that, sweetheart, right?"

Lila nodded, but didn't answer the question. Of course a person couldn't answer a question like that. Not when it was asked that way, an answer expected on the spot. What kind of a question was that. What are you afraid of.

The girl asked again, or maybe Lila mind's played it back: "What are you

afraid of?”

Could dreams tell her? Lila’s recurring nightmares were of falling, which wasn’t interesting because so were almost everyone else’s. A few nights ago she’d had a different dream—she’s been lying on her stomach in her tent and a tarantula had been crawling over the crown of her head—it had been so real that she couldn’t tell if it really had been a dream or if she’d woken up and experienced a hazy reality she’d mistaken for sleep. When she and her mother had lived in their old apartment, she’d been afraid of the smoke detector. Not a fire, just the smoke detector going off because of some stray smoke or draft or circuitry, the uncontrolled, alarming noise of it, and not knowing how to stop it. In dreams, her mother’s boyfriend had said, the trick to not being afraid is to control them. In life, fear clouded your judgment. Control made you regain it. Even if it wasn’t real. Even if it was just a dream. Lila had rolled her eyes. You’re not a warlock, she said. But he was talking about lucid dreaming, where you knew you were dreaming and had a say in what your dream self did. For a long time, Lila was stuck on the idea that if you could control what happened, how could you tell if what you were in was a dream or wasn’t? But maybe it didn’t matter. Not only because she’d never had a lucid dream, but also because maybe the same logic applied to both places.

Out here, with the girl and the man, what was she afraid of?

“Nothing,” Lila said.

The girl looked at her lovingly, as though Lila had said something sweet.

“You sweetheart,” the girl said. She turned to the man. “Isn’t she perfect?”

The man examined Lila, and seemed to decide he couldn’t come up with an answer. He stood up and started studying the road atlas again.

The girl sat next to Lila, hugging her. “That’s absolutely right,” she said.

WE'RE IN THE OCEAN

Causing terrible rowing
Toward the task of satiety
You're a sparkling musketeer
And here we are
Suddenly dangerous plus eating crackers
A gang of loose-jawed incumbents
Milking the lumped scone batter
Zapping the dismembered flutes
You sky-face my elegant period of Texas
And the curvature of my nasty beats
Wear your favorite hat in the garden
Of anise seed and salt
Pink
We droop our pocket machines
Pink
Into the veins of the roofie
I was talking about not even the gold
You're doing a lot of political agenda these days
You are drying up and bulging light
This is your warning
You're curving your mistakes to bloom them
And I'm not even talking about your big dumb face
Sitting up like a flower half-drowned in light

WE'RE GOING TO HEAL

To argue for dissention is a soft piece of going
Like harvesting a half-drowned bird
From the last pile of storm rubble
The ground is still wet from your falling
Clumped with feather and grain
Dearest ambiguity, show off your glut
Stay gold and walk through meadows
With your 90s collection of grief
You fall into the starlight
Like torn taffeta in summation green
We'll be glorious in the sky
Arms full of bats and roses
You're a turd
You're an obese starling
Welcome to the bandwagon
Panning through the streets of suburb Maine
I've walked them too
Tared and feathered
The ghost of a potato never begets victory
But rolls and keeps rolling
A soft orange light arranges its hair nicely
In the distant glum
A cloud can't even begin

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