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BEST NEW VOICE
Brandon Ghigliotty
Come (kum), v., came, come, coming. n. –v.i. 1. To approach or move toward a particular person or place: I came to middle school without friends. The other kids would only come close enough to spit at me. 2. To approach or arrive in time, in succession, etc.: Thank God puberty only comes once in your life. 3. To arrive by movement or in the course of progress: Every day I counted the minutes until my mother would come pick me up. 4. To be available, produced, offered, etc.: Every afternoon I devoured ice cream that came in half gallon containers. 5. To extend, reach: Other students pulled my hair which came down to my waist. 6. To issue; emanate; be derived: Taunts and abuse came from their mouths. They felt like demons that had come from Hell. 7. To become: My peace of mind came apart. 8. To occur at a certain point, position, etc.: Seventh grade comes after sixth grade, eighth grade comes after seventh; one level of Hell comes after another. 9. To enter into being or existence; be born: My little brother came into our family when I needed my mother most. 10. To have been a resident or to be a native of: I come from a house that uses love like ether to suffocate. 11. To enter or be brought into a specified state or condition: Without the affection of my mother I came to a state of rejection. 12. To take place; occur; happen: Depression came, and held me when no one else would. 13. To befall: When I was younger I thought no harm could come to me. 14. To occur to the mind: The realization came to me that I didn’t want to live anymore. 15. To arrive or appear as a result: When, at eleven, I told my mother that I wanted to kill myself, tears came from her eyes.
That’s when I learned to keep my emotions to myself. Nothing good can come from telling other people. To seem to become: Hiding who I am for the sake of others has come easily with practice. Informal. To have an orgasm: This is why release is so vital. Every time I would cut myself it felt like I was coming for the first time. And now that I don’t cut anymore I can’t come enough.
Two drops from a small aperture
Syringed

And it was yesterday—
One day, still a teenager, I was walking out of my house when my dad stopped me. He had been fixing the bird feeders in the front yard, applying a gigantic silver saucer to keep the squirrels off. My father was an ornithologist and could probably name more birds than actually exist, but he didn’t give a shit about squirrels.

He held up a red-handled hammer and said, “Curtis, what is this?”

“Uh—” I paused. Surely this is a trick question. It can’t just be about identifying the hammer, it’s about identifying the nature of the hammer. If I merely say, “It’s a hammer,” how can I prove it? How do I know it isn’t a hallucination? No, that’s too easy. My dad wouldn’t waste my time with that. Perhaps it’s about how we differentiate ourselves from the world around us. What makes me different from this hammer? Where is the wall of matter and force that separates us as two different entities? Of course I can’t identify the boundary specifically, so I’d have to say that the hammer was a part of myself, or at least a reflection of myself. Or is that also too simple? Obviously whatever answer I give will reflect my personality. That must be what he’s looking for. He wants to decode my answer. He wants to see what aspects of the hammer I notice first. Is it the base, chipped like a pencil too stubborn to be sharpened? Is it the iron top, warped like a heavy voodoo doll? Is it the dull paint, a deep burgundy often found on decorative purses? Or perhaps it’s just the dilapidation of the hammer in general. I don’t know how long he’s had this hammer, though I suspect it’s older than me. I see now, he’s trying to juxtapose my age and potential worth with the hammer’s age and potential worth. He’s telling me I’m not worth as much as this hammer, that I should get a job. No, if he was going to tell me to get a job he’d tell me to get a job. He’s pitting me against this hammer for a different reason. I am sentient and presumably the hammer is not. He wants me to think about why this hammer can’t think, about the nature of thought itself. What makes our brains special enough to produce thoughts? Our brains are made up of the same atoms as everything else, after all. Maybe this means that living things aren’t the only
things that can think; maybe *everything thinks all the time* but inanimate things have no way to express it. Perhaps with each swing of this hammer some thought was spawned, only to evaporate away.

I decided that this made sense.

But still, I couldn’t be sure it’s what my father meant to say. I couldn’t risk being wrong. I conceded to the simple answer.

“It’s a hammer,” I said, submitting my answer to the spark of my father’s mind.

“No,” he said. “It’s a ball-peen hammer.”

I looked again, and he was right. It was indeed a ball-peen hammer.
the pretty boys in amber freckled husks, they watched R-rated movies as babies and whipped each other with uncoiled clothes hangers because they didn’t own Candyland, and the woman who told me my poetic aspirations were An Overzealous Inflammation of the Ego—the boy who died on a Friday. the boy who died of cancer on a Friday—the boy who died on a Friday of a cancer we saw too late because everyone thought it was just allergies—it is true his eyes were crimson and watering—and his husky pup, and his mother, and the allergist for fuck’s sake, but most of all his mother, his big loud black weeping mama—my mother, the one who told only me of her abortion, the baby mass she sent flying away from here, away from us—my mama, who said I was meant to be her first baby—and those people, those fucking people, why didn’t they stop the angel-faced babies from thrashing each other? why didn’t they recognize the bloody tears for what they were? the baby boys who grew up to drink themselves to dirt and hit their girlfriends. the boy who died on a Friday—

—and you oceanic, fucking shark-infested waters, one time we took our inflamed egos and wrote a poem together, you went home and did lines lines lines lines lines of coke and added to it—riptide.

rising and rising falling rising—
She was swift
and soft
and pale
and I wished I was wearing my glasses—
I dove into the water, plugging my nose,
and she followed, tip-toeing on the sand, to
where I was standing, her bare shoulders
almost see-through in the moonlight waxing full.
“This is as close to being fish as we can get,”
she said.
And for a while
we swam
in circles
around each other,
brushing
elbows and knees
and finding each other’s hands.
Then my arms were around her
shoulders and her hands were on my back,
and we were throwing our clothes back on in record
time and racing each other back to her cabin
and there was nothing else on my mind but her.

So, long story short, Officer,
that's how I misplaced my wallet.
Please call this number if you find it,
it's probably still by the lake.
America, I love too much.
I had six Americans inside me within the year since I wiped my hymen blood on your flag.
That should say enough.
America, there’s absolutely no one in the poet’s attic.
I haven’t been able to leave the house, I get lost in the closet for weeks on end. The roses won’t stop staring at me. It’s hideous.
America, put away the razorblades.
I don’t remember falling asleep here.
America, your straight wheel broke my shoulder—
Even when you sent me to jail, you couldn’t keep a poker face, blared your pop music on my cuff-sore wrists.
I wish you were Europe.
America, I want every cent your pigs stole from me reimbursed, and I want it in cash, not pepper spray.
I refuse to give you all. You are nothing.
America, I won’t accept your embarrassment of me. I know I’m a little chubby and grew up on the west and weirder coast of your split personality, but don’t deny the wind torn black blister nights we spent igniting stars with our laughter.
America, we really shouldn’t be doing this without a condom.
I love you too much.
Please hold me.
Not tonight, America. I’m too tired. Let me sleep.
America, put yourself in my position.
Your natural resources are: eleven cigarette burns, two marijuana-shot eyes
(brown), a list of six names with appropriated sensations to match, and one V
card (not mine).
America, why don’t you understand the sacredness of menstrual blood?
America, it’s too late to shame me. You can’t do it.
America, you owe me.
Big time.
America, get your cum off my leg.
America, when will you learn to clean up after yourself?
I’m tired of babysitting.
Please pass the joint.
I’m sick of being your target demographic.
America, your children live inside a television set. You told me I could get my face on
that box, too. TV box. Cereal box. Latex box.
I want to be your next revelation, not another car commercial, America.
You said this body wasn’t marketable, anyway.
Fuck you with your MTV Kindle.
America, you taught me not to walk alone at night. Taught me which way to drag the
exacto knife if I were really serious. Taught me how to use a lighter, scorn my
parents, unbutton a shirt.
I still don’t know how to gather wood, which berries are safe to eat.
Do you even remember?
My IQ is comprised of brand logos. I hate it.
The trees don’t even want to talk to me anymore.
America, when will it be safe to drink the water again?
Your shitty karma is coming back to haunt me. The same radiation you soaked Japan
with has crossed oceans to find its way into my food and sunshine. Into my
uterus, to disfigure grandchildren I’ll never meet.
America, I don’t know what to say to you these days.
Paranoia is how I get from point A to point B.
There’s Prozac in my McDonalds. Why is no one else suspicious?
America, it took me six tries to find real love. Your children are either insensitive or
over emotional. We’re the broken you left in side alley gutters, who bow their
heads together in understanding.
There is unity in a syringe,
a pipe, a bottle.
America, let me take your picture.
You really should turn yourself in.
I know you’re not listening.
America, just give me a goddamn moment.
I’ve still got fifteen minutes, you promised me that.
America, my mind is too extra brilliant for your lackluster soul.
Eench? Eench vortis? Any child with Armenian grandparents knows the phrase.
Eench? It is followed by food, something to drink, a blanket. Perhaps a soft pinch
on the cheek, so you know you are loved.

Before she was named Mary by Immigration officers who could not pro-
nounce her Armenian name, my grandmother was named Haganosh. When I was
little she lived with us. We had cats and she always pushed them away from her. I
asked her why once and was told this story from her childhood:

When she was six, Haganosh Djknavorian had a small, black cat. Ha-
ganosh slept with the kitten, played with it, and as it fit into the pocket of her
pinafore, she took it with her everywhere. The kitten had green eyes and long,
soft fur.

Haganosh’s family lived in the Armenian quarter of Constantinople,
Constantine’s city. “Polis,” she called it. Both her father and mother worked in the
Turkish sector. Haganosh’s father was a chef and her mother cleaned the house of
a Turkish family. She often went with her mother when she went to work.

As Haganosh told it to me, the Turkish woman was nice enough. The
woman had no objection to the child being there on cleaning day. The woman of-
ten gave the child a piece of jellied candy, locoum, which is made with rosewater.
Sometimes Haganosh would be given a cookie.

The hours her mother cleaned the house bored the little girl. So one
Friday, she tucked the kitten into the pocket of her pinafore and took it with her.
The kitten curled up and went to sleep. It slept as they went out the iron gate of
their building. It slept as they passed the enclosed park. As a key was needed to
enter the park, they had to walk the long way around it. The kitten slept through
the walk.

At the house of the Turkish woman, which was really a large apartment
on the sixth floor, my great grandmother sat Haganosh at the kitchen table and
went to work. The little girl took it out of her pocket, then placed it on the table next to a plate that held a piece of candy. She untied the ribbon from one of her braids. It was a white ribbon with tiny blue flowers. Her mother had embroidered similar flowers onto the pocket of her pinafore. Haganosh began to trail the ribbon across the table top to tempt the kitten. It was a game they often played at home. The kitten batted at the ribbon. It placed its tiny paw on the end and rolled on it. That made Haganosh laugh, she told me. She dangled the ribbon just above the small cat and watched it sit on its tiny haunches batting at the ribbon.

It was a young cat, and very tiny. Perhaps it had not perfected the art of balance. Perhaps it was still too young to be agile. Cats learn those abilities. While batting the ribbon, the cat fell over onto the edge of the plate that held the piece of candy. The plate flipped and spun. Haganosh watched it spin with mesmerized horror. The kitten sat still watching it as well. Off the table it spun, onto the floor. Upon impact it shattered, as small, fine-boned china will do.

The door to the kitchen flew open. In the doorway stood the Turkish woman and behind her stood Parensium, Haganosh's mother. The woman looked at the child, then down at the broken plate. She looked at the child again and then at the kitten.

When Haganosh told the story of the cat, if she told it, she always said, “The next thing was very fast. So fast, it was done before I knew.”

The woman of the house crossed the room and snatched up the kitten by the fur on its neck. She went to the window and opened it. Without a word, she held the kitten out the window and let go. Upon impact it shattered, as small, fine-boned kittens will do.

The woman, without saying a word or looking at the child, left the room. Parensium came in and knelt by her daughter. She took the cleaning rag in her hand and began to sweep up the shards of the plate. “I will remember this,” my grandmother said. “She told me not to cry. She told me she needed the job.”

I have thought about that Turkish woman often. Perhaps she was having a difficult day. Perhaps the plate carried a meaning or memory for her. Or perhaps she was excusing the Turkish prerogative for dealing with Armenians. When you conquer a people you tend to see them as less than. You tend to believe you are superior to them. So, perhaps for her, the child was less than precious and the kitten of that child equaled nothing. Eench? Eench vortis? Can I comfort the wound you suffered so long ago? Eench?

Haganosh was born in 1902. The Ottoman Empire had been shrinking for decades, centuries. And I would be telling you less than the truth if I did not mention that the Ottomans did not treat their Greek or Arab subjects any better than the Armenians. What thread of logic causes a people, especially a people who are marginalized by those in charge, to believe nothing can happen to them? What mental hoops does one jump through to conclude that, yes, they burned six hundred people in the church at Ani, but that will never happen here?

When World War I began, the Ottoman Empire was referred to as the ‘Sick Old Man.’ It was corrupt in all areas of its government and it was losing the war. The new trend within its leadership was to proclaim Turkey for Turks. My grandmother’s education ended in second grade because a law was passed forbidding the education of non-Turks. Businesses were told to fire their Armenian employees. The government began to round up the teachers, the writers, the poets. These people simply disappeared.

Panicked by the thought of non-Turkish citizens turning on them, the government passed a law forbidding Armenians from having any weapons. They took the rifles for hunting. They went from house to house, farm to farm, and col-
lected the kitchen knives, the butter knives, the scissors, the hoes, rakes, plows, scythes. No one could plant food. No one could butcher a lamb or harvest grain. They began to starve.

This was not a secret. In America, mothers would look at their children over the dinner table and tell them, “Eat your lima beans. Remember the starving Armenians. The Armenians would be happy for a lima bean.”

Even as they starved, they stayed. They did not believe they needed to leave.

My grandfather was Hovanis Arakelian. Hovanis was named John when he came to this country. I knew him as Grandpa. Hovanis was born in an Armenian province out on the Anatolian plateau. His family had lived for generations on a large compound. His brothers lived there. I do not know how many he had, because he talked of his past even less than grandmother did. His parents and grandparents lived on the property. They all had houses. There were barns for the horses, the sheep and the goats. There was a large chicken coop for the chickens. There were hundreds of chickens.

The family raised livestock and grew fruit trees: apricots, pomegranates, and figs. The family had large grape arbors of both white and deep purple grapes. Since they did not live in an area where one used the plow—and because they could always wring a chicken’s neck—they still felt somewhat safe. Like all Armenians, they were not allowed to join the army during the war. If they joined the army, they would have to be given a weapon. They paid a heavy tax to support the army instead.

The men in the family took turns at the farm work. If somebody cut back the grapes one year, they did not do it the next. The sharing of labor served a double purpose: nobody was ever stuck with a chore they did not like, and every-one knew all that was required to run the farm.

The spring it was my grandfather’s turn to move the flock had not seemed so different from any other. There had been no fighting near the family. It had gotten warm and the flock of sheep and goats needed to be moved up the mountain. The trip would take a little longer than a week. Everyone had done it. He would take a dog, move the flock and come home.

Eench? Eench vortis? What? What, beloved? I will tell you that, about the same time in Van, another Armenian province, the Turkish governor began rounding up people and shooting them. I will tell you that the men, the Armenian men, dug up and uncovered the rifles they had hidden and attacked the Turkish outpost. I will tell you that it is this one act of defiance that Turkey still points to when it says that the Armenians were killing them.

Yet, Hovanis felt safe and moved his flock. There was no difficulty in moving the sheep and goats, so he returned. When he found himself on the small hill that overlooked the compound, he stopped. He stood for a moment looking down on the place he had always lived, the place he was born. There were no clothes, linens, table clothes or bed linens hung out on the line to dry. There was no smoke coming from any chimney. There was no one moving about the property. Not his family, not those they employed. He could not hear a dog bark or a rooster crow. So he ran.

He found them where they had been killed. Each house held disaster. They were shot, or cleaved with a saber, or both. Old, young—it did not matter. All were dead. He went to his own house last, as if hoping the truth would be different.

He left them there. He walked away. He walked out through what is now Jordan. He worked his way, saving money to buy passage until he left for America.

Eench? Eench vortis? What genocide? There was never genocide, dry your tears.
Word began to circulate. It was spoken in hushed tones: the Dance of the Virgins. It started in the village of Diarekir, an Armenian province of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish police in the town would gather the young Armenian girls, the virgins, the young married girls, into the center of town. They would tell them to dance. So, with rifles aimed at them, the young women would slowly dance in a circle. The police would tear off their dresses. Dance. Faster! Faster! Weeping and praying, they would dance. The police then poured kerosene upon their hair. Dance! Dance! Anyone who broke from the circle was shot immediately. Dance! Then they tossed a match. Dance! With hair and limbs on fire they danced and fell, burned in the center of town. People who lived outside of Diarekir recalled smelling a terrible scent on some days. The Dance of the Virgins spread from that village to others.

Eenh? Eench vortis? What? What, beloved? You don’t like the dance?

I think it was the dance that terrified my great grandmother. Haganosh said she was kept in the house all day long and was not allowed to go out when she was sixteen. Even in Constantinople they had heard of the dance, of people disappearing. “They hung men off the bridge. I saw it and thought one of them was my father,” she said. “I ran home crying to tell my mother that papa was hanged.” Paresium made arrangements to send my grandmother away and out of the madness. My grandmother became a mail order bride. Hovanis Arakelian paid her passage out of Polis, now Istanbul. It was no longer Constantinople’s city. Hovanis wed her when she got off the boat. She was not yet twenty. He was forty years old. She could never forgive him. He had sent her a photograph of himself taken when he was twenty.

Eench? Eench vortis? Did the Turks steal your youthful dreams of love?

The government of Turkey rounded up the Armenians that they had not already hung, burned, shot, or slaughtered and marched them, mostly women and children. I once asked, Why? Why, when there were so few soldiers with rifles for so many starving frightened women, why did no one rush them? Why keep walking? Eench? What? What made them just walk until they fell and were shot? Until they saw their child thrown against a rock for crying in hunger? Until the women were raped each night as they lay on the ground?

Why did they just keep walking until they arrived in the desert of Syria, where they were left with nothing but the sand, the heat and the madness of the journey.

Eench? Eench vortis? What? What did you think would happen?

How do you begin to forgive a people who will not admit they murdered you? How do a people begin to heal from such devastation if no one says they are sorry? Can I blame a people for the death of all the relatives on my grandfather’s side if those people have never been taught that their grandparents committed a genocide against mine?

Eench? Eench? You make my head hurt, Turkey. You fill me with anger. My grandfather spent his whole life in America attempting to regain what he had lost. On two city blocks he planted trees of fruit, grape arbors of white and deep purple. An acre was dug for the vegetables, and across the back of the lot he had a long red chicken coop. My grandfather and my grandmother never came to America for freedom. They never saw this as a place to make a life. They never expected the streets to be paved with gold or opportunity. They both loved their
life, their old life where it was, where it had been.
Before he died, my grandfather told me, “This place is no better than Europe.” I took that to mean that he wished he were home. Two city lots are not the mountains and orchards that were his birth-right. My grandmother spent her life running from him. First, with my mother to Paris, then back to grandpa.
A man at the Turkish Embassy took her two hundred U.S. dollars and gave her a one-way visa. He told her he did not recognize her United States citizenship. She would have to stay, and so would my mother, if they went to ‘Stambol. Then, to New York City. I only remember them arguing. She could not get past being a young girl wed to an old man.
The old man, my grandpa, was kind and gentle, yet she could never see that. Each was too caught in what had been, what might have been. Each wished they could have stayed at home. They longed for, mourned, a home that no longer existed.

Eench? Eench? What? What? What genocide? I will leave you with an Armenian joke from that time, the time when there was no genocide. Most Armenians knew this joke. When you told it, you substituted the name of your village. It goes like this:

There was a man who went to Constantinople. After he had been there a while, he heard that there was a man from his village in the city. This man had left his mother, father, sister, brother and his dog behind, so he was anxious for news of them. His dog’s name was Manook. He found the man from his village and asked him for news from Bitlis.
“What is the news from there?”
“What news do you want?”

“How is my dog Manook?”
“I am sorry, my friend, but Manook is dead.”
“Eench? Are you telling me my dog is dead?”
“Yes, I am sorry, but he ate the meat of your dead mule and now he is dead.”
“My mule is dead?”
“Yes, the mule died while pulling your father’s gravestone.”
“My father is dead?”
“Yes. He died two weeks after your mother died of a broken heart.”
“Ohhh. My mother is dead?”
“She died when she heard that your brother died trying to save your sister.”
“Are you saying my family is dead and my home is ruined?”
“I don’t know if your home is ruined, but when I left, a Turk was tilling the soil where your house once stood.”

Not all Armenians told the joke. In some parts of Turkey, there were no Armenians left to tell it.
Eench vortis. Eench, all of them gone.
Your Jealousy

it makes me
a black eyed bender—

blending in with the
polished bar
its brass bangles
a glisten that is
not me

you've rendered me
mute pebble in
the maw of my mouth I sit silent the
raucous laughter of you three exchanging absurdities sliding over me

“I would like the edamame starter, please,” you say.

“What’s edamame?” they say.

“I’ll eda-your-mame!” you say.

“pftpftpft...” says the silence shoved under my tongue

me all eyes
grasping the
side-mirror’s
gilding—
you've drawn me
as a fine line of
charcoal:
black satin

me chewing my
cracked chaps—
broken mouth
not the nubile
you imagine;
thin lips
sipping silently
nevermind my cherub
cheeks my hips my thighs
elephant eyes so soft
not drawn tight you’ve
imagined me to be strained
silk and in doing so
stuck stones in my jaw

“I am your cast-iron consort
only you do no reigning
just sling your honey-green
eyes threatening to break
because my cobblestone
teeth needle your delicate
disposition

“I would like the Paradise Martini?”

“Sounds paradisical...! Para-disi- whah? That a word?”

“Paradisic? Parasitic!”

“pfft pfft pfft...” pebble in our parley

“Nah, try the silky sake— not even sticky.”

“Check it out! It says, silk in a bottle!”

“p f t’”

“Yeah, last time I got sake it was wayee sticky... How ‘bout some milky silky!”

“ p f ”

“ p ”

“ p ”
I am satisfied from drinking your lips / Say my name / If you're wondering why I keep tearing the bed sheets out from between our limbs / it's because I don't want anything separating / the touch of our bodies / We drink wine / You pour the red water over my breasts / between my legs / and lick me clean with your Spanish tongue / Lemon smoke rolls from your oval mouth / You lean in and bite my neck tendons blue / Thighs, hair / You throw my body to the wall / and I melt into its whiteness / The dew that flies from your hands strips me / Our quivering shadows rise / One cry / Your acidic breath swallows my open vowels
Here I am: a naked mass of pasty, girl flesh sweating under a tulle of purple hair, heaving the acidic foam from the bottom of my stomach into a neon orange wastebasket. How terrible orange is, and life. As far as me and my stomach go, I’ve been scraping the bottom of the barrel for nearly a week now. I’ve got a fever that won’t let me wear a coat in thirty-degree weather. I’m so tired—opium tired—that I require a nap after lacing a shoe. I have swollen lymph nodes on my neck like fat scarabs underneath skin, and my mouth is swelling with algae throat mucus.

The entire day is a blur of frustrated, blistering sleep, broken with intervals of spitting up what might as well be anal slime. I pray for the ability to drink water. My boyfriend knocks at the door.

“Here’s the orgone you asked for.” He hands me a blue fist-sized cone threaded with various metals.

“Thanks, love. I’ll try anything to make this go away.”

“If you need me, just call.” He leaves a chapped kiss on my forehead.

“Thank you.” The shadows slide as my boy closes the dorm room door, and for a moment the dehydration makes me see a gun wound near his forehead. I labor at choking out more green-white sludge, then curl with the orgone against my belly.

Another day begins with infectious KY tonsil ooze demanding orange wastebasket freedom, and I’m about ready to volunteer for the William Tell Act. Wastebasket, I’ve given you all and now I’m nothing. A full week I’ve been vomiting—Tuesday to Tuesday—full circle. Water is an old friend, who I wish would visit my cottage in the western night. I call my boyfriend, demanding he put his queer shoulder to the wheel and get me to the hospital.
“Have more tea, we’ll be there soon.”
I take another hit off the joint he rolled and placed in my hands. Against the form of Hell I’m experiencing, the default ganja isn’t much help. More like a metaphysical pillow under my head.
“Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to do drugs?” I try to pass the joint to my lover, but he just waves it back to me. “That true happiness is in the key in the window?”
“Sweetheart, this is the key in the bars, the sunlight in the window.” He motions to the joint. I take another hit. EMERGENCY crowns the horizon in big perspiring meat-red letters.
“I’m going to park the car, then I’ll be right in,” my boyfriend says through thick-rimmed glasses as I plead with my legs to find the strength to carry me.
“You don’t have to stay if you need to get stuff done,” I offer altruistically.
“I want to stay. While you are not safe, I am not safe.”
“I love you,” I say.
“The weight of the world is love.” And my boy speeds away.
Walking under the red EMERGENCY sign, I swear I feel something breath-hot drip.

“What is your emergency?” the beetle at the front counter asks.
“I’ve been vomiting for a week, I’m extremely dehydrated, and now I’m really in the total animal soup of time.”
“Alright, someone will be with you shortly,” she clicks.
Soon a nurse with dead retina fish eyes is leading me through the intestines of the hospital. A man in a patient’s gown passes me by, holding a fistful of potato salad.

The nurse lays me down in an isolated dark room, and immediately hooks me up to an IV.
“What are these?” She points to what she already knows are cigarette burns on my arm as she fingers my inner elbow for a vein.
“Cigarette holes in protest of the tobacco haze of Capitalism.”
“I knew you had a masochistic calm,” she compliments.
Next the doctor is in: an older gentleman with a strange drawl that pulls at the loose threads in my lingerie. He parts my lips with his old, blue hands.
“There’s your problem. Have you seen your mouth?”
“Have I seen it?”
“Your tonsils look like they’re coated in larva. They’re swelling with puss. Let me take a sample and we’ll see what virus you have.”
A cock-long cotton swab is shimmied down my throat. The doctor disappears to the lab and I tangle the IV cords around me like an umbilical wire until I am sleeping, as in utero.

When I awake, my boyfriend is sitting in the room with me, munching on a reality sandwich. How strange for him to see me so wasted and pallid, penetrated with intravenous fluids. How strange for him to see me so perishable — this body he loves to soft finger trace lines of feeling from nipple to pubes.
“You finally fall in love and now the girl is so sick you can’t even make love to her. I’m so sorry,” I murmur from the vinyl hospital bed.
My boyfriend gives me a look that says he loves me and I’m being foolish, all in one.
“Nonsense. Be kind to yourself.” He smiles at me and takes another bite. The old doctor walks in again, this time with news.
“It was as I thought—you have Infectious Molochleosis. Now a virus, in order to invade, damage and occupy the human organism, must have a gimmick to get in—in this case the virus is spread through the first step to fornication, an exchange of the saliva. It is a sensual virus even children can get. The infection may have been transferred from an asymptomatic carrier. The area of predilection is the pair of testicles in your throat. Common symptoms are high fever—that accounts for the nova heat, heroin-withdrawal aches, after-birth fatigue, rape-raw throat, shit appetite, and an obese spleen. There is no cure. Hell should subside into purgatory within two weeks. Gargling gyzm salt may help relieve your sore throat. Sucking harder may also help. Begin intercourse after fever has broken, but only from the bottom. If rape occurs don’t struggle as this may result in a ruptured spleen. I’m prescribing a drug not yet synthesized to keep the larva from disrupting your tummy box.”

A prescription in hand and a few last vomit trips to the bathroom later, I’m back in my boyfriend’s car.

“Don’t call again,” the doctor had advised. With another marijuana pillow under my head and a suspicious Benway pill on my tongue, I am coerced into sleep. I dream of sunset hilly Frisco. And when I awake, I am staring at the roses in my closet.
I stole words for you my love
Planned to paint them on your walls the hood of your car I called in favors with the moon hoping he’d arrange the stars letters for you anxious I deposited them separately Tongue dry on your cold back placed each letter carefully branded your protruding spine with my weak voice
I stole lighter skin for you my love
Tattooed a map on it in case of emergencies Take this with you and do not stop you are not lost my love You are gone your finger prints have begun fading from my lower back
but that doesn’t mean I expected you to be away this long I dated time for you
Let him in my bed Head on his chest I listened to his tick tock I can hear the prayers of the it’s not easy being the mistress of time stealing love from someone else’s husband
I gave in for you
The words were never for you They were directions instructions for me splintered and torn I untied the knots from your tree that were never meant to be nooses my love I never needed to touch the fire to realize it was hot my love the problem was my nothing forgiveness doesn’t leave room for resentment the problem is my nothing that you were the only thing I was good at and I wasn’t enough the problem my nothing waterfalls are like mirrors in the moon light.
There was only one road in Powys. The routes from the south congregated like little veins into the jugular that cut through the center of the town. It shambled up through the farms where the little wagon paths greeted it, but it never paused, even for a friendly hello on its weary journey north. That one road stopped dead at the foot of the black pine trees of the forest. It took several moss-covered steps into the forest to poke its head around, but quickly retreated back toward the village. In its wake a thin, leaf-carpeted path tiptoed around the austere pillars of the trees like a trickle of blood from a leaking artery.

In Powys, everyone was just as stubborn and sturdy as the farmlands, just as their fathers had been before them, and theirs before them. They were clad in the same coarse, gray-green weeds as their fields; their shoes were forever stained in the same dark mud. Cloud-colored eyes hung over earthly labor with the same resignation as that eternally murky sky over their heads.

The northern border of Powys was rigidly marked by a wall of black trees, just as impassable in the minds of the villagers as the king's stone fortress. Nobody ever ventured north into the forest for fear of the wild men and beasts that thrived in those lands.

Lilybet’s family was as hardy and numerous as the turnips in their scanty garden. The young ones and the girls worked with their mother, Enid, around the barn and the house, and the boys helped their father, Drystan, in the fields. That was how it was before an ox trampled the eldest son. Drystan had then forbidden his younger sons from leaving the care of their mother.

The morning air was thick and misty, occasionally disturbed by the rumble of distant thunder like a ripple on a pond.

“That’s a northern storm,” Drystan grumbled. “No inland wind is so brackish.”
“What’s brackish?” the youngest boy asked, stumbling over the complicated word.

“Salty, Anwyll, like the ocean,” Enid said as she scoured filth from one of her other children in a wooden tub of hot water beside the hearth.

Anwyll gave his mother a blank expression before toddling away to find some crude plaything to bang against the floor. Drystan wolfed down some barley bread and cabbage broth before tying on his hood and braving the biting wind outside to start his chores. The door was still standing agape when he left. Drystan always forgot to shut the door behind him anymore; his eldest son had always closed it as he followed his father out to work.

“He’ll catch his death in that gale,” Enid said. “Lilybet, I want you to go to town and get chamomile and honey for me. We’ll need it.”

The eldest girl looked up from her own breakfast of cabbage water at the sound of her name and nodded lazily.

“After I finish this,” she said.

“Be quick about it, then. Lilybet, don’t let him get outside!” Enid said briskly as she caught sight of her toddler ambling toward the open door. Lilybet darted from the table and scooped up Anwyll as his fat, rosy legs stumbled down the second step outside. The baby screamed and thrashed in her grip with all the indignation of a betrayed martyr. Lilybet balanced his body on her hip as she stepped back inside.

“Hurry up, now,” Enid said. “You don’t want to be get caught in the rain.” Lilybet rolled her eyes as she pulled the front door closed behind her.

At first, his shape melted into the misty black of the pine trees bordering the fields. Old branches shivered their burden of morning dew onto the sable head of a horse as it brushed through the forest. The head was followed by an arching neck and a powerful, black body with long legs and white-tasseled hooves. Sitting astride the monstrous creature was the figure of a man. He seemed no more than a silhouette, for he was covered from head to toe in a heavy cloak. The rider paused for a minute, halfway between the forest and the road, and removed his dew-covered hood to survey the outstretched farmland before him with eyes pale like frost. His white skin was strewn with freckles like a farmer’s field covered in springtime seeds, and indigo glyphs had been tattooed under his white-blue eyes and down his cheeks. His long hair was a black hue never seen in Powys, and tangled as the seaweed that littered the northern shores. Half of it, on the right side of his head, had been crudely hacked off at jaw-length, a mark of recent disgrace. Without a word, he squeezed his mount’s sides with his heels and plodded down the lonely road toward the huddled houses below.

Lilybet groaned yet again at the price she had paid for the dried chamomile. Didn’t the old medicine seller understand how her family struggled? Yet the man still demanded three whole silver pieces for a measly handful of dried flowers. Lilybet sighed and shoved the herbs back into her apron pocket as she threw a dirty look over her shoulder at the medicine seller. Had her older brother been sent to collect the chamomile, the nasty old merchant wouldn’t have dreamed of driving such an unreasonable bargain.

As Lilybet pulled her hand back out of her apron pocket, a single sprig of the precious flower dropped into the road at her feet. As she stooped to retrieve it, a pair of rough, scabby hands snatched it from the ground and shoved it into her own. Lilybet looked up to find herself staring into the unfamiliar face of a man with a black mole above his left eyebrow. He leered at her, revealing a chipped front tooth. Lilybet straightened and walked in the opposite direction without a word. The man’s fingers had lingered too long against her wrists for
her to overlook. Lilybet took careful note when he followed several steps behind her to the beekeeper’s stand and stared as she bought a fragment of honeycomb. As she placed her purchase in her pocket and began to walk away, a loud whistle echoed from behind her.

“Hey, girl! Come with me and I’ll make you a woman!”

Lilybet glared at him, but the old beekeeper put a hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t worry, young woman. Those kind talk up a good show, but it’s all just hot air in the end. Just ignore him. He’ll be on his way soon.”

Lilybet gave the beekeeper a grateful look, but her stomach still crawled with worry. Her thoughts were bent when the people in the market abruptly rushed to congregate at the mouth of the square that led to the road. As they followed the crowd, the women spoke frantically of the painted demons that lived north of the forest, and the men shifted their hands on the tools or canes that they carried. The sudden muddle of nervous voices and bodies provided the perfect distraction for the mole-faced man, who turned his stare away from Lilybet. Noticing his lapse in attention, Lilybet scampered through the crowd to seek the shelter of the tavern.

Within the tavern, the air was thick with earthy-scented smoke and the warmth of many bodies. Lilybet let her shawl droop around her shoulders as she glanced around the dimly lit room. She knew most of the faces around her. There was their neighbor who had lost two fingers while building a crib for his expected child. There was the butcher with his bloody apron and domed, hairless head, which glimmered with sweat as he choked down a pint of stale mead. Lilybet took her seat at a bench by the stairs that led up to the rooms for travelers to rent for a night. She felt herself sinking into the low but welcome grumble of conversation that filled the tavern. With so many familiar faces around, she surely was safe.

The tavern went silent when the door opened, framing a cloaked silhouette. This was a face Lilybet did not know, an outsider. The patrons of the tavern cringed back from the counter as the stranger entered. Men glared, and women turned their backs to whisper to their companions. The barkeeper’s meaty hands clenched against the bottom edge of the counter to keep him from recoiling from alien apparition before him.

“What do you want?” he asked. His tongue flapped about like a fish caught in his mouth when he spoke. His dull, gray eyes darted from the stranger’s dark hair to the patterns etched into his freckled skin, his stern eyes—all of them completely foreign.

“I need food and shelter for myself and my horse ‘till dawn,” the stranger said. His voice was heavy with an accent as rolling as the northern ocean itself. The flustered barkeeper had managed to regain control of his trembling tongue, but his knuckles were still white as they clutched the counter.

“I don’t serve northern types!” he choked. “G-get out!”

The tattooed stranger swallowed once, the patterns on his throat shifting slightly.

“Please, sir.”

The barkeeper sealed his thin, jerking lips into a straight line, his eyes still darting.

“I don’t serve your kind,” he hissed through his teeth. The tattooed man reached into a pouch at his side. The barkeeper flinched as the stranger held out a clenched fist. When the tattooed man opened his palm, three irregular golden discs clattered onto the counter. The barkeeper’s frenzied eyes fixed upon the money.
“Don’t try pawning your stolen money on me, stranger!” he said, but his eyes remained fastened on the gold. The tattooed man took note of this gesture and placed three more coins onto the counter. Under any other circumstances, six pieces of gold would have bought half of the tavern.

“That’s all I have,” the stranger murmured. The barkeeper bit his lower lip before sweeping the money into his palm.

“One meal. The fodder for the horse is around the back.”

As the door closed again behind the stranger, the barkeeper rattled the coins in his hand and shoved them into his pocket.

“Savage,” he growled.

Upon his return, the stranger was banished to the corner of the tavern that was furthest from both the hearth and the windows. He sat down at a battered table in the shadows to eat the meal begrudgingly given to him and remained there, his face as blank and distant as before.

Lilybet watched the scene in silence from her bench, but her focus was broken when a man’s face turned to leer at her from the counter. Lilybet knew that one all too well. The man with the mole and the broken teeth swaggered over and slumped in a chair near Lilybet’s bench. His breath stank of alcohol and too many nights without cleaning.

“You were at the medicine seller today,” he said.

Lilybet turned to face the other way.

The man picked up his stool and slammed it down in front of her seat.

“I like you.”

Lilybet’s eyes ranged around the tavern, but none of the familiar faces turned her way. Her eyes came to fix on the figure in the corner. The dim light glinted in his pale eyes as he looked up from his finished meal to take in the confrontation before him.

“I’m talking to you, girl.” The mole-faced man tried to grab Lilybet’s face with his hand, but Lilybet pushed his grasp away roughly. Several other patrons of the tavern glanced over at the commotion and rolled their eyes before returning to their ale.

In the corner, the stranger’s hands tightened against the top of his table. Lilybet cast a desperate glance to the pale face. The stranger’s light eyes flickered from her face to the door. Understanding the unspoken message, Lilybet stood up and quickly strode out of the tavern. The sky was churning overhead, and the smell of rain hung thick in the air. As Lilybet descended the first step into the square, the mole-faced man grabbed her wrist too roughly.

“What’s the matter girl, you deaf?” he asked with a dangerous edge in his voice. Lilybet squirmed, trying to shake her assailant’s hand.

“Let go of me! Leave me alone!” Lilybet glanced around in panic, willing the people around her to take action. The mole-faced man tightened his grip and pulled Lilybet closer to his face.

“So you talk now, huh? Maybe you should’ve thought about that a bit sooner.”

“Leave me alone!” Lilybet raised her other hand and swiped her nails across her attacker’s face. The man jumped back and pressed his fingers to the shallow scratches on his cheek. A devious grin crept across his smelly mouth.

“It’s never any fun without a few marks,” he leered as he took a step toward Lilybet. “Now I’ll put a few on you.” As he spoke, he drew a hunting blade from his belt. The edge of the knife had three notches chopped out of it, and the murky gray metal was speckled with brown spots of rust.

Lilybet stumbled down the remaining stairs into the square, but the mole-faced man seized a handful of her hair and yanked her back. Lilybet screamed.

“Shhh, you shouldn’t make a scene,” the man hissed in her ear as he drew the edge of his filthy knife across her cheek. “Now be a good girl.”

The mole-faced man was abruptly pulled backwards and thrown off
balance. Lilybet used the diversion to break his grip on her hair and bolt toward the road. She paused to look back and a man’s yell of surprise filled her ears. The mole-faced man was staggering to his feet in the middle of the market square, blood seeping through the fingers clutching his nose. His hunting knife lay in the mud where he had dropped it. The villagers gasped collectively as the dark-clothed stranger stormed down the tavern steps, danger crackling in his pale eyes.

“You’re a dead fool!” the mole-faced man screamed as he snatched his dropped knife from the mud. His face contorted in rage as he lunged at the foreigner. The dark man parried his opponent’s strike to the side with a curved dagger that had been concealed in his sleeve. In the same motion, he drove his blade through his enemy’s abdomen and slit the man’s stomach, from navel to ribcage. The assailant screamed and dropped to his knees as his liver, spleen and intestines gushed out into the square like a burst package from the butcher. The onlookers watched in shock as he writhed himself to death in a pool of his own blood and innards.

Silence permeated every opening in the market. The stranger turned slowly and fixed his gaze on Lilybet, who stood frozen in the middle of the road. Lilybet’s eyes wandered over the shocked faces in the square. All of their expressions were shifting from shock to hatred. Their eyes flashed death to the foreign intruder. Lilybet turned again to the stranger. Though his eyes still glinted with energy from the fight, a quiet sadness permeated their depths. Lilybet bit her bottom lip and began to take one step in his direction, but then stopped short as the horde of wrathful eyes turned on her. Her hands balled into fists and hot tears burned her vision as she stepped back again.

The stranger’s eyebrows furrowed slightly in confusion, and Lilybet had to force herself to look into his eyes. She shook her head slowly as she pushed her angry tears away with one fist. Thank you, she wanted to say. I’m sorry, she wanted to say. Please run before they hurt you. Only one strangled word escaped her lips, sounding far harsher than she intended.

“Go.”

The stranger bowed his head and closed his eyes for a moment. After a breath of charged silence, he turned, mounted his horse, and trotted in the direction of the forest. As he passed Lilybet on the road, she noted his brief glance and a quick motion from his left hand. The dimmed sunlight glinted on a silvery blade as the stranger’s curved dagger landed in the mud at her feet. He did not look back again.

With the dark foreigner gone, the charge in the air fell stagnant. The familiar, hostile faces gradually disappeared, scattered by the approaching rain. Lilybet swallowed and bent to pluck the blade from the mud. The dagger dragged like lead against her hip as she attempted to tuck it into her apron. When Lilybet took a step in the direction of home, the keen blade shredded through the ties around her waist with a resounding rip. Lilybet cried out in dismay when it thudded back into the road. She instinctively began to reach out to recover the weapon, but her hand drew back. Choking on the lump in her throat, Lilybet wiped her nose with her sleeve before gathering up the remains of her ruined apron and shuffling toward home with her chin tucked tightly against her chest.

The curved dagger remained prostrate in the filth behind her; its weight partially embedding it into the muck. The rain dulled its gleam amidst the trampled ground.

Only a few things grow in Powys. The fields are filled with the local rye or barley or kale that they use in the village. The stable, stubborn earth has been worked into submission for too many years to support the tangy, wild garlic and nettles that grow so easily in the untamed forest just to the north. Those are weeds to the people. Even if the plants aren’t smothered by the unforgiving roots of the crops, the people of Powys go out every morning and rip out the wild shoots themselves.
some unnameable horror-thing sits in a New York-style deli
leaning on a plastic red-and-white checkered tablecloth
applying entirely too much cream cheese to an everything bagel

far from its planet of shivering custard-colored tube people
far from the ruins of jellyfishmen's porous coral houses

and right here, the only thing keeping us from annihilation,
is the goddamn taste of everything bagels
It comes from my head chains
In the walls
  Chains
On my teeth
Chains

Anticipating in swings
Like a pendulum  an umbilical cord
An extension cord she might as well
Shrink her babies back down to size and hang them there too

Little snakes
All curled in a ball there loving each other

Ticking away on the watch I don’t wear?
On the watch I don’t even own?
Because I write good. Because I don’t write well, I write good. And I do other stuff fine, but I write good. Because I can distort the English language with the wave of a Pentel wand. Because a proper lady says ‘well,’ but wells are for townies without adequate water irrigation. (And too many kids fall down wells.) I write good because I ain’t the Queen of England. Why I Write: because I stole the prompt from Joan, and she stole it from Orwell, and who the heck knows where he stole it from. Because it’s one elaborate Droste effect, and because now, it’s a class assignment. Because, hell’s bells, I’m a writing major and my first assignment of the semester is ‘Why I Write.’ And there’s nothing more literal than that. I write because I like to, plain and simple. Because there’s a whole lineage from which I’ve come: family trees and long winding roots that twist and split and coil. Because my dad is a 6th generation Rabbi and it stops there. Because I’d be the 7th, but instead I’ll write because I say ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ too much. And what I like most about the Rabbinate are the sermons. Because you can stand on that soap-box pulpit and read what you wrote the night before, while you were lying on your California King mattress under the orange glare of the ballgame on mute. And my father speaks the prettiest eulogies. “I do the best funerals,” my dad says. And he does. I write because of the Plimsoll line. I write because there’s a load-line in cargo ships. Because pre-1870, a whole bunch of sea-faring merchants drowned because there were no national load-lines; too much overloading was happening. In 1876, the British Empire enforced load-line regulations, and in 1894, the laws were fixed. Because before then, the ship-owners had ship insurance, and before then, if the ship sunk, they’d profit... and a whole crew-ship of men would drown. Because my mother’s father came from a family of Scottish merchants who sailed out to sea without load-lines or any sort of labor union and that’s all I know. Because Lloyd Plimsoll changed the law, so that a maximum amount of designated cargo would be enforced. And I look most like my grandfather. My sister looks like my father’s mother. She’s the spitting image. But I look
like my mother's father, mustache and all. I look most like him. He played the trumpet and he sailed the seas. He fought the war and he was stationed in France. And, “Damn the French,” he said. Because he asked a French family to feed him when he was amidst war and starving in a blank field. No, they would not feed him. “Damn the French,” he said. And meanwhile, my grandma was having an affair with a Czechoslovakian doctor because my grandfather was reported MIA, and she figured him dead. And my mother says, “Stand proud. You're royal blood, remember that.” But, really, I come from Scottish merchants without Plimsoll lines. And I also come from black-hatted Polish Rabbis. And I come from my mother and my father, two products of these two separate lineages. And there's me: no royalty. And I write. I write for different reasons. I write for words. I write because of sounds. I write because of sermons and Plimsoll lines. I write because I can skew English grammar as much as I please. Because I can begin sentences with as many conjunctions as I please. Because I can be as repetitive as I please, and so on and so on and so forth. Because people ask me, “What do you do?” And I can't say it. I can't spit the damn sentence out or I'll feel like an imposter. Because I'll keep writing ‘till I can say, “Well, Sir, I'm a writer.” And maybe then, I'll go to Devry and finally become a dental hygienist.
FADE IN

INT. APARTMENT IN THE BARRIOS OF CALIFORNIA - DAWN

An elderly Mexican-American, MIRAZ, hunches over a table, aligning three pills on a plate. He is short and round, with a gray ponytail running down his humped back. His undershirt is stained with liquor and his overalls extend at his belly. Miraz slips his swollen feet out of his night shoes into a pair of over-sized boots. Shoving aside photos, newspapers and heaps of bottles, he sits down and lifts a pill to his mouth. Groaning, he sets it back down and plunges his face into his arm. There is a buzzing nearby. Miraz lifts his head. A large fly lands on his arm then jumps to the table. Its eyes are unusually red and bulbous. Man and fly stare at one another. Miraz pulls a hair from his ponytail and makes a loop. He brings the loop close then lassos the fly around its neck and pulls. The fly jerks alive, buzzing.

MIRAZ

(Chuckling)

Eeeeee... Mosca estupida.

Outside, a truck honks its horn. Tying the strand of hair to a keychain, Miraz CLUNKS across the apartment and out the door. The fly remains in a hysterical buzz.

EXT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO STREET - DAWN

The sun turns Miraz's three-story complex orange. His apartment stands beside, above and beneath rows of stained walls and square windows, which host
webs of mangled clotheslines.
A truck is parked on the dirt road below. Dark-faced Mexican workers sit in the
back and they frown and yawn as Miraz descends the staircase.
The workers wear sun caps, thin shirts and jeans. Two friends, SANTIAGO and
ERNESTO, look up and laugh.

SANTIAGO
(Shouting)
Where are your *chopos* today?
(Turning to Ernesto)
Fool can’t walk worth a damn in
those *chanclas*.

Miraz grins and keeps walking.
The horn honks again and the men shout for the truck driver
to shut up.

ERNEST
*Rapido, Chopos.*
A teenager, TERENCE, sits among them, bending wires on an umbrella. He
wears an Iron Man shirt, a Red Sox baseball cap and thin wired glasses. A bike
leans on the truck bed beside him.
Terence looks up to watch Miraz.
The horn honks three times and the driver shifts the truck into gear. The men
curse as the wheels peel from the dirt and begin rolling down the road.
Terence jumps from the tailgate, pulling his bike with him. He stands in a plume
of dust, the umbrella in his hands and the bike against his leg.
He shrugs, turns around, then rolls the bike to the bottom of the stairs, where
Miraz is stepping off.
Terence looks at Miraz’s boots.

TERENCE
I was thinking of wearing *chopos* to
work one day.

Terence hands him the umbrella and straddles the bike. He turns and points to
the bars sticking from the back wheels.
Miraz CLUNKS to the back wheel and steps onto the bars. The bike sways.

TERENCE
*Hijole,* You’re bigger than *mi*
hermana, Miraz. Last time I do
this, *comprende?*

Miraz grins, opens the umbrella with one hand and lifts it over their heads.
Terence pedals down the road while the sunrise reflects off the umbrella.

EXT. APPLE ORCHARD - DAY
Rows of apple trees stretch across a California valley. An office building, garage
and electric fence stand by the highway.
The garage opens and a truck pulls out, lugging workers with boxes.
Terence and Miraz ride up to the front gate.
MILDRED STORK, a middle-aged woman in a skirt, spaghetti strap shirt and
sun hat strolls up to the gate. Her blond hair hangs like stiff noodles on her
shoulders and her fingers lace at her exposed midriff.
Her long flat feet SLAP the dirt, violently.

MILDRED
(Smiling)
*Bway-nose no-chase,* Mr. Grillo.

Miraz steps off the bike and looks past Mildred into the apple orchard.
Terence is glaring at Mildred, who keeps her eyebrows raised at Miraz.
MILDRED
I expect you to be ready for
morning carpool from now on. We
won't wait. Cooperation is
appreciated.

She unlaces her fingers and unlocks the gate. Glancing briefly at Terence, she
re-laces her fingers and walks away.

Terence grits his teeth at the closed gate.

He lets the bike drop, opens the gate, then straddles it again, pulling Miraz’s
overalls to get him on.

They ride into the field.

EXT. APPLE ORCHARD - DAY

A truck drives between rows of apple trees. It stops at each worker and waits as
they pour their apples inside.

The workers are drenched in sweat and sunburned on the arms and neck.

The truck stops alongside Terence, who hunches over his box.

The TRUCK DRIVER is pale with red curly hair. A puffy goatee darts from his chin
and stays nestled by his dangling window arm. His green eyes narrow at Terence.

TRUCK DRIVER
Apples, kid.

TERENCE
They’re not ready.

The driver scratches his chin.

TRUCK DRIVER
You picked bad apples?

TERENCE
No, it’s just...

TRUCK DRIVER
Kid, now!

Mildred steps out from the trees. Her sun-hat hangs around her neck with a
yellow ribbon.

The truck driver gets out, picks up Terence’s box.

Mildred reaches in. Her apple is bright orange. She looks at the truck driver
who nods in Terence’s direction.

Mildred turns to Terence without lifting her eyes.
MILDRED
Creative, but the market wouldn’t approve.

She takes several steps closer to Terence until he’s an arm’s-length away. She lifts her eyes.

MILDRED
Californians are so worried about what gets in their food these days.

Terence takes a step forward, so Mildred’s face is close to his chest. He takes the apple.

TERENCE
It’s just food dye... ma’am.

Mildred steps back and shapes her lips into a smile.

MILDRED
Take this batch home, it’s no good to us. This will be taken from your pay.

She looks toward the workers.

MILDRED
Let’s get back to work, I’m afraid this will have to count as your break.

Mildred SLAMS her feet to the truck and drives off, leaving the truck driver behind.

The driver drops the box of colored apples at Terence’s feet.

Miraz CLUNKS to the box and takes a blue apple. He winks at the truck driver and takes a big bite.

The workers smirk and one by one take a colored apple from Terence’s box and eat it.

INT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - NIGHT
The lassoed fly looks unblinking out the window.

There’s a full moon.

Miraz and Terence sit at the table, watching the fly. Both have a cup of coffee in their hands.

TERENCE
Sure is weird.

Terence adjusts his glasses.

TERENCE
Must be your hair. The Indian hairs in Mexicans are strong.

They stare some more.

TERENCE
You part Apache?

There’s a knock at the door. Miraz gets up to open it.

Terence’s thirteen-year-old sister, CECILIA, stands on the threshold. She wears an over-sized hand-me-down shirt and rolled up baggy jeans. Her face is dark and she blinks with long eyelashes.

CECILIA
Hola, Senior Chopos!

TERENCE
Don’t call him that, Cecilia.

Cecilia hides her hands in her sleeves and purses her lips at her brother. Miraz laughs and looks at his slippers then back at Cecilia.

MIRAZ
Call me Chopos.

She smiles at him and walks to Terence.
Cecilia.

Miraz closes the door and bows to her.

MIRAZ
Encantado.

She giggles.

CECILIA
Me too.

TERENCE
Cecelia, check this out.

Terence sits her down in front of the fly. She looks at it.

CECILIA
So what?

TERENCE
You don’t see it?

CECILIA
The fly?

TERENCE
Try waving it away.

She leans toward the fly and waves her hand above it. It jumps sideways with a buzz then sits still.

CECILIA
Wow! The wings cut off?

Miraz joins them.

MIRAZ
I lassoed it.

TERENCE
Senior Miraz pulled a Miyagi.

CECILIA
Poor fly.

TERENCE
But with a strand of hair instead of chopsticks.

Miraz brings a box of crumbled cookies and another cup of coffee for Cecilia. He brushes empty cans from the table and pulls out a chair. Cecilia sits down and takes the warm cup in her hands.

They all stare at the fly.

CECILIA
You have Apache hair don’t you? Mom always said Apaches had strong hair.

TERENCE
It hasn’t tried very hard to escape.

Miraz massages his hand. He breathes deeply then smiles.

MIRAZ
Mosca don’t know he’s tied.

Cecilia dips a cookie in her coffee.

CECILIA
(Chewing)
It must feel foolish to be lassoed. Like those cows in the rodeo, no? Poor cows.
Terence looks at Cecelia as if calculating a math solution. He moves his finger toward the fly.

It doesn’t react.

He takes off his glasses.

TERENCE
Just like the cows. STUPID.

Terence looks out the window at the neighboring apartments.

Dogs bark, kids scream and cars zoom by.

TERENCE
We're all so... stupid and lazy and so... god-damn scared!

CECILIA
Terence!

Terence slams a fist on the table making Miraz and Cecilia jump. There's a buzzing sound. For a moment the fly drags the key chain across the table then is still again.

TERENCE
No way.

CECILIA
Hulk of moscas.

Miraz reaches for his pain pills in the silence. He doesn’t take them, but stands and walks to the kitchen, returning with Terence’s umbrella.

CECILIA
Is that mom's umbrella?

TERENCE
I borrowed it.

Miraz opens it and some wires hang out.

MIRAZ
What was your idea, hijo, with this?

Terence leans back on his chair and puts his glasses back on.

TERENCE
It was a dumb idea.

Miraz tosses the umbrella to Terence. Terence catches it.

Miraz un-clips his belt.

Cecelia and Terence look at each other.

Miraz slips the belt off and takes pliers from the table and tosses both to Terence.

Terence raises his eyebrows at Miraz.

MIRAZ
(Smiling)
Abracadabra, Houdini Nino. Invent something great.

EXT. CALIFORNIA APPLE ORCHARD - DAY

A large colorful umbrella rolls along a row of apple trees. Underneath is Terence. As he picks apples, the umbrella attached to the wire on his belt moves with him so he's continually in the shade.

Miraz is in front of him, also in the shade.

Ernesto, Santiago, Harold and Gus stare at them while they work.

Ernesto throws his box down.

ERNESTO
Chopos, you've lost your mind and you're taking hijo with you.

MIRAZ
No, no. The umbrella was his idea.
Terence smiles and brushes an apple against his Superman shirt.

TERENCE
The shade helps.
(Looking to Santiago)
I can make you one too, Santi, you look baaaad.

Santiago, whose shirt is soaked in sweat and whose cap is crusty with old stains, sets his box down and wipes his forehead with his arm.

SANTIAGO
(Laughing)
Maybe, hijo. I ain't gonna lie, though, you look gay.

Ernesto shoves Santiago.

ERNESTO
It's not funny. He'll get us in trouble.

SANTIAGO
Relax, Ernie, he's a kid.

Ernesto jerks his head to Santiago.

ERNESTO
Hell no! Not in this field. Young, old, sick, legal, illegal. We citizens don't count for nothing no more. They flood in and we get paid nada.

Terence glares at Ernesto.

Gus drops his box and stands by Terence.

GUS
Because you were born here, Ernie, you think you should get paid more than the rest of us?

Ernesto looks at Gus.

ERNESTO
Don't go there.

SANTIAGO
Shut up, todos. Here comes giggles.

They return to work.

The truck parks by Santiago and Ernesto. They pour what they have inside. The truck moves to Terence. The driver leans out.

TRUCK DRIVER
Get rid of that umbrella.

Miraz grabs his jumper straps and stands with his belly out.

MIRAZ
Hijo has a great idea. The heat pains us sometimes, as Señorita Mildred knows.

The Truck Driver looks at Miraz.

TERENCE
If we all had one, we'd work faster.

The Truck driver ignores them and drives to the next worker. Terence and Miraz smirk at each other as Harold pours his apples into the truck.

The truck driver turns off the engine and jumps out, slamming the door. From the back, he pulls a blue apple.
TRUCK DRIVER
(To Harold)
What is zis?!

Harold looks up.

HAROLD
I didn't put that there.

TRUCK DRIVER
Bullshit.

HAROLD
I swear on San Francisco.

The truck driver pulls at his goatee then strides to Terence, who shields himself with the umbrella. Miraz steps in between, his shoes CLUNKING.

The driver gapes at Miraz as Gus, Ernesto and Santiago gather close.

There's silence. Miraz finally sways back on his heels and lets out a booming laugh.

MIRAZ
Guess what I have in my kitchen?

Open mouths all around.

Santiag0 finally gulps and leans forward.

SANTIAGO
What?

MIRAZ
I caught a mosca.

The truck driver narrows his eyes.

TRUCK DRIVER
What?!

MIRAZ
A mosca. A fly, with a strand of my hair.
SANTIAGO
Can I see it?

MILDRED
Enough!

Mildred walks out from the trees.
The truck driver blinks his eyes then stands beside Mildred, giving her the blue apple.

She takes it in her hand and looks at the umbrella.

MILDRED
You are to keep your inventions at home, Mr. Sanchez. And Mr. Grillo, as charming as your story is, I don’t want to hear it in my orchard.

Mildred turns to the workers.

MILDRED
And if I see these apples again I will order a complete recall.

Ernesto looks up.

ERNESTO
Of the apples?

Mildred turns to him, still frowning.

MILDRED
I will order a complete RECALL.

The truck driver turns his engine on and the workers continue to pour their apples in the back. Mildred turns to Terence and Miraz. She tosses the apple at their feet then walks away through the trees.

INT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - DAY

Members of the Barrio are gathered around Miraz’s dining table, looking at the fly. Some pass around cell phones, taking pictures, while others leave and come back towing their grandmothers and kids.

Miraz, Terence, and Cecilia stand to the side, offering colorful apples to their guests.

INT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - DAY

More are gathered around the table, passing money and taking pictures. Ernesto and Santiago are in the corner arguing with one another. Cecilia brings them apples. Santiago smiles at her and accepts one while Ernesto storms off.

INT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - DAY

The doors are lined with people and Cecilia lets some in while others leave.

INT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - DAY

More around the table. Many kids carry colorful apples. Miraz, Terence and Cecilia are approached by an older Mexican-American man, DARIO, dressed in a nice button shirt and clean pants. Santiago walks with him. He points to the fly.

SANTIAGO
I told you, Pop. It’s still alive.

Dario lifts his eyebrow.

DARIO
Claro.

Dario pats Santiago on the back and nods toward Terence and Cecilia. Santiago looks at his father, then joins the kids.

Dario beckons Miraz into the kitchen.
DARIO
I don’t like it.

Miraz leans on his sink and hooks his fingers on his overalls.

MIRAZ
Como que no? We have them riled, Dario, and it’s not over a damn football game.

Dario paces, his hands on his waist.

DARIO
Protest is no good.

MIRAZ
For you. You’re comfortable, no? Passing for a happy American, but you don’t own the barrio.

Dario stops pacing.

DARIO
I might as well. I’m the one who chooses to house them.

Miraz smirks at Dario.

MIRAZ
You?

DARIO
Mildred allows them all here, the illegals too. Hell, without her Terence would be moving from job to job, his mama y hermana would be out in the streets.

(Beat)

Viejo estúpido, why are you causing trouble?

Miraz CLUNKS to his cabinet, opens the glass with a shaky hand and pulls out his pills. There are two left and they plop loosely around the plate.

MIRAZ
This is it, Dario. I can’t afford more and I haven’t taken any since I caught the mosca.

Dario looks at the plate then back at Miraz.

DARIO
That’s not Mildred’s fault.

Miraz puts the pills back and laughs.

MIRAZ
No? Wages have changed again, I notice ’cause I count. Terence tambien and Cecelia, only thirteen, she counts. We notice.

Dario walks over to the window and stares out.

DARIO
It’s the economy.

MIRAZ
You’ve lost dinero tambien.

DARIO
Not a lot. It’s the economy.

Miraz slams a fist on his cabinet.

MIRAZ
Not the economy! La mujer! Her company! She’s knows government, she knows tricks.
Miraz holds his wrist on his chest and pants, looking at his slippers. Voices stream into the kitchen.

MIRAZ
We’re all... moscas.

Dario takes his hands from his pockets and points to the other room.

DARIO
And you think a mosca pequeña will change her mind!? Buzz around her brain a little and she’ll suddenly raise the wages?

Miraz stands up straight.

MIRAZ
No se, but la mujer is nervous.

EXT. CALIFORNIA APPLE ORCHARD - DAY

Bright sunlight drizzles down the apple trees and down the worker’s necks and backs. They move slowly, sipping water between each load of apples. Gus, Ernesto and Santiago work side by side, panting.

GUS
Those umbrellas would come in handy right about now.

TERENCE
Ask your wife. I gave one to her last night.

The workers laugh.

GUS
Watch it, hijo. You’re young enough for an ass kicking.

Terence stands to stretch.

TERENCE
I could use a good kick in the ass. Anything to distract from the heat.

Santiago leans awkwardly to the side, breathing heavy then stumbles backward until he hits a tree stump.

ERNESTO
Santiago!

Ernesto, Miraz, Terence, and Gus bend over him. Gus takes off his shirt to fan his face and Ernesto dumps the rest of his water on his forehead.

TERENCE
He needs cold air.

MIRAZ
Terence, call the Truck.

Terence darts off. They fan Santiago.

Terence bursts back through the trees, fuming.

TERENCE
Bastard refused! He actually refused to help! Should’ve just taken the keys from his big ugly...

MIRAZ
(To Ernesto)
Take his legs.

(To Gus)
Take his arms.

They align themselves and hoist Santiago above the ground.
INT. CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - NIGHT

Miraz, Terence and the fly are immobile in the dining room. Miraz and Terence wear black. A picture of Santiago sits on top of a white cloth. There's a knock at the door. Miraz opens it. Cecilia stands with Dario, whose eyes are red and puffy. She holds his hand and leads him inside. Miraz puts his hand on Dario’s shoulder.

CECILIA
Chopos, we have something for you.
Or Senior Dario does.

Dario releases Cecelia’s hand and reaches into his jacket. He pulls a folder out and looks at Miraz.

DARIO
You were right, Miraz. I was too comfortable.

Miraz takes the folder.

DARIO
But the bruja claimed I didn’t! No compensations for the hospital or funeral.

Terence takes the folder from Miraz and looks through it. Dario runs his hands on his neck and loosens his tie.

DARIO
I don’t have the energy to fight, Miraz.

He glances at Cecilia and Terence with sad eyes.

DARIO
I still have family to think about.

He turns and walks out the door. Cecilia wipes her eyes with her sleeve and turns to Terence.

CECILIA
Dario wants us to sue?

Terence takes the papers to the table and looks at them under the light.

TERENCE
Yeah, yeah. Miraz, the wages listed here are all wrong. There’s enough here for a lawyer.

MIRAZ
Hijo, lawyers can’t work for an illegal.

Terence turns white and looks at Cecilia then back at Miraz.

TERENCE
Cecilia can take it, she was born here.

MIRAZ
She’s too young.

TERENCE
Then you can get one.

MIRAZ
Mildred is watching. If I request a lawyer, she’ll know. She’s threatened deportation to half the barrio.

Terence shoves the folder in his pocket and paces.
TERENCE
Then what do we do!? 
Miraz sits at the table and looks at the fly. Cecilia joins him.
There’s silence.
Cecilia jumps up and down.

CECILIA
Aye Dios, I got it! I got it!
She points to it.

CECILIA
We use Mosca.
TERENCE
What?

CECILIA
(To Miraz)
Do you have a camera?

Miraz looks at the fly then at Cecilia. He smiles, goes to a drawer and brings out a VHS camera.
Cecilia takes it and inspects it.

CECILIA
This’ll work.
She and Miraz take the lassoed fly to the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN OF THE CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - NIGHT
She anCecilia takes a lamp and creates a spotlight.

TERENCE
So what, you’re gonna scorch it?

CECILIA
I’m going to video tape it.
Miraz nods.

TERENCE
What?

CECILIA
We’ll send the tape to the news.

TERENCE
To broadcast a mutant fly?

CECILIA
It’s more than a fly, Terence, it’s our...
(Her eyebrows crunch)
...our mascot. If we bring the nation to us, we’ll win.
Terence opens his mouth then closes it, watching his sister.
Cecilia takes the camera, adjusts the tape then bends over the fly. Miraz and Terence wait. Cecilia waves her hand at Terence.

CECILIA
Make it move.
Terence lifts his fist to bang on the table, but goes to the radio instead and cranks it.
A Spanish song vibrates through the apartment.
The fly starts to buzz on beat. All three of them smile.
Cecilia begins to tape, while her feet dance. Terence and Miraz polka sloppily with each other.
When the song finishes, Cecilia stands up and removes the tape.
CECILIA
Got it. Where to?

There is a banging at the door then an inaudible command.
Miraz turns off the music.

MIRAZ
Stay here, hijos.

INT. DINING ROOM OF CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - NIGHT
Miraz steps from the kitchen and turns off the music. He opens the door. A fat OFFICER stands on the threshold, holding a badge and warrant in Miraz’s face.

Lights flash from the bottom floor.

OFFICER
Miraz Grillo?

MIRAZ
Yes?

OFFICER
We have a warrant to search the apartment for private company papers. Issued by Mildred Stork.

The officer shoves the paper in Miraz’s hand and files in, followed by other police officers. Miraz looks at the paper then is shoved backward.

MIRAZ
Espera!

They search the dining room. Miraz crunches the warrant in his fist.

One officer stands still and looks to the others. They all stop moving and listen. They exhale and continue looking.

Another officer steps into the kitchen. Miraz begins to shake. The officer calls for the others to join him. Miraz follows.

INT. KITCHEN OF THE CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - NIGHT
It’s dark. On the kitchen counter, the camera sits open without a tape. Terence and the fly are gone. Cecilia stands by the sink with a piece of paper between her fingers.

One officer steps up to her and takes the paper. He opens it, glances at her then hands it back. He looks to the others.

OFFICER
A citizen.

Miraz stands by her as the others check the kitchen. The officer turns to Miraz.

OFFICER
I’ll need proof of your citizenship too.

Miraz, who’s still shaking, nods his head and goes to the dining room.

INT. DINING ROOM OF CALIFORNIA BARRIO APARTMENT - NIGHT
The front door is open, and a draft brushes through Miraz’s hair. His gaze tries to penetrate beyond the flashing lights to the ground floor.

The officer coughs behind him. Miraz bends down to one of the overturned drawers. There’s a gunshot outside.

From the kitchen, Cecilia runs to Miraz. The officer beckons them both to stay down. Miraz grips Cecilia’s arm as the police radio projects in their ears.

VO.
Suspect is an immigrant teenager.
Male. We’re pursuing on foot.

VO. 2
Weapon has been discharged.
The officer picks up his radio.

OFFICER
Bullet impact?

V.O.
Don’t know... I aimed for his leg.

Grabbing hold of the windowsill, Miraz looks out into the darkness.

A buzzing echoes nearby...

FADE OUT
He was inky, smudged with the kisses of a black goddess, licking his loose lips with the carelessness of a stranger. He had those alive kind of eyes: jade gems existing in two oceans of milky white hue.
She walked around with the hair of a filly. Pencil-straight, and black as charcoal; it was thick. She tilted her head in a curious way, dipped it forward then back. All that mare's hair went over her shoulders and grazed her slender back.

Bent over his computer, he squinted at the screen. He had on a bandana that was red, folded, covering only his forehead, knotted in the back like a tree. He sat there typing, and his elbows were ashy: white smeared on this black canvas of a body.
She was waiting. Her face was a landscape of red, swollen blotches. Greasy hair, a reproduced auburn, tangled tight in a hair-tie. Her head twitched to the right as she scratched at a space behind her ear.

Chapped lips, cracking; pink tint peeling like paint. A pouty pillow in the middle of her pale face of Mexico. She had glossy eyes: pupils spreading out like black seas into the forest of her irises.
You know, when a bird hits a window it
leaves a print there

whisper there
itself at its last moment

so it is that this girl
breaks her bones in a moment of

her lover’s mother appearing in the doorway
bearing a bowl of his favorite spaghetti

green plastic spaghetti bowl mother’s love envy
in the glance from this girl who flew the coop

before her mother could nudge her
out of the nest gently

she’s careening in the kitchen now
the toaster insulting her with a stagnant staring
she draws in her knees, tries to tuck them under her wings while she's gnawing gnawing gnawing on everything her mother ever gave her— bracelet scarf tiger’s eye ring game of clothing in cloth stone metal memories rusted artifacts carving the envy of empty hands she hoists herself to the window—the courage her mother gave her, but no bird whisper there the glass transparent flat if only she looked back she'd see the faint outline of her body she's left on the kitchen floor there whisper there a print with tile grout for windowpanes broken bones as she hit that unstained glass
like (vb) 1. To feel attraction toward or take pleasure in: I rather like(d) the way he made my oatmeal bath boil, then touched it with the tips of his fingers each minute until it was cool enough; He like(s) wearing the color red on weekends; I like(d) the way he watched me undress; I like(d) the way it made me feel; I never did like the way Mr. G leered at me in ninth grade biology. 2. To feel toward: How would you like to walk to the football field? How would you like to go after dark? How would you like to crawl under the bleachers? Would you like to see my private parts? 3. To wish to have: I would like a moment to step from my stoop, my shoes, my skin, to walk over to him and peel his flesh from the tops of his freckled shoulders down to his toes, and put it in my mouth like gum or jerky and chew for a while. I would like a moment to see how it tastes, because I know it would taste of summer—then I would like a moment to go back in time with the taste in my mouth—that way, I wouldn’t have to patch his skin back on and he would be good as new, but I would still know I was Right. like (prep) 1. Having the characteristics of, similar to: Your house is like the red barn; his house is like a sex palace. 2. Such as: A subject like physics is difficult to master, so I didn’t—I promised Liza I’d take her to parties if she let me copy from her papers; a girl like Liza doesn’t go to parties, but a girl like me cheats.
I got ya
I seen ya
walkin like ya own the town
criss cross
Waitin to get ya
whippin that gorgeous strawberry scented hair
I been waitin
I'm everywhere girlie
I seen so many things so many days
My numbers
my numbers
they callin you home
like they call home the others

I'm smooth honey
I'm butter

Her hair
her hair it's golden I'm not
Oh god she's teeny
  she's tiny

She's against the wall
  get away from the wall, baby
and I see her fear in her sweat
  I smell it

I talked my way into the house
  backed her across the linoleum
promised some sweet things

My boots fit off
  an I keep adjusting em

You're ready
  I know you're ready
Cause she ain't got no problem talking to me
  through a screen

My hands ain't so scary as my fake face
  so I reach my fake fingers out to my girl
don't ya wanna go for a ride
and she climbs in

That hair
  that hair
It's cornsilk smooth like my tongue
  She's so small

Tick tick little girl
  let's go
There still are nights when I remember Sister Carmen, and the way in which my hands searched her habit for the awakening of a new era, the refuge for my doubts and inopportune erections during her homily. It was that black veil that made us imagine—me and every other boy-man sitting at their desks—the movement of her young body behind the cross hanging from her neck, the friction of her legs as she walked through the empty hallways, and the firmness of her breasts, against which no other nun in the institute could compete. She was very pretty—or we felt satisfied, at the very least, with the youth in her face and her laugh, with her way of praying silently under her breath, like a sigh for her own relief and not a morning imposition to the blind flock in front of her. She spoke to us of eternal salvation, and as we listened we wished to reject it.

It was the time I caught her walking toward me, in the loneliness of the schoolyard, after classes: the smoke of a cigarette fleeing my throat as a cough. I begged God, more authentically than ever before, for his wrath not to fall upon me through her, for him not to condemn me to Hell with his servant’s lips of temptation. She stared in silence at the smoke signals coming out of control from my mouth, my tearful eyes in the middle of my reddish skin, and the fear in my hands as I threw the cigarette to the ground, to then lay my frenetic foot on it like someone stepping on a bug. And there we were, surrounded by no one: a boy and his mirage, a sinner and his redeemer. Without daring to say a word, I wished to tell her to forgive me, that it was not what it looked like, that it was, that she ought to punish me, that I was a man and I didn’t care. I awaited her conviction, but she just smiled at me, and maybe the two were always the same. She spoke to me with the same voice in which she preached every prayer, saying, “I hope you kept another one for me.” And for the first time, I felt faith. It was the touch of her fingers on my trembling hand, the ash lighting up and going off with every breath from her chest, and the way the smoke escaped slowly through her lips, like a caress lacking the blow of the wind.
We met that way, in an empty schoolyard and a cigarette in hand. I would tell her later, lying on the grass, that I didn’t always feel God in every place, and she would answer me, next to some wall in the shade, that neither did she. We were two strangers telling the other the things we never were, and I could feel, in every word she kept silent, a sadness that went beyond any religion and any church. Among the hallways could be heard the rumors of a thousand pasts that belonged to her, stories that went from convents and temples, to streets that were better off unlit, to lives that were tougher than anyone could comprehend or imagine. And everyone longed to share as many pieces of her as they could, coming up with versions of her that contradicted themselves and multiplied among their fantastic facts, but no one dared to believe in just one. She turned, without any notice, into everyone’s favorite myth, fascination for the unknown, for what’s not understood; her image turned into the vision that no one wanted to actually reach and unmask, but rather to flutter around without ever leaving her out of their sight. And maybe the responsibility of an idol was weighing her down, the task of feeding everyone’s minds with the illusion that was imposed on her: purity waiting to be corrupted, and malice disguised as an angel.

The wind of a fall day kept us together one time, against the pillar that defended us from the world, and our bodies were pressed under a contact that neither one of us could break. The friction of our sides wrapped around smoke that the wind blew hurriedly, and then lost forever. And in that closeness, she stared at me, as if begging for forgiveness, for a peace of mind she could never find, and for whose search she was now too tired. We kissed with hot lips and cold cheeks, searching in our mouths for the warmth that promised the end of her doubts and the beginning of mine. Settled inside me was the carnal desire that drew me so close to the improper, to an eternal punishment that didn’t scare me anymore. I surrendered to her embrace in the silence of the wind blowing around us, and in her breast, I felt saved. It became a part of our ritual with every encounter, and in the handfuls of her that my hands managed to grasp, I discovered the life that was coming to me and to everyone else, the fever that ran through my body and moved it with the primitive instinct of two pieces that have finally fallen in place. Every time her hands went down my back and played with the buttons of my uniform, it took me further away from the innocence that I wore as a stigma, and with my lips and hands I would tell her that I didn’t want it anymore, that the man inside me no longer needed it. I bid it goodbye.

She left on a morning that seemed like any other. She seemed older. Even the smoothness of the corners of her mouth enclosed a gesture of emptiness, of heavy conscience, of hangover. She didn’t tell me she was leaving; she barely said anything at all. But I could tell by those longer sighs, those hands longing to go beyond the skin, yet hesitant. She had her own demons dancing on her backbone—the same dance that kept me awake at night. It wasn’t sin that scared her, nor her punishment in the fire; her fear was more primitive, more human. Her melancholy and uncertainty kept her silent, a heart that, by loving too much, had been left broken. And I loved her more than anything, or that’s how I thought I loved her; that’s how I remember I loved her. She didn’t come back to the institute the next morning, or any other morning after, and I found myself begging the brief memory of our disguised farewell. I always hoped to find her, in every turn down a hallway—to hear among her warm breath the goodbye I thought I deserved—but her absence through the months left a taste of resignation in my mouth, and finally I decided that, like many other prophets before me, I had simply been victim of a divine revelation in a dream, while I was still asleep.

The number and fantasy of the rumors about her life were only matched by those of her departure. Everyone built inside their heads, not the ending that sufficed who she was, but one that best ended the version of her myth that they had so diligently constructed between the bell for lunch and the turning of pages during class. As with everything about her, there were no reasons for her
departure, and in that way, without meaning to or knowing, she culminated all the lives that could have been hers with a blank conclusion, ready to be molded by anyone’s liking. After a few weeks, when everything that had to be said and remembered had been said and remembered, all the fuss over that muse slowly grew more silent, until it became a murmur that resonated in every hallway and every classroom, but that no one heard anymore: a legend that starts only to be forgotten. And although her mystery was what allowed everyone to make her theirs, it wasn’t enough for me to know so little of her, even though she had been mine more than anyone else’s—in every cigarette, every trusted word, and every embrace. I try to remember her precisely in every moment, because she didn’t give me many, but she gave me the world in each one. Perhaps, she also remembers me even for the most meaningless reasons, whoever and wherever she is, and perhaps now she smiles more. And I find myself always hoping that she does, like someone who hopes blindly for the promise of eternal salvation, devoted to those scarce memories and to the faith that she does.
Knees rotting from overuse
And hands attempting collusion
You are allergic to grass
But the clouds look different when there is a blanket between you and—
I have considered cannibalism
I want to fully experience you
No fork, no separation
You must taste of perfection the kind of purity
People go to India for
Let me inhale you
I want to hear you
I didn't stuff those
  feathers bullets    glasses
Down your throat for nothing
I am:
fluffy crumb,
creamy white
topping.
Baked in
dozens.
Stacked to taste.

Peel off
my paper dress.
Nip me.
Nibble me.
Tear into me.
Tear me in two.
Consume my cake.

I give my life to please you,
my life is not my last.
I stick around to spite you,
in your hips and thighs and ass.

OF ALL YOU'VE HAD I'VE BEEN THE BEST /
BRANDON GHIGLIOTTY
I watch you / bite into a strange fruit / Suck on the seed that is pink / like a pomegranate bead /

I watch you / peel back the smooth skin / Wipe the dripping juice from your chin / You hold my eyes / then /

You lick the pink meat of this / My skin / My throat closes / as you start sucking on the seed again /

My eyes shut / and body quivers / The sensation of a whisper
You had me at “barista,”
the mariachi band is
playing maracas, or is
someone whispering,
tease, tease, tease—
As I sit and
Stare at the strangers that surround me,
It takes every ounce of
Restraint to not reach down,
Pull the head from my bag
And give it
A kiss
The refrigerator still hummed. Honus Posada knelt at the open door, the upper half of his body extended into the depths of the machine. He tinkered with the thermostat. The humming was less noticeable than it had been that morning when Posada first arrived. His boss—a pudgy old man who liked to pretend he wasn’t balding—had sent him to Apartment 8C to address the noise. The woman who lived in the apartment was out of town. A full, unobtrusive day of custodial work could thus commence.

Posada didn’t mind the work. It was a chance to see inside one of the biggest apartments in the building. Since he’d been hired at Babylon Towers six months ago, he had spent most of his time working in the studios on the ground level. Those were the furnished rooms, the kind people could rent week-to-week. Most of the renters, Posada thought, were lowlifes.

But apartment 8C was different. The woman who lived there was enchanting. Posada had first seen her during his second week on the job. He had happened to be in the lobby around seven o’clock one night, at the same time she happened to come home from work. He had been, and still was, struck by her dark features. Asking around the front desk staff, he found out what apartment she rented and was pleased to learn she was on a yearlong lease. It wasn’t long before Posada realized she was a product of routine. Every weekday night at the same time, the concierge would buzz the woman into the lobby, where she would wait for an elevator to the top floor. In total, she spent only three or four minutes in the lobby, which was just enough time for Posada to satisfy his lust. He would watch her longingly, from a good distance, and would always consider approaching her, but he was a man who followed the rules—at least the ones that could get him fired. And the rules about employee-resident relationships were very clear, so Posada remained a silent observer.

It was almost seven now, but Posada knew the woman would not be following her typical procedure. He didn’t know when, precisely, she was sched-
uled to return—or, for that matter, where she was—but he knew her return to Los Angeles would not be tonight. He would therefore have to be in the lobby every night, starting tomorrow, to insure that he would see her when she returned. With a slight twist of a wrench, the humming from the refrigerator finally stopped. Posada removed himself from the fridge, careful not to disturb the top shelf of condiments.

Posada doubted his work. He decided to remain in the apartment a little longer, to be sure the hum did not return. He wandered around the rooms. It was a two-bedroom, one-bath with a view of the concrete Ventura Freeway. The cars rushing past looked like toys. Posada spotted a picture of the woman on a windowsill. It was of her and an old, white-haired man in the middle of some city with neon lights and Asian writing on billboards. She looked a few years younger in the photo, and full of hope. Her eyes looked less tired than they did when she returned from work every night. Posada wished he knew her name, but those records were kept in a locked file cabinet in his boss’s office.

Satisfied that the humming was gone for good, Posada gathered his tools and left the apartment. In the hallway, he considered heading for the elevator, but heard a resident jingling his keys, and decided to take the stairs. He walked down the nine flights to the musty basement, where his own room was located.

The windowless studio was situated between the boiler room and the electric room, which made for some strange noises. Posada was under the impression that the room had once been nothing more than a large storage space. He dropped his toolbox and took a quick shower. He was sure to avoid what he believed to be the beginnings of mold in the corner of the tub. He prepared one of the pre-made meals from his freezer and ate while flipping through the pages of the latest FAMA Magazine. After he ate, he hand rolled a cigarette and laid on his bed. He stared at the ceiling for a moment, then went to light his smoke. The phone rang.

“Posada,” said Posada’s boss. “Booked some asshole at the last minute. Comin’ in later tonight. I put him in 1B. The jerk in there should be out by now. Need you to go fix it up.”

“That’s housekeeping’s job.”

“Housekeeping went home an hour ago.”

“Can’t they come back in?”

“For time and a half” Posada was on salary, meager as it was. “Take care of it within the next thirty minutes.” There was a click on the other end of the line, and the conversation was over. Posada changed back into his custodial jump-suit and checked himself in the mirror. He hated the way his name was stitched in gold over the blue fabric.

Posada retrieved the cleaning cart from the storage closet and marched it down the corridor to 1B. He knocked and said, “Housekeeping,” while fishing for his master key.

The final rays of an orange sunset pierced through the barred windows of Mike Foster’s room. The light hit his eyes and he stirred from his sleep. He had only gone to bed a few hours before, after the bachelor party of a lifetime. At least, he thought it was the party of a lifetime. In actuality, he didn’t remember most of it. He hadn’t drunk that much since college.

He stretched around in the queen-sized bed, enjoying the space. This was the first morning he had woken up in a different place than his wife since she returned from the hospital with their first son last year. He liked the peace and quiet. No one was kicking him, telling him it was time to get out of bed. There was no baby crying. No work to go to. Chicago was a thousand miles away. Mike’s eyes wandered around the room, and he decided that he had paid far too much for it. The walls were bare and ugly. The beige paint job had been rushed. The TV on top of the bureau was at least ten years old. The only hint of modernity was a
digital clock on the nightstand.

“Shit!” Mike cried. It was almost eight p.m. Not only was he supposed
to have checked out that morning (he was surprised no one had bothered to kick
him out yet), Mike had a ticket for the nine o’clock Southwestern Chief. Mike
shot out of bed and looked for his pants. He found them on the bathroom floor.
He tried to slip his foot through one of the leg holes and tripped, his foot caught
in something. A quick glance at the pants and he found his problem. A long tear
made its way up the side of the leg. The pants were no good.

He rifled through his backpack, wishing he had taken his wife’s advice
to pack an actual suitcase with multiple changes of clothes. Now he would have to
buy a new pair. He gathered up his belongings, tossing them in the backpack and
made his way for the door. As he reached for the doorknob, he thought he heard
someone knock. He swung the door open and heard a thud, like someone falling
to the ground. Mike looked around for the source of the noise. A housekeeping
cart was next to his door, but he didn’t see anyone and continued on his way. He
positioned his backpack in front of his left leg, a modest attempt to hide the hole.

Mike tried to hail a cab outside Babylon Towers near one of the plastic
palm trees in the parking lot, but none stopped. A bus pulled up to a stop not too
far away, and with no taxis in sight, Mike ran for it.

“This go to Union Station?” he asked the driver.

“Route two goes cross town.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

The driver handed Mike a map of the bus system. “On or off?”

Mike glanced at the map and saw that route two did pass the train sta-
tion. “How much?”

The driver rolled his eyes and pointed to a sign that read, Fare: 75 Cents.
Mike fished a wrinkled dollar out of his hip pocket.

“Don’t suppose you have any change?” he asked.

The bus lurched forward, and Mike fell into an empty seat. He reached
across and slipped the dollar into the fare collector. A woman he was sure must
be a prostitute had her eyes glued to the tear in his pants. Self-conscious, he repo-
positioned his backpack to cover it, once again.

It was twenty minutes before the bus reached Union Station, and Mike
was relieved that he still had time before his train departed. After some strange
looks from some travelers and one security guard, Mike found a small clothing
shop in the terminal. The only pair of jeans his size had an image of a rapper
ironed onto the hips and thighs. He wore them out of the store.

On the train, Mike had a row to himself. He took the window seat and
threw his backpack on the aisle seat. He reclined in his chair and watched as the
city disappeared into the blackness of the night. His eyes drifted shut.

“Scuse me,” said a voice, as someone jabbed a fist into Mike’s arm.

“C’mon, man, git up.”

Mike opened his eyes. A menacing looking man in a Stetson and leather
jacket stood over him. “What time is it?” asked Mike.

“Four in the morning. C’mon, move your backpack.”

“Sit somewhere else.”

“There ain’t no place else.”

Mike removed his backpack from the aisle seat and dropped it by his feet.

“Thanks,” said the cowboy. “Name’s Jake Witten.” He extended a hand
as he sat. Witten wore cowboy boots, complete with spurs. Mike straightened up
in his seat, but didn’t extend his own hand.

“Where are we?” asked Mike.

“Coupla miles outsida Flagstaff.”

Mike did his best to regain his senses. Through the windows, all he
could see was black.

“Tickets, please!” The conductor made his rounds, collecting tickets
from the new arrivals. He arrived at Mike and Witten’s row. “Tickets?”

Mike shrugged off the conductor. “I’ve been on since L.A.”

Witten pulled twenty dollars from his wallet. “Don’t got one. Kinda a spontaneous trip.”

“Thirteen bucks,” said the conductor. He gave Witten a ticket and his change, then went to the next car.

Mike wondered why someone would take a spontaneous train trip in the middle of the night. He asked Witten where he was headed.

“Denver. Where the ex-wife lives,” Witten told Mike. “She took some-thin’ of mine that don’t belong to her.”

“What she take?” asked Mike. He noticed a large hunting knife strapped Witten’s belt.

“My son.”

Mike didn't know what to say. He thought of just rolling over and going back to sleep, but the knife made him nervous. “Excuse me,” he said and maneuvered his way around the cowboy. “Gonna go see if the snack car's still open.”

Mike took his backpack with him.

Witten thought it was bizarre that a man in his thirties would wear jeans with the face of a rapper on the leg, but the train did come from Los Angeles, and he had never been that far West. He knew fashion was much less practical in big cities. Once, he had gone to Phoenix and saw a man roller-skating in a sundress. He didn’t mind that the man was in a dress—to each his own, after all—but he couldn’t wrap his mind around the logic in it. As the man skated down the hill, a gust of wind swept through and the man’s dress flew over his head. Not only were his boxer shorts visible for the whole world to see, but the man, left blinded, crashed into a mailbox. Ultimately, cities were just too chaotic for Witten’s liking. His uncle’s ranch suited him just fine. The vast stretches of land kept him calm, the work kept him humble, and his family kept him grateful.

It was his uncle who took him in after the divorce. Witten’s uncle gave him a job and two rooms—one for himself and one for his son, Jake Jr. It was a sort of sanctuary for the two, away from everything that had haunted them for five years. From time to time, his ex-wife would reappear in town, looking for him, but some concerned neighbors would always let him know a strange woman was asking his whereabouts.

Over the last few weeks, though, Witten hadn’t heard from her. He was grateful for it. It meant he and his son were safe, or so he thought. While he and his uncle were driving some cattle, she had dropped by the house. Perhaps she had been waiting for Witten and his uncle to spend the day away from the home. Maybe she had just been passing by, and it was a pleasant surprise to find only Junior around. Regardless, by the time Witten and his uncle had returned the night before, the house was empty. His son was gone.

Witten’s uncle lent him some money and drove him to the train. It was his first time on a train – he had always driven his truck. But with gas prices the way they were, the train was the most reasonable option.

It wasn't long after sunrise when the train arrived in Denver. Witten disembarked and glanced around the train station's parking lot. He stood motionless, a deer caught in the headlights, as he tried to determine where to go. A queue of taxis stretched across the street.

Hopping into the first cab he saw, Witten told the cabbie where to go. “First time to Denver?” asked the cabbie.

“How’d you know?”

“Don’t look like you’re from around here.”

Witten told the cabbie he was from Arizona.

“Well wuddaya think so far?”

“Mighty big.”
The cabbie agreed. They rode the rest of the way in silence, and Witten
handed over the forty-seven dollars the cabbie asked for. Witten exited the cab,
and as it drove away, he took a breath before ascending the stairs of his ex-wife’s
brown Victorian.

“Fuckin’ hick, just earned myself twenty extra bucks!” Charlie said into the radio
of his Denver cab. “He didn’t even question it!”

A voice muttered something through the static.

“Say again,” said Charlie.

“Gotta love tourists,” said the voice on the radio.

“Amen!” Charlie pulled onto a main street and headed for a strip of
hotels. “This is two-five-nine, heading down Colfax in search of fares.” Charlie
cut through a few lanes of traffic without signaling in order to get to the side of
the street with the sidewalk. He slowed as he passed a few pedestrians but, so far
as he could tell, none of them wanted a ride. After he had gone three blocks and
seven hotels further, he decided on lunch.

In the line at the fast food joint’s drive through, Charlie was caught behind two
teenaged bicyclists. While an eternity passed, the bicyclists flirtatiously tried to
push each other off the bikes, unable to decide what they wanted to eat. Charlie
didn’t mind. The girl was cute. The only unattractive quality about her was her
blue jeans, which had the pop star of the week’s face printed on the back.

As he pulled back onto the street, Charlie got a call to pick up a fare at
a local hotel. He drove with the burger on his lap, its grease staining his pants. At
the hotel, he saw the brunette beauty he would be chauffeuring.

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“You got it.” Charlie radioed his operator and drove the car to the high-
way. “What brings you to Denver?”

“Then you’re doing it wrong. Denver’s full of great places to go. Why
just last night, I was—”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather not talk,” said the woman. She
gazed out the window, avoiding making eye contact with the cabbie in the rear-
view mirror. When the cab pulled into the airport, he dropped the woman off at
Departures and collected her fare. The cabbie stared at her backside until she
slipped inside the terminal.

He pulled back onto the street in search of another fare.

“Any luck with the babe headed to the airport?” asked a voice on the
radio.

“Bitch didn’t even tip,” said the cabbie.

The security line at the airport stretched around the corner. Lauren didn’t mind
having to stand that long—she had spent most of the last few days sitting in
funeral parlors, a church, at the side of a grave. Wherever she went, people felt
the need to console her and offer her a chair. She was tired of being consoled. She
was tired of sitting. She just wanted to move on. In a matter of hours, she would
be home again.

Passing through security took an hour, but Lauren found her gate with
ease. The flight was delayed by thirty minutes. Since she had unexpected time,
she decided to go to the airport bar. She ordered a double shot of Jack—something
to help her sleep. She had always found it difficult to sleep in public places. The
uncomfortable seats on airplanes didn’t help her any. Bourbon should do the trick.

She boarded the plane, taking her aisle seat near the galley. The noise
from the flight attendants would have been too much to handle if she hadn’t come prepared with earplugs. As soon as the plane was airborne, she reclined her seat, trying to slip away from reality. It was not to be.

Lauren felt a crushing pain on her right foot. She woke to find a flight attendant pushing the drink cart directly over her toes.

“I’m so sorry!” said the flight attendant. “I didn’t see you, are you okay?”

Lauren nodded, removing her earplugs. “It’s alright.”

“I’m so sorry. Please forgive me. Here, would you like a drink?” She held up a small bottle of Maker’s Mark.

Lauren nodded. She took the drink, opening it.

“That’ll be eight fifty.”

“You’re charging me for it?”

“Alcoholic beverages are only complimentary for our first class travelers.”

“I don’t want it, then.”

“I’m sorry, you’ve already opened it. Once you open it, you have to buy it.”

Lauren paid the flight attendant and drank the whiskey in as few swigs as possible. The flight landed at L.A.X. around six-thirty. As she passed baggage claim in search of a shuttle to her apartment, Lauren laughed at all the passengers waiting for their luggage. A long line of them stretched out of the Lost Luggage Office. Lauren only ever travelled with carry-on.

She found a seat on the shuttle bus as the lights of the city were starting to illuminate the darkening skyline. She liked the lights of Los Angeles—they reminded her of the time she had gone to Tokyo with her father. But the neon-green sign up her apartment complex was an eyesore. It stood about twenty feet above the plastic palm trees in the parking lot. Each letter would light up, then darken as another letter would lighten to spell Babylon Towers. It was cheesy—something out of the Las Vegas of that Frank Sinatra movie.

Lauren entered the lobby. It wasn’t too late, just about seven o’clock, but she wished her flight hadn’t been delayed. The building’s custodian was in the lobby. She hated him. He would always watch her as she entered the lobby and made for the elevator. He had never spoken to her, had never asked her name, and she found it eerie. Today he was even wearing a neck brace—probably, she thought, an attempt at playing the sympathy card. Still, she had been told he would be fixing her refrigerator while she was gone. For that, she was thankful.

She turned the lights on in her apartment and threw her bag on the couch. Across from her, on the windowsill, she could see the photograph of her with her father in Japan. It was the last time the two had spent any time together. As soon as they had returned, Lauren had moved to California, leaving him in Denver. He died there, alone. No one, Lauren thought, should ever have to die alone. But then it occurred to Lauren that everyone did. Caesar died alone, betrayed by those he trusted most; Napoleon, after two exiles, met his end in a similar vain; now Lauren’s father, while watching CNN, had died of a massive heart attack. Even his cat hadn’t been with him—had been outside at the time.

Lauren laid down on the couch and closed her eyes. The moment she felt herself drifting away, there was a series of clanks from the kitchen. Then there was a familiar hum that grew louder which each passing second. A lamp on the bedside table rattled from the vibrations, forcing Lauren to take cover under her pillow as if she were smothering herself.

“Fucking fridge.”
But you know the difference between
cat’s paw and a claw hammer. How to drill
nails into dry-rotted wood and make something
as dead as Elvis seem alive and well. How to turn
twigs into many-roomed mansions and replace linoleum
floors with ones of marble. Floors so pure that the foot
that touches them bare
asks their steps for mercy
and may never walk again. I’m
cool with that. Build me
a wheelchair.
and | conjunction 1. used to connect words of the same part of speech, clauses, or sentences that are to be taken jointly: the kitchen we lived in had tan and white tiles; he wore jeans that were blue and fading; the money he owed me was seven hundred and fifty. 2. used to connect two clauses when the second happens after the first: one day he pushed her over a couch and she cried; he pushed me up against the wall and I screamed; he chased us and we hid. 3. used to connect two clauses, the second of which results from the first: knife in his hand, he said, look at me again, and I’ll skin you alive; he said, keep sitting there like that, and this party will never happen; he said, bite your nails, and you’ll never be someone’s girlfriend. 4. connecting two identical comparatives, to emphasize a progressive change: he was drinking more and more; he was getting better and better at sleeping; I felt more and more helpless. 5. connecting two identical words, implying great duration or great extent: It took hours and hours; he looked for weeks and weeks; I hurt for years and years. 6. used to connect two numbers to indicate that they are being added together: two and one make three children; seven hundred-fifty and six make too much to repay; sixteen and five make twenty-one years; one and one make unforgiven.
Shuffle—Mrs. Bramlette’s words

Each of us was meant to steep ourselves in a high academic calling while we waited our turn. I was trying to read Oliver Twist. Most of the others had decided to chitchat, and from time to time Mrs. Bramlette would shush them. She was perched on a ratty, dotted, mint-green loveseat, where we were joining her one at a time to discuss a personal narrative she’d asked us to churn out. The assignment had been to write about a time that completely changed you. I had done that, and now Mrs. Bramlette just needed to tell me how to fix it. The review process would take that entire day, and as students funneled up to her one at a time, I worried about what she might say about mine, about the sticky, gross truth I had written.

“Brandon.” Mrs. Bramlette’s voice was high-pitched and Southern and world-weary. Oliver’s travails slid out of my mind. What is she gonna say?

“Come on up, Brandon,” she said. I tripped down the aisle of desks without a word and sank into the cushions of the loveseat beside her.

Mrs. Bramlette was a colossus. I see her—always—as the slack-cheeked, makeup-caked, rotund lady wrapped in a forest-green turtleneck sweater who taught me ninth grade English in eighth, and who once admitted that she swore at tense, emotional moments, like should her finger get caught in a car door.

She had sheets of paper—my sheets of paper—pinched between her fingers, the hours I had spent writing, my dim efforts to speak honestly. She shuffled them for thirty seconds or so. Then, not smiling, she locked her eyes on me. I was not scared of her, but she was a mean, tired woman. She never hid that. What did a mean, tired woman have to say about this little boy’s hard knocks?

How could his stand up to hers?

“Brandon,” she said, “this is profound. I mean it. This is precisely what I wanted from you and your classmates. I’m sorry that you had to deal with this. But it is one thing to suffer at the behest of these children, and another thing
entirely to come away from it with such a clear understanding of—"

I cleared my throat. “What’s profound?”

“Your attitude,” she said. “Your takeaway. The conclusion you’ve come to about this experience.”

“No, Mrs. Bramlette—I mean—what does ‘profound’ mean?”

Mrs. Bramlette’s lips tugged a bit, and that was about as much smile as she could give. “It means your conclusion has depth, Brandon. It’s good, I promise.”

Mrs. Bramlette thought that it was profound. I didn’t know that I’d written about race. I thought it was about some kids who were mean to me and, thinking back on it, how bad I felt for them. How I hoped they’d turned themselves around, something like that. Maybe that is what I wrote about then, and maybe not.

Eighth grade was when I bucked Anne McCaffrey and Tolkien—dragons and demons—and chewed on raw literature, the stories about real people’s souls and science, communism and capitalism.

I didn’t understand or like that stuff then; I didn’t, and don’t, understand or like race. Still, I knew its face, its toothless snarl. I knew about being ostracized, about that singular lonesome quality of rejection.

Mandy Gonzales, a high school friend, once told me about the time she discovered race. I had conversations like this one with her all of the time, where she would narrate and giggle about a decision she’d reached, a discovery she’d made—simple stuff, mostly, like the day she decided out of the blue to be a nice girl.

As a girl, Mandy knew that she was nasty to her younger siblings, knew that it was out of jealousy. The day she told me about was straightforward. She woke up one day to the smell of breakfast and, instead of getting out of bed and eating the meal her dad had made, she just laid there. She ruminated on how she acted towards her siblings, how she would throw her sister under the bus with their parents and nab her brother’s snacks; she soaked in her jealousy and accepted it. Then she tossed it aside. “I wanted to be nice. I didn’t wanna be like I was,” Mandy told me. “And because I didn’t wanna be, I wasn’t anymore.”

Mandy went to grade school without any working knowledge about society’s arbitrary dividers. Her family was just affluent enough that poverty hadn’t ever been an issue; her dad ran a company that built houses, and the housing bubble had been kind. Boys weren’t interesting yet; she didn’t think to treat them any differently. Catholicism was the only religion in the world. Race hadn’t even come up in her life. That’s the thing about Mandy: she was herself Filipino and Caucasian, with thick hair and caramel skin like her father and high cheekbones like her mother. But for Mandy, skin color was just a color.

One day at grade school, a black boy was being harassed. Mandy didn’t get it. She understood that the boy’s skin was the target, but couldn’t for the life of her parse out precisely what that meant, could not compute that skin was not just skin, that for those other children, and perhaps their parents, it was an economic certainty and an attitude and a personality that certain people wore. She was a girl who could wake up one day and decide to be nice.
The students dispersed for recess. It had rained, and the grass field where we spent recess was moist and slick. We had a dress code of blue shirts, slacks and dress shoes, and the rain and recess had conspired to ruin the code, much to our delight. The call to end recess came and I didn’t hear it. The field hummed with children playing one minute, and the next minute three or four of the other boys had surrounded me and no one else was around. I don’t remember what I said or did to provoke them; it was probably my disinterest in them that did it. They pushed me around for a while and then left me on the field, muddy and grass-stained.

I doubt they were racist, at least not in any conscious sense. They were white. They were Southern. They might have picked up a thing or two from their parents, and they might not have. They were also children, the same as me. The fact is I haven’t ever gotten along with others the way most people do, and in a hive of children that sort of thing slows down the work. I was an easy target.

**Shuffle—The crucial piece**

The hallway was crowded with kids, hustling from one class to another—either getting in a quick ‘Hey-how-are-you’ with a buddy, or keeping their heads low. It was a buzzing green sea of bodies, but I knew the game. I knew where she would be. Halfway to English, I caught sight of her—of Mandy. She had a big goofy smile, which she offered me on sight—her skin was caramel, her dark hair thick and earthy. She was a long-limbed girl, but also sturdy, grounded. Her eyes, forest-hazel and sharp, locked on mine and then on the note jammed between my knuckles.

Writing the note had been easy, more or less. All I had to do was be honest. The handoff had to be different.

“I wrote you a note,” I said and held it out.

“Okay!” She grinned, not even beginning to sense the significance of the note or from whom it came.

She took the note, said bye, and headed to class. I did the same.

I cut out of class as soon as the bell rang. I went straight to her locker... and she wasn’t there. Then again, that was normal. Mandy took her time getting to her locker at the end of the day, because she had to collect her violin from one of the classrooms upstairs. At first I considered snooping around to find her, but that didn’t hold much water. It was dumb. I had waited this long—I could wait a few more minutes. And I wasn’t going to sit there and wait for her, either. I wandered outside and people-watched.

I saw Mandy as soon as I reentered the building, there at her locker. I knew at once that she was dreading my arrival. Her shoulders slumped. Her hair blocked her face, a dark moss obfuscating what I had already guessed.

“Mandy,” I said, leaning against the locker adjacent to hers. She didn’t say anything at first, just fumbled with something in her locker, hiding. “Mandy,” I said again.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffed. The locker clattered shut. I saw the note I’d given her in her fist. My belly was a tight coil, my attention heightened, my heart drooped. Mandy was crying, and it was my fault.

“Sorry about what, Mandy?” I doubted that I managed to hold the disappointment or the shame or the longing out of my voice. I doubted Mandy could handle any of it; otherwise this conversation would be going differently.

She rested her head against her dim green locker. “I don’t...” She cleared her throat, made a weird gurgling sound. I still couldn’t see her face. She pushed the note into my hands, the closest we would come to touching for a long time. “I can’t love you. Not this much.”

Her words have not changed. Neither has Mandy. I’m glad. It was never about rejecting me as a human being, the way those Saint Peters children did, but an expression of what is true about Mandy Gonzales. She holds fast to
her compass, her decision to keep race out of her heart, to simply be nice, to say
“I can’t love you,” to her friend. There was no room in her heart for the thought
of stranding me either, of snarling at my advances, barking obscenities and slurs
until I slid out of her life; there was room only for accepting how I felt and smil-
ing her big, goofy smile, with each of its teeth firmly intact.

One last thing:

Let’s not be profound about this. It’s been nearly a decade since Mrs.
Bramlette said that word to me, and I still don’t know what being “profound” has
to do with writing. Instead, let’s be sure-footed and honest and say simply, “I
wanted to be nice.”
Yes I would like you to
open up each of your sewn
squares. No I do not want to
do the opening—I will find
shrapnel there, sown
by your last catastrophe
our shabby, untamed, jetlagged minds
like that time we signed up for anatomy class
knowing we’d have to dissect cats
and when it was time to dissect cats
we didn’t want to.
thought about skipping—
got too high
forgot about skipping—
lost our minds
we were stoned coroners, scalpels in hand
“one of them was pregnant,” our teacher said
i crossed my fingers behind my back
then sliced organs one by one
until, in the sac, they were
cuddling lima beans.
i removed my gloves and scooped them out
used my left pinky to press tiny chests
in and out and in out
begged their bean-root lungs to gasp
please, please, before anyone sees but
you saw you took them
you tossed them around like hacky sacks
then threw them in the discard pile.
i wanted to find them put them back
in the warm sac and sew her up—
their unbelievable little faces and ears.