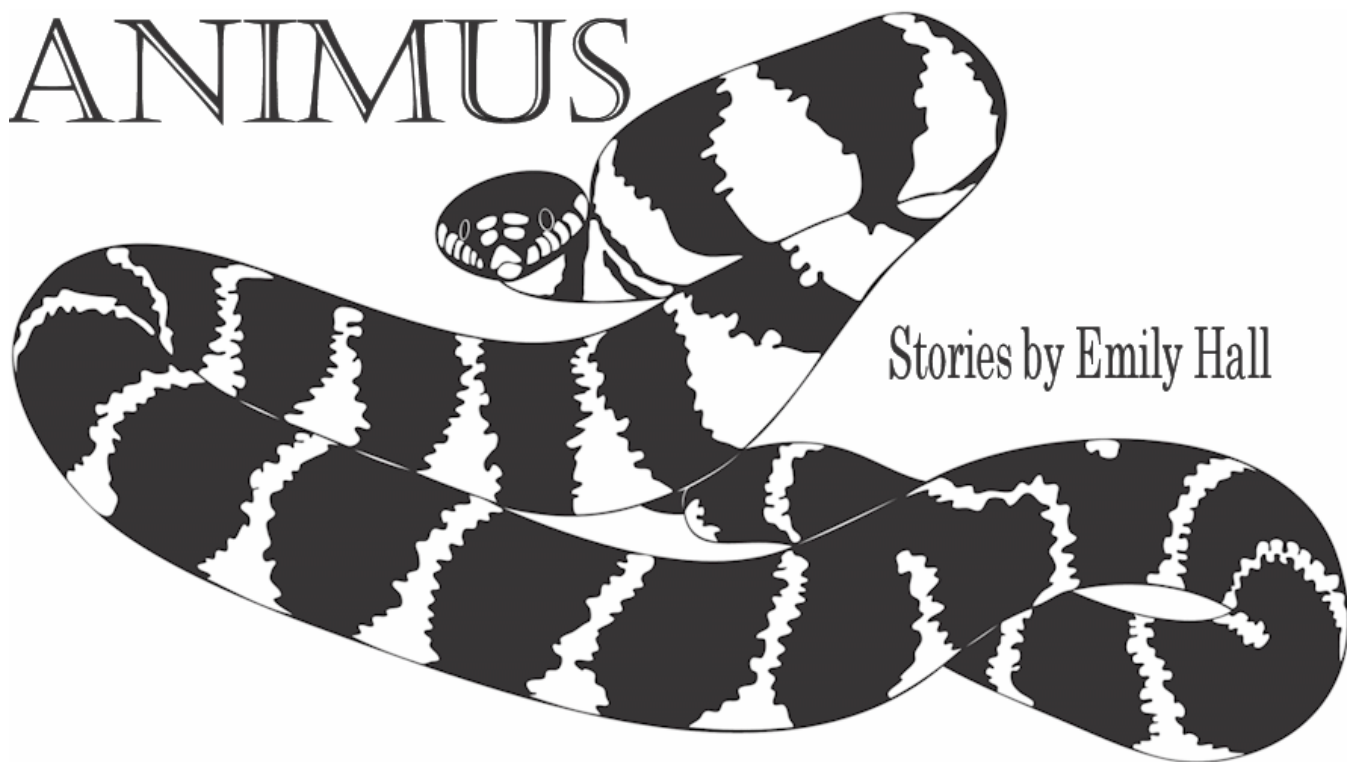


# ANIMUS



Stories by Emily Hall

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#### IV. THE HUMORIST

His particular incantations take forms (COMEDY). These forms being the dual techniques of **beetles** and **jigsaws**. First, spectators must submit by allowing the jigsaws to move along the outermost parts of their formidable braincases (Fig.18.0). These complex mechanical devices zip through bone, neatly perforating each braincase. The resulting opening (ACCEPTANCE) allows for the next embodiments--the rain colored beetles--to move in. These beetle incantations run into the new opening and easily locate the braincleft, also known as the **linear thought tabule**. Inside the soft cave of the cleft, the beetles dance madly, using their exponential rain colored legs. The dancing produces no discomfort at first because spectators have no feelings (NERVE BLOSSOMS) up there, but if they did, they would require suppression with further incantations of **ether** and **handkerchiefs** (RELIEF). The humorist can do that.



*Fig. 18.0 A view of the spectator's formidable braincase.*

The standard braincase, through a sad fault of evolution, cannot tabulate the beetle dancing, and thus malfunctions, sending messages (EMERGENCY, EMERGENCY) via chemical mail to the central area of the formidable torso. The activated water-moving machine (BODY) responds by sending further chemical emergencies to other areas of itself, including the **arm spatula** (HAND) and the musical **twine** surrounding the throat.

Resulting **seizures** in the formidable torso exit gasping through the primary orifice. Spectators sense terror (EMERGENCY, EMERGENCY) in the tabulation malfunction, but they gladly eliminate this undesirable sensation through communal agreement. The humorist, looking out at the infinite rows of spectators, sees beautiful faces all full of uniform radiance (DELIGHT).

ALREADY

The drunks should just die already. They've staggered off the end of the porch, and now they are sleeping face down in the grass. Beyond the fence, dump trucks and Hondas stir up big wind. The weeds look like flowers out there in the ditch. The bastard blooms nod their heads.

In the house my mother combs her hair. It comes out in handfuls because she is dead already. Likewise the dishes are not done. There is a watermelon rind in the sink, and I stand watching a long line of ants erode it. They lift apart that pink flesh and carry it off with their pincers.

A little at a time, then gone.

PET

She went by the pet shop almost daily. Behind wood-beaded curtains and fly-spotted glass, she spied rows of eyes that peered like bright nocturnal cataracts. She saw ringed tails and nimble toes clutching slats of cages. She finally went into the store to look. This sort of thing was illegal where she came from.

She had moved to this country already a year ago, but still she did not feel familiar. It seemed to her that people purposefully avoided talking to her except when she bought things. So she bought: Hanged bird carcasses with dark spicy meat, limp vegetables, delicate wicker baskets, strands of tiny beads. She paid too much for these things, she knew.

When she entered the shop, a cowbell sounded from a leather strap on the door, and all of the creatures went quiet. She could feel their eyes, though, as they watched from the dim

cubbyholes and crude cages that crowded together, emanating humid smells. It was so quiet, then, that she could detect the rustling of tarantula legs and the dry sound of scales. She held her arms close to her body and did not touch anything.

It was in the biggest cage, the one with yellow newspapers on the bottom and an old flannel shirt thrown over it. What is that? She asked the shopkeeper in his language. The sound of the bell had brought him from the back of the shop.

What is it? She asked. It was cute, a curled croissant of ivory fur. It had short prehistoric legs and clawed feet with small pink toes. Its head was a small, furry wedge with one papery ear showing. Its ear was light pink and traced with rosy capillaries. Its visible eye was a slit, slightly open to reveal a glint of pupil. She had never seen anything like it. She wanted it. Cute, she said, Can I hold it?

The shopkeeper was short, with a greasy nose and a broom-like mustache. He undid the thick bicycle chain that held the door of the cage shut and reached in with a long bamboo cane. He nudged the animal and hooked the handle around its body. She heard it hiss as it was lifted and drawn precariously out of the cage. The man was missing fingers, she saw, and she tried not to look at the stumps. He deposited the warm animal into her arms where it settled like an infant. She saw how it would curl on her lap while she worked and miss her when she went out.

Is it sick? She asked, for its body sagged in her arms.

No, just a little mature, see? He put the cane aside and lifted it from her arms. This is good quality, see? He invited her to stroke its lustrous fur. Sad, sad. Her brothers and sisters were sold long ago.

How awful! Why would nobody take his one? What is her name?

Whatever you want, Miss.

She paid too much for it, as was their habit of overcharging her for things, but she knew she could afford it and pretended not to notice. She carried it through the dusty streets back to her apartment, which looked out over a square shaded with large fanlike trees that dropped stinking nuts on the ground. The man had given her a mason jar full of fat albino crickets that he said it would like to eat and promised a cage for it, to be delivered by his son.

She was nearly inside the apartment when it woke up. As she shut the door the flimsy carton tipped out of her hands and it squirted out the top. She lunged to grab it and the jar smashed on the floor. She saw that it was not as cute as she had thought. It hissed at her and hopped around the broken glass and scrabbling insects, showing her a row of its terrible teeth. She gasped and backed away, but it was awake now and angry. It nipped at her ankles through her stockings and she tried to kick at it but it was so fast! She cried



and slapped it away with her purse, then ran into her bedroom and slammed the door.

There she sat on the bed to think.

She thought she would catch it and take it back to the man. She would demand her money, or not. Maybe she would trap it somehow beneath the wicker basket she used for her laundry. She decided that she would leave the apartment and ask the man to come remove it.

The apartment was one room cut into two with a wall that did not reach the ceiling. The front room was a small, bare kitchenette with a table sitting in the middle. After that was the bedroom. The bedroom had the only window, but the front room had the only door.

That was a problem.

She saw it in the space beneath the door. Somehow it was squeezing its head through the crack, sliding its long body on the floor, passing black eyed and sinuous through that inch. Impossible! She thought. Horrified, she threw her shoes at it. One hit the wall. One clumped against its head. It squealed and shot back, but then it was there again, dragging itself through with its back on the ground and its short legs straining against the bottom of the door. Maybe she would have to climb out the window and shimmy down one of those fan leaved trees in the courtyard. Maybe she would have to call someone or scream.

It did not seem at all cute when it pulled its hind legs from the crack and shook itself off. In fact, she realized that it was disgusting. Its head was a venomous wedge. She saw that it would sooner eat her up and claw her eyes than curl in her lap while she worked. It focused on her again lunged. She dove off the bed and heaved her typewriter from her desk. She lifted the heavy machine over her head with shaking arms and waited for it to strike again. It squirted from beneath the bed and rounded her legs. She screamed and brought her arms down. The typewriter dented the floor and capsized, spewing lettered keys. But it was so fast! It darted toward her again and leapt, and she thought it was after her face, that she would have to kill it with her hands. But it flew past her, diving out of the window into the fan-leafed tree. Briefly the branch bowed beneath its weight before it disappeared.

She saw that it had only been trying to escape her.

When the son arrived, it was late afternoon. The sun slanted in through the open window. There were broken things everywhere: the machine she had brought to this country with her, the glass jar. All of the crickets were smashed on the floor.

He charged her for the empty cage--too much but she was able to pay, and she knew it was their habit to overcharge her.

## XVI. THE ROMANCER

Like the **tragician** and the **poetess**, his particular incantations take corporeal forms (LOVE). These forms being the dual techniques of **towers** and **weapons**. First generation romancers relied on the chivalry of the slingshot, the bow & arrow, or the blunt fist. Due to recent advancements in technology, the primary weapon has now achieved the refinement of the **laser gun** (13.0).



*Fig 13.0 The laser guns, when aimed at individual spectators, have a remarkable coaxing effect. Spectators usually retreat to their towers within 5 minutes of initial laser contact.*

To accomplish the tower, the romancer may choose to incant by using sounds that mimic the rhythm of the water-moving machine (MUSIC) and by lowering the levels of light. Mesmerized by the seduction of his or her formidable body, a spectator slips into a trance and notices a looming black tower at the edge of his or her **blank area**. Knowing that he or she is being beguiled to ascend the steep tower, from which there is only mortal escape, he or she resists the incantations of the romancer, sending **chemical emergencies** to all areas of the body (NO PLEASE NO).

Laser guns facilitate the spectator's tower ascent. Once locked inside the black battlement, he or she has no recourse but to fling the self out of the topmost window (13.1). Once the self has been eliminated (FALLING HOWLING TO THE GROUND),

the spectator feels a rush of **endorphin** and a new willingness to submit (CONTENTMENT).



*Fig 13.1 After this step, individuals experience great happiness.*

## FIRST LOVE

She loved him, that's the worst part. She loved him on the high school day when he got on his knees before her and everyone, and stuck a wad of graveyard daisies in her hand. She loved him later on, too, when he broke into her locker and stole her umbrella, and then made her chase him into the boys bathroom to get it. She loved him when he called her seventeen times in a night so that her stepdad pushed her down the stairs and threw the phone across the room.

In the packed rusting hallways at school, she was the backpacked beast in K-Mart clothes. She felt disconnected from her body, as though she resided in the hollow space of her skull, right behind her eyes and looking out. She hid there and peered out of her own face with the detachment of a robed woman having a drink on a high covered balcony. Her body ambled beneath her—bad pants, big butt, shimmering like a mirage about to wipe itself away. This is how he found her.

The day he passed her the daisies, she stupidly climbed back down into her body so that he could beat her and laugh in front of his friends. She comforted herself knowing that if she ruined the joke by not taking the daisies, he would have beaten her and laughed anyway. So she might as well keep whatever was given, any physical proof that someone, a rich boy, could like her. The daisies were made out of synthetic cloth, and they had graveyard dirt on them. She chose to believe. In her locked room in the back of the house, she didn't sleep. In the dark, she saw his name etched again and again in front of her eyes, the letters slashed with a burning sword, the horrible intensity of it.

When they were alone, when he stole her book and lured her into the graveyard, when she met him as indicated on the frayed notepaper dropped off on her desk, after the last bell, at the Wharton tomb—he tried to kiss her. He was tall and pleasingly disheveled. His skin was strangely dark for a white person, a kind of dusky yellow color. His face was far worse than hers. His hands were gigantic and hot. He said, I think I like you. He twisted her breast. She grabbed back, at first, but when he put his hand on her shoulder and forced her down, when he grabbed her hair and yanked it, when he said to the crown of her head, *You can suck my dick now*—she got scared and ran. She thought: *Is this how it is supposed to go?* She leaped over the headstones.

The next day, and the next were worse. He called all night breathing, then told his laughing friend that she did it for a dollar. The joke among everyone was that five more times and she could afford another pair of K-Mart pants.

She was walking home sometime later when he caught her. She could hear his footfalls beating the pavement. She was frightened, but she was stupid with hope. *Does he want me?* she wondered. She had been walking home on the highway, imagining him holding her. The cars blew dirty wind at her, and at him. He said, *You're beautiful.* She hadn't considered that before. Hope brightened inside of her head and made her ears burn. She followed him to the graveyard.

After he came on her face, he wouldn't hold her hand. She was hugging his skinny chest, but he wriggled away and pushed her into the ground. He placed his foot upon her neck and pressed. She could smell the strange mildew of his sneaker as she sucked in air, and she could feel small rocks cutting the back of her head. Through bulging, blood-heavy eyes, she could see his face looming far above her. Give me a reason not to kill you, slut, he said. She writhed and grabbed at his shoestrings. Fuck this, he said, and he stepped over her body to leave.

When her stepdad found her in the graveyard, he didn't get mad as she thought he would. Get in the car, he said, and he pulled up beside her. It was getting late and the shadows of headstones and crosses stood stark against the sunset. She got in. Her knees were dirty and her hair was matted with blood. If her stepdad noticed the red footprint on her neck, he never said.

Much later, when he did the same thing to another girl, he was sent to military school. She saw him kneeling down in the hallway, packing up his locker while his dad stood



there over him. His dad was tall, with a burr cut and a square back. *Hurry up you piece of shit*, he said, nudging his son in the ass with his boot. *Time to go somewhere where they'll teach you to be a man.*

## BONE DOG

Once there was an old man called Richard. He lived on a street in a tin-topped small town, in a tin-topped house with two rooms. His wife was called Meredith and she liked to joke with Richard that he was losing it.

For one thing he got up three times a night as if to go pee, but then he couldn't remember what he was doing. Then Meredith would get up and give him some buttermilk. You're losing it! she said, leading him back to bed.

For another thing, Richard felt that there was a clock in his ribs and that its tick was getting fainter each minute. Sometimes it ached, like it was hurting to be wound back.

The most important thing, though, was that Richard got a dog. He was no ordinary dog. For one thing, he was much bigger than a dog ought to be. And there was a problem with the dog. He had no skin. Just bleach-bare bones and long ivory teeth.

Meredith could not see the dog. The dog followed Richard everywhere he went, clicking his skeleton paws on the two rooms' floor. His black breath filled the tin-topped house, but Meredith never noticed him at all. She stepped over him in the morning when she got out of bed. Sometimes the dog came right up next to her and passed its bleach-bone head right by her elbow, and still she did not see him.

Richard felt the clock stop when the dog first walked through the door. But now they got along fine. Richard called the dog Bone Dog. He said, Man, you're alright, and fed him pieces of toast for a treat. He sat by Richard's big brown chair while Richard watched the television. He liked to chase rabbits, but he never went far.

You're losing your mind, old man! Meredith laughed when her husband whistled and slapped his thigh to beckon a pet she did not see.

Bone Dog wagged his long vertebrae tail and followed Richard everywhere. Richard bought him a nice leather leash. After that he went on walks up and down the block with Bone Dog galloping beside him. Meredith watched him from the window. He pulled the limp leash behind him.

One night while Meredith was washing dishes, Bone Dog came through the kitchen after Richard. She heard claws click the linoleum behind her.

Another time, Meredith imagined that she saw something large dragging her husband down the street by the leash.

She shook the images out of her head.

Richard died one afternoon while checking the mail. His clock ticked twice and was done. Bone Dog pulled him though with his sharp teeth. The silent ambulance came and they pulled the zipper over Richard's face. Meredith cried hard and went to her sister's house to stay.

She returned a few days later to pack some things. Bone Dog was in the house waiting.

This time she could see him just fine.

## IX. THE PHOBIST

The phobist (informally known as THE PUPPETEER) possesses the sole incantation of **string**.

The phobist need not bother with courting the audience; spectators already possess a series of **bone grommets** (VULNERABILITIES), which are located at key structural points throughout the water-moving machine. First, the phobist must approach an individual spectator and apply the **looping technique** through the **primary grommet**--typically found at the junction of the **bone ladder** (SPINE) and the braincase.

This initial knot gives the phobist complete control over the spectator's **voluntary movement** capabilities. After establishing control, the phobist may freely apply the looping technique throughout the remaining bone grommets. Once the looping technique has been established, the phobist may accomplish phobia by **yanking** on the string. The

water-moving machine, through a comic lapse of biology, can be completely overtaken by this single gesture (5.0).



*Fig 5.0 The entire spectator, from his leg spatula (FOOT) to his uppermost follicles, cannot resist the phobist's yank.*

The spectator's **linear thought tabule** continues to send useless messages to the water-mover (STAND UP MAN), but the spectator must obey the commands of the phobist. Resulting appearances include **the dancing marionette**.

## PRINCIPAL

The first one you could say I rescued. What with the fact that her dad pushed her down the stairs and beat her over the head with her own shoe. You could figure I was doing her a favor, just getting her out of that situation, mediating it if you will by causing her absence from it.

I picked her because one of her teachers was in the coffee lounge saying, That kid flinches every time I call on her. She smells like pee. So I leaned forward and listened while stirring lightener into my coffee. I hadn't been able to collect any for months, and my contract was running out.

Later I walked by the classroom and poked my face in the door. It was Spanish.

Advanced Spanish. They were all just yammering away in Spanish, all of those little heads on those narrow shoulders, all of them smelling of fabric softener and dryer sheets—I didn't see her right away because she was even littler than the others, but then

there she was, unmistakable, skinny in an ugly sweater with her thumbs sticking through the cuffs, her hair pulled like curtains over her face. I knew she would do just fine. My name is Miss Piper. I am the Principal.

After she was admitted to the office, I took her downstairs to the Parlor. I needed three more to fill a complete shipment, but it was getting more and more challenging to meet the terms of the contract. The kids are such wimps and the parents are always like Where is my baby?

The Parlor exudes a tang of rat and aged sweat, but I keep the clay floor swept smooth and the hutches full of fresh newspaper. The Parlor sits conveniently below my office, behind the back wall of the coat closet, down the steep secret staircase. It is just your typical storage area, although stalactites droop from the ceiling and it is lit only by a lantern, which I have to keep upstairs so the girls don't waste the batteries.

When I indicated that she should get inside a hutch, she crawled in obediently and hugged her thin knees. She did not cry or look surprised when I clinked the lid shut. Keep your lip zipped, I warned, and went upstairs to my office.

My office is lit by a window that looks upon the soccer field, and the walls are butter yellow. A row of thick reference books and a pair of glossy potted plants send subliminal messages of academic integrity. A collection of photographs arrayed on the desk exudes



a personal/welcoming vibe. I cut the pictures of children and families out of magazines and framed them for this purpose.

I had just closed the closet door behind me when the secretary—a suspicious old biddy who owned a different colored polyester blazer for each day of the week—entered with a fax. From the Board, she said, glancing at the lantern in my hand.

I began to worry after two days elapsed and there were no leads. The contract dictates that I bring three complete shipments in every fiscal year. April was edging in, a terrible month of halter tops, short shorts, and tax forms—and I had been too preoccupied to come up with the final shipment. Most of the distraction was coming from the Board, which was demanding improved standardized test results and the State, which was cutting the education budget. Added to the complications were the teachers, who continuously wanted to get paid.

The first girl waited in the Parlor hugging her knees, and she was cooperative in most regards. But she was also an anorexic, and refused to eat the granola I sprinkled through the slats of her hutch. I hate my thighs, she said. I feared she would not last much longer, and then I would have to start over again. Luckily, another opportunity arose before the week was through.

The second one was the fifth of nine children and was suffering from abandonment issues after being forgotten at a rest stop during a family vacation to Mount Rushmore. She

stayed there asking strangers for money and eating candy bars out of the vending machine for nine days until a bus driver called Highway Patrol. During this time, she washed her underpants in the restroom sink and slept under a potted plant in the lobby. All this I heard from the guidance counselor. She was in the Art Room trying to flirt with the ceramics teacher. The ceramics teacher nodded, but his attention was on a well-developed sophomore.

Being the fifth of nine children, on the heavy side, and with a giant bear trap of braces in her mouth, I did not think this one would be so aggressive, but there you go, Never Assume Anything! This was the theme of my commencement speech, in which I congratulated the rows and rows of uniformly imbecilic graduates and gave them one last chance at knowledge before their futures began.

The girl gave me a nasty bite. I told her Take it easy, you are going to where you will meet all of your friends. Once I got her downstairs and contained, I thought she would relax. However, she would not stop kicking at the lid of her hutch. I attributed this tenacity to her time at the rest stop.

The Parlor abuts a corridor that connects to the channels beneath the city. You can get pretty much anywhere from there, by climbing into the sewer main and following those hallways to and fro. In certain places, you can hear cars overhead, but underneath the high school, there is only the sound of water dripping on granite and the occasional whoosh of the furnace.

I keep a copy of my Contract locked in the hidden drawer of my desk. It is typed out on official high-grade paper, and a seal graces the bottom—a coin-like indentation with a man's arrogant profile on it. This is the man who pays me. This is also the man who will stop all of my accounts and send someone to collect me if I do not produce three viable shipments every academic year. Principals who do not cooperate or fulfill their quotas get collected, meaning they vanish.

I folded the contract up and put it back in the drawer. I buzzed the secretary and told her I would be helping with Lunch Patrol today. That is how I found the third one.

The third one was clean and an Honors student. She had soft cheeks, small earrings, and she was fourth-chair clarinet. I knew nobody would miss her. My family will miss me, she said when I mentioned this. My family isn't afraid to come after you, she said, twisting her fingers through the slats of the hutch. They think you're an incompetent anyway. The anorexic, crouching in a pile of untouched granola, began to giggle. If it weren't for the secretary's voice calling Hello? beyond the secret stairs, I would have caned the crap out of them.

Instead, I flipped the lantern off and whispered, You cretins have it coming.

The secretary, suspicious and wearing maroon, had her eye up to the crack of the closet door when I shoved it open. She shrieked and a sheet of paper floated from her hand.

What? I said to her horrified face. WHAT? She tripped out of my office and shut the door.

The paper on the floor was a memo from a Board member. The subject line read: Regarding yesterday's impromptu meeting. I thought, What meeting?

I was getting frantic at this point, with this shipment being very close to its deadline and with the rest of the student body also skipping class, smoking in the bathrooms, and spraying graffiti on my car (Piper has a Pecker). Half of the little cretins were in In School Suspension, and I had to hire another Security Specialist for damage control after they poisoned the other Security Specialist with chocolate laxatives.

Not to mention that certain influential Board members were openly staging a coup against me, and I was having to stay late at work hacking into the district's mainframe to alter the test scores.

Down in the Parlor, the anorexic curled torpidly in her hutch, pulling out hanks of hair. The clarinet girl rocked back and forth saying Please Miz Piper please let me out. To top it all, the brace face got her period. What did you do to me, she asked, holding up fingers streaked with blood. I was disgusted, but I said, Look, it's just your first menstruation. Remember Health class? She continued to make keening sounds. I thought she was being a wimp, maybe trying to con some more granola, but her horror seemed real. I

lifted the lid of her hutch and patted her head. It's natural, honey. You're a young woman now!

I had to take her out behind the Auto Shop annex to clean her up. I couldn't take her to the gymnasium because the Prom Squad was busy hanging piñatas. She stripped down to her rubbery white skin and cowered while I hosed her off.

A trench-coated duo sallied past the annex, smoking a joint. They gaped at the shivering naked girl until I turned the hose on them. Get to class and study for god's sake! I screamed. Students like those drastically reduce the mean test score.

On Friday morning, on the last possible day to fulfill the shipment, I drove to work and noticed Missing Have You Seen Me posters attached to nearly every light post, phone booth, and bus stop. The clarinet girl's yearbook picture smirked at me as I stopped at a crosswalk.

I was feeling desperate, and when I saw a little kid with a lunch box and a giant pink backpack, I put the car in park and stuffed her headfirst into the trunk.

It was second hour before the secretary took her break so I could come out and get her. Jared from Varsity was out having a smoke, and he saw me pull her out, but I said This is my niece. She has epilepsy.

After shutting the lid of the final hutch, I was so relieved that I brought the girls some of the secretary's Jolly Rogers and pushed them through the slats for a treat. The anorexic asked if it was sugarfree. Of course, I said.

In my office, I could hear them crying and rattling their locks. The eight year old was squalling right through her gag. I sat at my desk, trying to enjoy my Lunchable in spite of the racket. The secretary, suspicious and wearing pistachio, entered with another fax, another Missing Have you Seen Me? with the clarinet girl's yearbook picture on it. I choked on a round of ham. Her parents and the Police have determined that she was last seen here on school grounds, said the secretary, eyeing the pile of Jolly Roger wrappers on my desk. I wondered if she would fit in one of the hutches.

The procedure is to remove all identifying clothes and jewelry. I let them keep their shoes because we have to walk so far beneath the city. Some batches require harnesses, but this one was docile due to their longer than usual amount of time in the Parlor. Mostly they just walked in a line weeping quietly. A few times I had to poke them with the cane.

After walking for a couple of miles down the sewer main, we hung a right into a narrower passageway, and this is when the lantern has to come on. The walls are covered in something you don't want to touch, and there is the occasional washed-in roadkill bloating in the pathway. At the end of this passage, there are steel ladder rungs fused to a

wall. We climbed down it single file until we arrive at a wide concrete corridor. It is blank but for a metal door that has a dim porch light bolted above it.

When we arrived at the corridor, I tapped on the metal door, and the Doorkeeper came out. As always, he wore a hood of black cloth with eye holes ripped in it. As always, he did not speak. He peeked into the girls' mouths and felt their armpits. Then he noted their skin and eye color on a greasy notepad. He stopped at the youngest one and lifted up her hair. If they have long braids or ponytails, he cuts them off and throws them into a cardboard box by the door.

As always, my money came in a manila envelope with a receipt. As I ascended the metal ladder, I looked down to see the Doorkeeper's arm closing around brace face's round shoulders. I walked back through the humid darkness with the envelope zipped in my blazer. I should have been relieved, but, as I sometimes do, I felt a little bad, you know, kind of wormy on the inside, thinking of back when I was a little girl. Would I have wanted to go meet all of my friends like that? Some people might think that the darkness behind the metal door and the hooded Doorkeeper with the sidearm do not mean better things ahead, but it is unwise to assume anything.

## THREAD THE NEEDLE

How many miles outside the eye of a needle? A dime is an acre with respect to the eye of a needle. The president's nose is a deep cave. A fleet of miners swarm inside picking for metals. Miles radiate from the eye and pour from the nose. Miles, curlicued like space, streaked with spillways of stars.

See this thread. It could drag a barge down the Mississippi river. A barge stacked with clawed earth-moving machines. Workers move between them without rhythm, like mites. Look closer. The one named Duane smokes a cigarette while leaning against a tire. How many miles outside of Duane? His wife would know.

My fingers receive messages piped in through crisscrossed blue telegraph wires. Clumsy Morse code from brain to hand. Hold the thread steady, the message reads, but the dumb goliaths tremble instead.



How many miles between me and that storm? How many objects exceeding five feet five inches stand in their yards by an overturned plastic pool in the rain? The clumsy gray sky rumbles STRIKE HER DOWN but the lightning frays the neighbor's tree instead.

It is an act of god only when the thread goes in.

## XCXI. THE SEDUCER

A recent addition to the cast of body incantors, seducers can be traced back to the advent of the **refined sugar beet**. His incantations take forms (LONGING). Forms include **golden syrup** and **hognose snake**. Unlike non-body incantors, he does not need to breach the braincase. Instead, he administers the sweet golden syrup to a spectator through her mouth and nose until she becomes supine, with each area of her **formidable brain** seeping powerful sedative elixirs (INSULIN). She registers **total harmony**, and sends messages (REJOICINGS) via chemical mail throughout all areas of the water-moving machine.

In this supine state, her water-motion decelerates, and she intermittently pulls ungainly breaths through her syrup-filled **primary orifice**. When the spectator becomes sufficiently complacent, the seducer drenches the hognose snake in yet more golden syrup, smoothing its scales in viscous sweetness. The **viscosity** aids the passage of the snake into the spectator's **body**.



*Fig 28.1 The hognose enters the spectator via the nasal channel or the primary orifice. After it finds a suitable habitat inside the formidable torso, it may instigate the **lifelong biting technique**.*

When the seducer moves elsewhere, withdrawing his supply of golden syrup, the spectator awakens. She may note a gouging **discomfort** in all areas of her water-moving machine (WITHDRAWAL). Her brainleft, unable to tabulate the truth of the missing sweetness, malfunctions, sending chemical messages (MORE, MORE) in all directions. The hognose snake, now residing in the **wet basket** of her formidable torso, struggles against its entrapment. Resulting effects of its unknown presence include **restless shopping** (PERMANENT HUNGER).

## YALE

I went on a trip with my friends. They were nice to me, they had trust funds, and we were going to Yale. One of them had been accepted there. I could not afford to go to school there. I could not only not afford it, but I didn't even care about Yale. What I mean is that I am probably not smart enough to get in, but if I did I surely couldn't afford it. I could not afford the trip either, so I sat in the back with the luggage. I had my mother's old suitcase with me. It was tan pleather with a sticky zipper. It bulged with my possessions.

After twenty hours of driving, we arrived in the town of Yale. On the outskirts of the city, I saw hundreds of homeless black children crouched beneath shopping carts. I saw old men dressed in torn blankets digging bagels from a trashcan. I watched these people recede through the back window. Near the campus of Yale, the homeless disappeared and I marveled at the old stone buildings that towered over the sidewalk. I saw granite

lions and tall brass fountains. Even the trees stood regally, each one surrounded by a pointed iron fence. I hugged my mother's suitcase to remember where I came from.

My friends had lunch reservations at a fine hotel. I said I would wait outside while they ate, and they said no of course not, we'll pay! So I unfolded myself from the back of the vehicle and followed them inside. The lobby was a spacious, high room made of peach colored marble and buttressed by mirrors. It went on for miles. The waiters were thin and androgynous. They spoke with serene voices and wore perfect black trousers.

When we sat down at our table, one of the waiters held out his gloved hand expectantly for several seconds. Your suitcase, ma'am, he said. I gave it to him. It looked beaten and pathetic in the context of the hotel. His hand remained outstretched in front of me until I said Oh and dug in my pocket to find a wrinkled dollar. He continued to hold out his hand until one of my friends placed a higher bill in his palm.

The food was the best I have ever eaten. I ordered the cheapest thing on the menu: A plank of trout with slender yellow carrots draped across it. My friends laughed when I insisted on taking a picture of the plate. We ordered wine and toasted the one who had been accepted to Yale.

After lunch, we got in the car to go look around Yale some more. That's when I knew I had left my suitcase. I begged my friends to return to the hotel, and they finally turned

the car around and got back to the stone lions at the entrance. They idled on the curb while I ran inside to ask someone where my suitcase had gone.

The man at the front desk had long blonde hair and a handsome frown. I asked him if he had seen the case. I explained that it had belonged to my mother, who is dead. He said, I know the one. He pulled it from beneath the counter. I reached for it, but he snatched it away. He said, You see, I can't just give you this case. You left it here. Therefore it is mine.

I asked if he was kidding. He wasn't. I asked if he would like me to call the police. He said I should try it. I asked what he wanted. We bartered for a while, and I saw that I was offering a very high price for the return of my case. For instance, I was going to have to give up my first memory, in which I stood in the yard and ate a leaf, as well as all of the songs I have stuck in my head. I said, Wait a minute. This is my suitcase, so where do you get off charging me so high a price for it? He said, Take it or don't take it, whatever. Your first memory sucks anyway.

I took the case and walked outside. My friends were gone. I was already forgetting the taste of leaves.

## VISITING

When I finally visit, Mother wears her mask while she knits doll clothes for the neighbor's daughter. I say, Take off that mask please, for it is terrible in many ways, the first of which being that it frowns and looks mournfully up to the sky. Mother keeps knitting the tiny armholes. The thorns pinch into her temples. I ask her to take it off, please. She asks for a sandwich.

While I'm in the kitchen, she just sits on the couch like that, with her temples bleeding and her knitting folded over her on chest. I make her a sandwich just like she likes it with very very little butter and only the bitterest rye. The mask watches me from the other room. It's a thin man's face made of rain colored wood. Someone painted its cheeks pink. The eyes drip blue and black beneath the wet detail of the eyebrows. She keeps it on with the thorns that clasp in back.

I bring the slices of dry rye on a plate. The thin man's face is like *digging* into her cheeks, and to look at it is to feel very guilty for leaving.

She says, I used to make you clothes like this, holding up the knitting. I used to, but then you got too big, and then you up and went away. She wipes the blood from her temple.

At night she watches television in the only chair. The mask's eyes mourn skyward, but she faces the bright screen anyway with her hands pressed together. She has put on her best pumps, and to look at them is to feel like a guest. When she falls asleep, I approach her and take off the mask, which weighs more than I had imagined. It's so heavy that I drop to the floor, and I can't figure how she did not suffocate under it. On the floor with the mask, I realize that I cannot just put it away in a drawer somewhere.

I put it on my face and link the thorns in back. It fits like a pair of shoes I have worn all my life.

In the bathroom I look at myself. Down the hall, mother's feet kick off the Sunday pumps and dance. She puts on Elvis. The stereo grinds dust. Mother hasn't played it in years. The thin man's face cuts into mine, and to look at myself in the dingy bathroom mirror against the backdrop of unicorn wallpaper is to feel like everyone I have ever loved has betrayed me.



Mother's feet carry her down the hall and her face pokes in the door. Her face is her face, with nothing cutting into it. She is so happy! Her eyes look forward now but mine don't want to see it. She asks, What's wrong? Can't you get to this music? I can't stop crying at the sky.

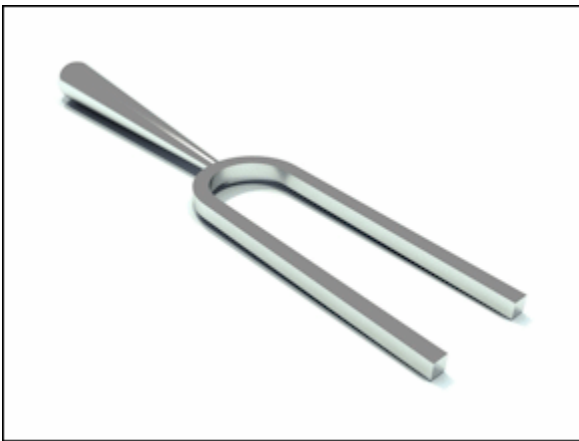
On the second day of visiting, I meet an old friend for lunch. I can only stomach the driest rye. She's like What crawled up your butt and died? I say, Well everyone I love has betrayed me, don't you feel sorry? She says, Sure I feel sorry for you. Have a touch of lipstick. It is Moroccan Moonlight. She leans over and paints a smile on the mask. It looks less like moonlight and more like orange.

My old boyfriend lives in a swamp his father made by crying into a mud pit. His father was like, Son, I am sinking, and so my boyfriend extended a long reed out to his father's hand. His father grabbed it. It would have been fine except the reed snapped and my boyfriend fell in, too. Now he's waist deep in black water. All I can see of his father is his gray haired dome and his heavy lidded eyes. They roll around to look my way. He mutters something that sounds like bubbles.

When the visit ends, I'm reluctant to leave for many reasons, the first of which being that what will happen to my baby?

## XCI. THE TRAGICIAN

Like the **religioso**, the tragician uses a tripartite incantation. Her incantations take forms (IMAGINARY GRIEF). These forms being **tuning fork**, **wool mitten**, and **pollen**. Unlike the invasive **jigsaw** method of the humorist, the tragician cajoles each spectator's braincase open with the icy charm of the tuning fork (690.0).



*Fig 690.0 The tragician's fundamental tuning fork method mimics the original calling, relics of which exist in the inner language box (cave). Perpendicular spectators (thumb bearing mammals) are susceptible to its charms.*

Upon hearing its heartbreaking pitch, each spectator notes the profound movement of **hair follicles** on the surface of his or her braincase. Feelings of agreeable coolness waft up and down the formidable torso. When the tragician feels that enough suspense has been achieved in the audience, she muffles the tuning fork inside the soundproof mitten embodiment. Keening for more, the audience leans forward, willingly moving their scalps aside so that their braincases unhinge and fall open like lids.

Once this **acceptance** has been achieved, the tragician may apply the next form. By liberally salting pollen into the brainleft, the tragician insures that the dormant **nerve spores** will germinate, creating **nerve blossoms** (FEELINGS) in its dark warmth (690.1). These blossoms grow ponderous and thick in this environment, often disrupting the **linear** properties of the **linear thought tabule**.



*Fig 690.1 Pollinated nerve spores blossom in the lush environment of the inner braincase.*

## THIEF

*She*

She swung out onto the fire escape and tapped down the rusty metal stairs that zigzagged down the side of the tenement. When she reached the final stair, she took a breath and leaped to the ground. Her coat billowed behind her.

She hit the ground hard.

Fifteen stories above the alley, her bedroom curtains wafted through the open window, reaching.

At night she traveled through the city while her mother slept, living the best hours of her life in the dark maze of her neighborhood among the fires and dumpsters and fences.

She felt most herself then, when she was slipping through darkness, filling her pillowcase with stolen trinkets. The girl was a thief.

### *The City*

The girl was a thief, and the city opened like a book beneath her feet. The city watched the girl, opened itself to her, unfurled its masterpieces for her to observe.

The city listened to her joyful romps and answered her with the language of car alarms, traffic, and sometimes homeless people playing mouth harps. Beneath it all, a heavy heartbeat, a surge of underground trains. On this night, the city cried sirens.

### *Fate*

On this night, she heard the thin sound of a siren as she emerged from the opening of the alleyway. People gathered in a knot outside of a nearby bar. She watched cautiously from the shadows beneath her tenement. Soon, people clotted the streets. Curious, she slipped from the shadows and scurried past the bystanders, ducking under their elbows.

At the nucleus of the crowd was woman. Her body was draped over the curb and her limbs splayed on the pavement. Nobody touched her. Nobody helped. The short denim band she wore for a skirt rode up her legs to expose runs in her nylons, stringy underpants. Her spindly high heels twisted on her feet. Purple lipstick inked her teeth.

The girl stared with detached fascination at the red line across the woman's white throat. Black gloved hands reached for the body.

Blood ran from her thin cut, down a rivulet in the sidewalk, into the gutter.

*She*

Later her mother on the side of the bed: Sugar, are you awake?

I was so frightened it was you.

On cue, an ambulance screamed outside the tenement. Her mother wore a cotton nightshirt and a worn sweater that smelled of apples.

She pretended to sleep and rolled away from her mother's touch.

*The City*

The city sometimes spoke to its people through television. Every apartment contained one. Walls removed, there would be stacks of screens, like a hive. Nobody walked streets, all watched wherever they were, all eyes on the lit box with the man blaring inside.

The City said: Remain calm.

The City said: Do not be alarmed.

The Mayor appeared on the screen to give commentary. He had a soft belly and a gleaming pate. He said: The gangs are terrorists, destroying for the sake of destruction.

The City said: Gangs are responsible.

The City said: Remain inside your domicile, and do not leave it alone.

*She*

She, watching, recalls no gang, only red washing into the gutter.

Though her mother forbade her to leave the tenement alone, she resumed her usual activities after only a few days. The dreary specter of junior high, of nights alone in front of the television while her mother was away at work—daytime life made her restless.

At night, The City played a traffic dirge while she sat awake in her bed, waiting for her mother to fall asleep in the room across the hall. When she estimated that her mother was unconscious, she dressed in jeans, pulled on her coat, and stuffed a pillowcase in her pocket.

Her chest was a washboard of ribs. Her hair was an oily smear of blonde. She had no physical features that captivated anyone. She moved deftly through crowds, her coat sweeping behind her. She sidled up to adults and slipped her fingers into their pockets, extracting anything she could find. Sometimes she looked straight into their eyes while she did it. The thought to mistrust her always arrived in their minds a moment too late.

Soon her pillowcase bulged with cell phones that rang and change that chimed, and strange bits of pocket lint that mingled in the cloth corners. She stopped in an alley and tied it through her belt loop. It bounced against her knees as she walked.

She stopped in front of the pawn shop and pressed her nose through to the grate. She saw light coming from the back office, so she went to the door and tapped on it. A moment later, the owner lifted up the grate halfway so she could duck under it and through the door he held open with his body.

### *Her Only Friend*

Haven't seen you for a while.

A cigarette smoldered in his hand and he scratched the short part of his hair while she unloaded her wares onto the counter. Only the buzzing strip from the back office cast a light, but he could see that she had collected quite a bit, though little of it would be of use. The phones were worthless. He said don't bring them but she brought them anyway. He was her only friend, and he also liked the night.

She did not know if he slept. He was a lean man of maybe thirty five, with a graying brown mullet and a messy tattoo.

She said: Did you hear about the dead woman? I saw her when it happened.



You saw that? Well, I suppose it was right near your place. He picked up a condom by the edge of its wrapper and chuckled.

She: It was no gang.

Of course it wasn't. But girls get killed every day, why should we even care.

But she knew he cared.

*She*

He cared, but probably only out of worry for her, who was his only living friend.

She had met him by stealing from him. When he had noticed the silver flash of a harmonica slipping fishlike from her hand down the mouth of her sleeve, he gaped in disbelief. He had watched quietly as her hands vacuumed up coral rings, pens, a clarinet, a cup of pennies. The first words he said to her were: I will end your life if you take from me again.

Now they ate chips, leaning on the same counter, and he made her hot chocolate on his hotplate, and he asked her to be careful walking home.

*Fate*

Blocks away from the pawn shop, a woman in high heeled shoes trundled past the graveyard. She was nineteen maybe, and she wore a champagne colored dress. She stopped suddenly and looked behind her. Someone followed her, she knew it. She hiked up her flouncing gown and walked faster.

Footsteps quickened behind her, and she was now running clumsily down the street, twisting her ankle on the curb, screaming for a taxi.

*She*

On her way home, she stumbled over something on the sidewalk: A lonesome high heel.

She picked it up. It was covered in flaky glitter. She shoved it into the pillowcase and darted breathlessly away. Blood tinted the air. For the first time, the streets seemed as dangerous to her as they did to everyone else.

*The City*

Garbage men found the body in an alley, with rats nibbling at the fingers.

The City said: Please do not be alarmed.

The City said: Police are investigating this rise in gang violence.

The Mayor, pate gleaming, chin to chest, earnest eyes—issued an official warning to women: Keep inside at night, and walk places in groups.

*She*

She, watching, could not believe it, and the high heel thrummed like a telltale heart from her bedroom. Her mother, scooching closer on the couch, asked

Sugar, are you okay?

and told her to eat her supper.

*Fate*

This girl wore thick, prosthetic braces on her teeth, and she was always grounded. Her mother was a religious fanatic. She was not allowed to wear make up or shorts. She was to keep her hair bound up in a braid.

The girl did not obey. In secret she listened to music on her clock radio when her mother fell asleep. She put on eye shadow in the girl's restroom when she arrived at school, then rubbed off with spit when it was time to go home.

Sometimes she unleashed her electric red hair during school hours. She tossed it around and smiled with her mouth closed. Some nights, a boy would show up at the base of her fire escape and scale its rusted folds to lose his hands in that hair and kiss her metal filled mouth.

She sat on the fire escape with her Pink Panther nightgown tucked around her knees and a cigarette in between her fingers. A voice called from below: Hey, pretty girl, why don't you let down your hair?

She smiled her crumpled smile down into the darkness, where she could see his shadowy form standing in the alley. She undid the rubber band at the end of the braid and shook her head so it came loose and hung like a glossy curtain, illuminated by the streetlight.

Her mother found the body in the morning.

*She*

The City said one thing on the television, but outside her window, she could hear something else: A new quiet, and underneath the quiet, something else.

Out of school for the day, she went out. She didn't think she was girl enough for murdering.

Before she left, she swept her coat over her shoulders and stuffed the pillow case in her back pocket. As an afterthought, she took the phone off the hook.

The pawn shop looked empty, but the grate was up and the door was open. The bell over the door brought forth no only friend. She felt a spike of uneasiness, but she resisted running. He had probably stepped out for a second to get a bagel from across the street.

She snapped to attention when she heard a sound from her only friend's office, the sound of a chair scooting across linoleum. She peered over the shelves to look into the office. The door was only open a few inches. She didn't hear anything else, but she had the creeps, so she decided to leave. As she neared the door, she heard it again, the scraping sound.

She: Who's in there?

Silence.

She pushed the door open. She saw her friend's chair overturned, his dirty white shoes sticking comically up from the seat, as if he was still sitting in it. A carton of Chinese food sat half eaten on the desk next to his adding machine. Eardrums hammering she backed away, her spine singing Run!

But the door clicked shut behind her.

*Fate*

He closed the door and leaned down to look at her face. Up close, she could see the coarseness of his skin, the gray pores. She saw that his eyes were of two separate colors, one blue, one as black as the pupil inside it.

He kicked her limp friend onto the floor and righted the chair with one large hand. He smiled at her and pulled her down so she was sitting unsteadily on his lap.

Where are your little blonde curls? Where's your little frock?

He touched her cheek with one large knuckle. She tried to bite but his hand closed around her jaw.

She: Why? Why do you want to kill me?

She: Why do you have one black eye?

He: So I can see you.

She: Why did you kill my only friend?

He: So I can talk to you.

She: Why are you joking? Who are you?"

He: You should know me.

She wriggled and kicked, but he crushed her throat in his hand. He gave her a comic look of disappointment. He lifted her limp arm until it was in front of her face: Where did you get it? She gasped and choked: My coat? He nodded.

She: I don't know what you mean. It's mine. I have always had this coat. I slept on it when I was too little to put it on.

He laughed while she waited on his knee like a wooden puppet. The last thing she saw was one black eye, zeroing in on her and swallowing her up, its inky color stopping all light.

*The City*

The City opened beneath his feet like a book.

He left the pawn shop, smoothing his hair and shutting the door neatly behind him. Over one shoulder, its hood hooked through one of his fingers, hung a long and lovely coat.

## HOW TO MARRY A MAN

First you must meet the man, share some secrets, and sleep beside him for several increments of time.

Now it is time to discover if this man is marriageable.

Begin by shaving off his mustache while he is sleeping. He might be upset, but don't worry. Start in the middle, where the bristles seem to grow out of his nose, then work your way down. Go slowly, or you will cut him. Go quietly, or he will slap you away.

When you are done, hold a light to your handiwork.

If you see that his teeth are sharp and made of steel, and that they are attached to his gums with screws, you may wish to turn off the light.



If his lip is cleft like a rat's lip, and his teeth are bigger than your thumbs, you may wish to put the blade in his mouth and twist.

Don't do that. Look at him closely, lean in when he exhales, don't be alarmed. See how he is just a small baby now without his mustache? How rosy his mouth is! It is a raw opening, ready for vows to come out.

## LAST NIGHT

Last night I ran across Kansas and Iowa and New York. I hurtled over rooftops and broke through windows and swung up drainpipes and slipped down splintered ladders and cut my knees on pavement.

Last night a monster was after me. He had greasy eyes and jagged rows of teeth. I couldn't lose him for he could smell me, and he was of superior speed and strength.

Last night the monster caught me. I was in my parents' attic. I had run through every place I have ever known, only to arrive behind my mother's sewing machine, cowering in rotting fabrics that tore easily in his teeth.

Last night I ran. Last night I was devoured.

This morning I lay still.

## WHITE WEDDING

Don't call me Billy this time, she said. It was 1988. The town still existed. Dad had gone to Los Alamos to start a new family.

You have to be him, I said. I don't know how to do it. She wore the jeans she wore every day—skin-fitting, worn nearly white, so tight I could see the contour of her kneecaps. Her leather jacket creaked as she reached for me. Her hands smelled like pennies and cigarettes.

I have a name of my own you know.

Stop, I said. Put up your hair at least.

But I just washed it! She sighed and stuffed her thick hair through a rubber band. She fell back on the bed next to me. It was a daybed, the kind your parents buy you if they

want you to remain a virgin. We couldn't fit on it, so she let her legs hang off the side. She slid her hand under the cuff of my shirt and trailed her nails up my arm. I couldn't help it, my skin rose beneath her fingers. I closed my eyes. I knew hers were open because I could feel her looking at me.

She reached into my bra. Stop, I said. Put the song on. Please.

Why does the song have to be on?

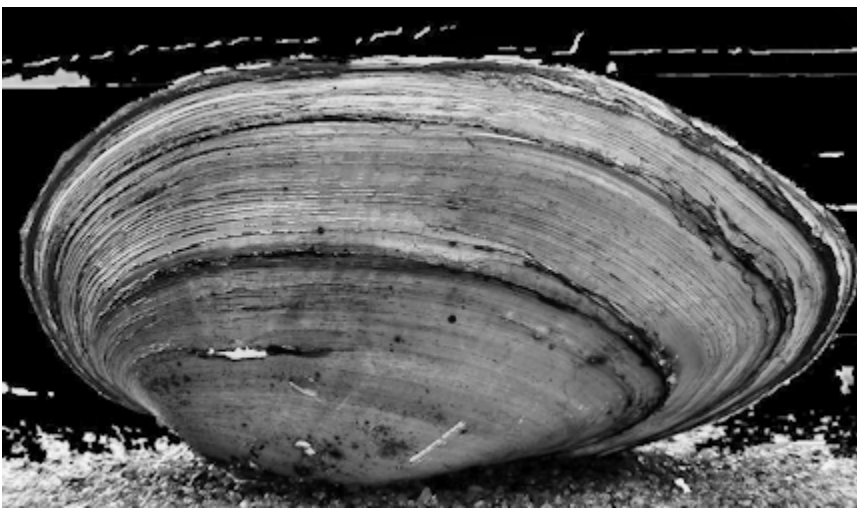
Because he's hot, I explained. Billy Idol snarled sexily from a poster I had mounted on my ceiling. I stared up at him and listened to her fumble through my records. She accidentally kicked my dollhouse. The small furniture scattered.

It's on top where you left it, I told her. The needle zipped on track.

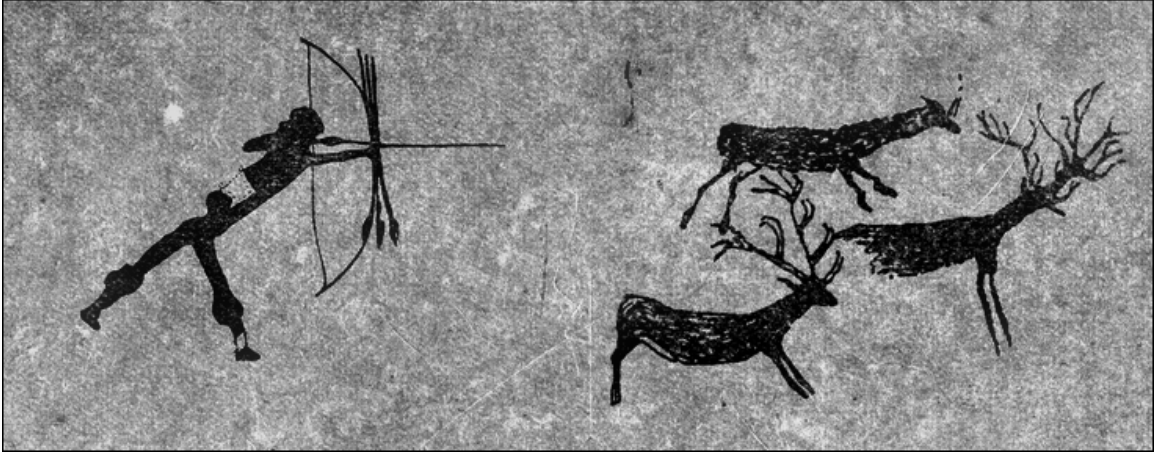
Hey little sister, she sang along, what have you done?

#### IIVX. PARENTALS

Newly inducted spectators require sound therapy (COOING) to open their infant language boxes (101.9). The parentals' incantations take the singular form of small, dexterous **thumbs**, which reach through the ear channel to access the language box. (Non-perpendicular audiences may not access language boxes due to lack of thumbs.) Thumb incantations pry the edges of the language box until it creaks open, exposing the **original cave** (102.0).



*Fig 101.9 A view of an infant language box.*



*Fig 102.0 A view of the inner language box (cave). Language boxes may be located at the base of the braincleft, beneath the **acquired memory module**.*

Once the original cave is breached, the language box remains agape. This allows for a period of **naming**, followed by a lifelong susceptibility to further incantations. Elementary incantations include the ever-popular **me ma meh** and **woo-chaka**.

## HOME IN THE COUNTRY

It was mid July when I uprooted my home and moved into the country.

The forklift was two stories tall. I paid the man who owned it a lot of money to pull my house out of the ground. It came out like a stubborn tooth, dragging muck and weeds from its base. People from my block gathered on the curb to watch. My house wasn't pliable. It groaned and snapped when the man put it on the semi truck. We tethered it down and I led him out to the country. The porch fell off in the road, so I got some of my money back.

That porch had been my favorite part of the house.

My ex-wife had planned to keep the house because her dad owned the subdivision where we built it. The way it worked was that you got an acre of land and then you built your dream house on it. You picked your floor plan from a catalogue. We chose #2, the one

with a porch. When it was built, we got to choose from a color palette. Since our neighbors all had houses in the taupe family, we got lavender with white trim. It's my house, she said. I said, No, actually it's your *land*. I paid for this house. She said, Well you can't very well just take the house, can you? By this time our son had graduated and moved away. I am taking it, I told her. And then I called the man with the forklift.

The chimney came apart in the move, and all of its sand colored bricks avalanched into the living room. I could see the sky through the hole in my roof. The sight of the sky through my roof might once have alarmed me, for I had been a concerned man all my life, and had always liked stability. However, I found that I enjoyed the act of watching stars through bare rafters at night.

There were more practical matters to take care of. The house was tilted because of the land's incline, so I frequently had to go to the ravine behind my plot to find rocks to prop up its backside.

I also had a lot of yard work to do. There were four acres. I tried to mow the grass, but it was stronger than rope. It was sharp and sticky, and it cut my hands when I yanked it. It snarled around the blade of my little push mower until the engine choked. After that, I didn't try to mow anymore.

There was a pond. I didn't notice it at first. Mostly because the wild grass covered it up. The pond was maybe a quarter of an acre long. It didn't demand any work. I liked to sit



by it. Its water was amber, like beer bottle glass. Small dust colored flies hovered over its surface in the evenings. In the mornings, too.

I still had my job, so I had to get up very early and drive back into the city. First I had to drive on a hilly mud road, following the mohawk of weeds that ribboned down its center. Low hanging trees slapped my windshield and many times I noticed deer. Then I had to turn off onto a wide gravel road where the wilderness boxed off into straight cut lines of farms. The tamed grass and the orderly rows of crops whirled right by me. On the first asphalt, I always felt uneasy, accelerating too fast on a two-lane highway crowded with cars. All of those gray windshields with frowning faces behind them teemed forward. We funneled into the city. By the time I made it to work my stomach would be buckling as a sat there trapped behind my own gray windshield.

Our job was to take calls. More exactly, we took calls for a multifaceted call center. My department was in charge of responding to calls about computerized heart monitors. The heart monitors were surgically implanted next to troubled hearts. When the heart faltered, the tiny little monitor would send a message to a master computer, which would automatically dial 911. Then the owner of the heart would be salvaged. I had an irregularly shaped cubicle by the women's room. When one of the heart monitors failed to detect its failing heart, I was the one they called. I remained busy.

One day, shortly after I had moved, a coworker of mine asked if I wanted a dog. I never had one before, I said. I wouldn't know how to care for it.

He said it would be no problem. All you have to do is feed it. Being as I was very lonely, I said sure. I called her Donna, after a woman I had loved before I had met my wife. I had been thinking of this woman frequently since the divorce. Something about how when a relationship ends, it loses its status and becomes only one more of its kind. And then the others of its kind become more important. Donna the woman was a redheaded cello player who raised chickens and made rugs on a loom. Donna the dog was very small and enjoyed barking. My coworker's wife delivered her to the call center parking lot and handed her to me along with a leash and a squishy red ball. Just make sure to feed her, my coworker called as I drove away.

One evening after I got the dog, I dragged my old pink easy chair out to the pond. I attached a six-pack of beer to a rope and tossed it out into the deeper part where the water was cool. Beside me, Donna chewed on a dead bird. I watched the sky turn pink and then purple, thinking how strange it was that I used to sit in the same chair and watch television shows. I was thinking that, and then the singing started. It was a deep dark dirge so low and penetrating that it vibrated behind my throat and beneath my fingernails. My scalp crawled. Donna dropped the bird and scrambled into my lap. She stood on my knee and barked brave staccato barks out across the pond. I couldn't see where the sound came from, but I felt that I was seen.

The singing stopped as abruptly as it had started, and the silence it left behind was ghastly. I put Donna under my arm, dragged my beers from the pond, and ran up the

narrow footpath back to my home. Already the country was swallowing it up. Crickets churned in the den. Spiders walked on the walls. I heard the leathery sound of bats waking up in my son's old bedroom.

Nights in the country were absolute. When the moon was closed off, the darkness was thicker than paint. Each night after that one, the strange singing kept me awake.

Sometimes the sound was so close that it seemed that the source was right next to me in the dark.

When the spring turned to summer, my supervisor issued me my first warning. He said I hate to do this to you, buddy, but you come to work looking and smelling like poop.

Many other employees have started to complain.

It was true that I didn't smell so great. Mostly because I didn't want to waste my potable water on laundry. I washed my clothes in the pond and hung them on tree branches to dry, but most days the humidity was so thick that they remained slightly damp.

Whenever I perspired, my dress shirts released the smell of spoor. On top of that, my slick-bottomed work shoes were caked with clay from my morning walks, and my pleated slacks were covered in burrs. At this time, I found that I had removed myself from caring about warnings. That was part of moving to the country. But I was concerned about making the payments on my land. I rented it from an elderly farmer. My wife also wanted money. She frequently called me at work to tell me the sum. I always paid it. It was fair, considering how I'd taken the house.

On late afternoons when I returned from work, the inside of the house was like a humidior. Even with the windows open and the birds flying in and out, the air felt motionless and dead. Mushrooms bloated in damp carpeted corners. Insects multiplied in the safety of dead light fixtures. But the honeyed sun leaned into the windows in a strikingly normal way. Minus the porch, there was a four-foot drop from the front door to the ground. It was a pain to have to pull myself up onto the doorstep every time I wanted to get inside, but it was my new perch since the pink chair had been rained on. I sat in my front door and swung my legs. I ate cans of creamed corn with a spoon. In the other part of the house, I could hear Donna barking, but I savored my dinner alone, looking with pleasure upon my country view.

I couldn't say for sure, but it seemed like Donna never stopped barking for all the hours I was away. I kept her shut in what used to be my office while I was gone. She made a lot of messes in there, but it was her room, so it was okay with me. I just wanted to keep her safe from coyotes. After I finished eating, I got up to let her out. When I opened the office door, she was standing over the heating grate in the corner. Her hackles were raised and she was barking so hard that her feet left the ground. Leave it! I said. Donna, come! She paid no attention. She continued to fixate her buggy brown eyes on the grate.

The grate moved slightly at first, lifting at one end, then slapping back down. A few seconds later, it swung open like a trapdoor. For a moment, Donna poked her narrow nose into the hole. When the head emerged, she yelped and ran out. It was the biggest

toad I had ever seen. It was the size of my foot. It was the size of my dog. It squeezed through the opening in the floor, pulling itself with its stout legs. Its skin was waxen and gray. Its eyes were vile yellow. Its pupils were horizontal slits. Bulbous warts lined its back. Once it was out of the vent hole, the toad cocked back its head and inflated its neck into a giant crimson bubble. Then it began to sing.

That was only the beginning. Shortly, my home in the country was taken over. My pond roiled with toad fights and toad play. My wild grass rustled with their migrations. My slick-bottomed shoes were ruined from stepping on them as I hopped off the front ledge and walked to my car. They appeared in my cabinets, in the dry bowl of my toilet, in the sanctity of my warm refrigerator. They frightened my dog to sickness, so that she hid in the foot of my sleeping bag at night. Moreover, their song, once lovely and deep, was becoming intolerable to me. I could hear them singing for miles down the road from my house. I could hear them at work. I could hear them singing in my skull.

I moved my canned foods and my sleeping bag up to the room that had been my son's. The walls were papered in blue. Back in the subdivision, I had hung this paper myself. The eastern wall of the room had become separated from the roof, so dribbles of rainwater ran down it and soaked into the carpeted floor. Still, it was better than the master bedroom, which hung precariously off of the structural wall and creaked every time I walked into it. The window was open. A bird sang on the sill. It was all very relaxing, so that even with the penetrating toad song blaring into the window, I could still feel at ease. I was reading a novel and eating a can of chowder when the farmer pulled

up. I looked out the window and saw his wide diesel truck creep to a stop next to my house.

When I came downstairs and opened the door, he was sitting in his truck with his window rolled down, like he was at a drive thru. He was an old Indian man with a burr cut and a chambray shirt. He asked me gruffly where they came from. He looked angry. He swabbed his forehead with a handkerchief and looked past my legs. Several yellow-eyed toads stood in attendance. I replied that I was hoping he would know why they had chosen my house. I suggested that, as my landlord, he might give me some help with the problem. He shook his head in disgust and said he'd be more inclined to help if he didn't have to take time off from his day to come out here to collect late rent. I said Please, man. Look at these extenuating circumstances. A toad jumped out from behind me and skidded across the hood of his truck.

He parked by my car and stepped out. I picked my way across the yard to meet him. A toad landed near his foot. He nudged it in the butt with his boot tip, causing it to spring into the air. I asked what he had in mind for a solution. He didn't answer. He opened up the toolbox in the back of his truck and pulled out two shovels and a pair of hip waders. What, are we going to bury them, I asked? He looked at me sternly and said no, there would be no burying.

He approached a toad that was resting in the grass nearby and halved it with his shovel. The sound of the blade striking dirt was resolute. The farmer looked at me gravely from beneath his gray brows. I picked up the second shovel and got to work.

At dusk, the farmer left. My house was empty except for Donna and myself. I felt satisfied and sore. In the subdivision, I had never had occasion to use my body that way. I remembered the glass bottle of scotch I had secreted away in the oven. After a warm drink and a long piss out the kitchen window, I dragged myself up to bed. Since the toads had eaten nearly every living insect and animal on the premises, an unnatural quiet hung over the house. The yard was a smear. The acid smell of toad's milk wafted in through the nursery window, but I could hear no singing.

Back at the call center, another man of much the same shape as myself inhabited my irregular cubicle. With most of the toads dead, I found no excuse not to return to work. That morning, before dawn, I had left my country home and visited a truck stop on the highway outside of the city. There I had showered in the coin-op shower and combed back my hair before the metal mirror. I had purchased new clothes at a twenty-four hour shopping compound. The slacks and shirt still smelled like plastic.

My supervisor said at least I wouldn't leave a stink in his office today, and he handed me a box filled with personal items from my desk. There was a calendar, a picture of my former wife, and a mug with a golf club on it. My supervisor wondered why I hadn't

called. I said I had been experiencing a toad problem. He said Whatever, you need some counseling.

The unemployment center in the city hosted a row of old pudding colored computers reserved for job seekers. People in much the same state as myself swarmed the parking lots and flooded the doors. They littered the sidewalks with their cigarette butts and sawed at the air with their voices. I waited in a line for an available computer. Above the computer terminals, a banner read Your Attitude Determines Your Altitude. Behind me, a bent old woman snorted snot into a rag. When it was my turn, I printed off toad information until the unemployment officer tapped me on the shoulder and said get the hell out.

It was the onset of fall, and for every toad the farmer and I had destroyed, two had come to replace it.

It was clear to me at this point that my pond was the destined mating spot for every Giant North American Bufo on the continent. Toads carpeted the yard. I was afraid of falling and being swallowed up by them. Their slime had softened the earth around my house, which disrupted its stability even more. I feared that they would suck it into the ground and cover it up as if it never existed.

I left the unemployment center and returned to my car. The parking lot was hot and bright. Other human beings in other cars seemed very hostile to me. They frowned



behind sunglasses. They crowded each other. I wanted to return to my country home and sit peacefully in my front door. I wanted to swing my legs and gaze out over the grass. In my daydream, there was still grass to gaze at. In my daydream, the country was toadless. Inside my car, there was another one. It sat on the driver's seat and suppurated into the upholstery. It was calm, obese, and self-contained. I grabbed it with both hands and flung it at a passing minivan.

I drove up to the front door, as had been my custom since the toad problem had increased. I climbed out of my car's sunroof and stepped into the house. Since the farmer and I had reinforced all of the broken windows and open heating grates, the house was a predominantly toad-free zone. I leaned out the door and placed a flat limestone rock over the sunroof to prevent stowaways.

What I noticed, upon entering my house, was that Donna was being quiet. I sat down on the rubble of my fireplace and took off my slick-bottomed shoes. Moss and bird droppings painted the floor in a pretty way. If I didn't think about what was going on outside, I could almost be content. Donna? I called. No answer.

The nursery door was open. I thought for a moment that maybe Donna had escaped. But then I saw the Giant North American female in the corner. It was approximately twice as big as a male. Its throat was the characteristic pale yellow of all female Bufonidae. It was the size of a hassock. Its round eyes rolled around to look at me. Its pupils visibly narrowed, but it did not move. On my empty sleeping bag, where Donna

liked to sleep, there was a pile of black droppings. I backed out of the room. From the research I had conducted, I discerned that mating season had arrived. Thousands more migrating toads would soon collect here to breed. The males would swarm the gravid females, forming giant snowballs of copulating toads. The pond was the locus of toad activity and I didn't dare go look at it up close. Several females were already gathered around its periphery. I could see them out there yanking low-flying birds out of the air.

I kicked the limestone rock off of my car and vaulted into the driver's seat. I give up, I said. You can have it. I drove over the hilly mud roads and down the gravel one. I merged onto the teeming asphalt and funneled gray faced back into the city. Driving toward the leaning tall buildings and sprawling malls, I thought wistfully once again of my country home as it had been, for that brief time before they had come. Probably it had always been theirs, anyway, I thought. I got an apartment on the outside of town. I got a new job. It was easy, there, to eat food off of a plate and watch television. I missed my dog, and the woman Donna, and my wife.

In November, I returned to the site. By this time, I had stopped having nightmares of toads. When I pulled up the steep, narrow drive, there were no toads that I could see. My house had sunk badly before the ground froze. The front door was at approximately ground level. I got out of my car and went inside. Webbed footprints smeared the floor. Although the air was frozen, I could still smell their toxic milk. Upstairs, in the nursery, I found my sleeping bag just as I had left it.

Outside, the pond was gone. All that was left was a frozen puddle and a hole that looked like an empty grave. I was amused to note that my chair still presided there, although it was overturned and no longer pink.

That night, I stayed there. I arranged the old chimney stones into a ring and built a fire. The heat and smoke blackened the wallpaper, then the ceiling. Through the hole in the roof I could see pieces of stars in the clean black sky. I sat there with my legs underneath me and listened to coyotes. I felt good.

Beneath me, buried far below the surface of the earth, the toads were asleep. I could feel them. Their bodies were planted in the dirt like seeds, waiting.

## BLOOD ORANGE

I sucked the red of your heart. Skeins of meat, arching moons. I peeled them apart. You were sweeter by far than any man.

## GUN

That summer we moved rocks for a man who owned 200 acres. He wanted to make it into a golf course and he didn't mind hiring girls. Chandell was fifteen and knew how to drive stick, so the twins and I followed the truck on foot. Chandell idled up and down the hills, stopping every fifteen feet so we could pry limestone rocks from the ground and toss them onto the truck bed. The land was rough with yellow grass and prickly pears and the husks of burnt cedar trees. Most of the rocks popped out like corks, but some of them just broke apart like rotten wood. We learned how not to fall backwards and roll when the earth suddenly released a rock into our arms.

At first we worked hard and took down four loads of rocks a day. The man didn't check to see how hard we worked, but we were used to supervision and didn't mess around. It was a hundred degrees and we hardly took a break. The twins, Jill and Sally, were scrawny, with narrow faces and uneven home haircuts. They had lots of little brothers at

home, and their mom didn't like girls. When they taunted someone, which was often, they laughed, showing mouths crowded with small gray teeth. Neither was pretty, but Sally's angles were blunter and her chin not quite as sharp.

When the truck bed was full and the shocks creaked under the weight, we'd all crawl into the cab next to Chandell and the water cooler and she would drive down to the river. The cab was hot while we ambled over the property, but once we bumped out of the ditch and onto the highway, the breeze would fly in and raise bumps on our skins. We listened to Chandell's mix tapes, which were all rap music. Sometimes she liked a song so much that she made a whole tape of just that one song. The songs sounded mean but the beat made me want to move. Chandell would back up to the edge of the river and we'd shove the rocks out into the water.

Limestone is scratchy and white, porous and crumbly. It is made of dead animals that have rotted and petrified in the muck of the earth. If you didn't have gloves, your hands would get cut. The twins had their own work gloves—matching gardening gloves with flowers. I wore a pair of my stepdad's felt ones and put rubber bands around my wrists to hold them on. My hands looked like cartoons. I was stronger than the twins, but they worked as one, pulling out big rocks together. We all made twenty dollars a day.

At the highest point of the property, you could see the river and the Co-op and black lines of trains following the highways. We could see the silver camper, too, because we worked the hills and it was parked down in the valley. A clutch of black cows surrounded

it most days, trying to squeeze into its narrow patch of shade. It glinted like a trashy beacon. We worked far from it at first but as the days passed, we advanced and ended up on the side of a hill just above it.

Jill saw him first. She whistled low when he stepped out of the camper. We didn't think someone lived in it. He wore high rubber boots, that's all. I dropped my rock and it tumbled down the hill. We watched as he shoved some cows out of his path and dunked his head in the aluminum livestock trough. He splashed his face and underarms, then his genitals. We all laughed when his penis flopped up and down. He was the first man I had ever seen naked. I tried not to appear too interested. The truck door slammed. Chandell came out to see why the rocks had stopped coming, but it was too late. The man had already snatched a towel off of a branch and tied it around his waist.

The next day Jill and Sally nicked their mother's binoculars. We figured out that it didn't matter how many rocks we brought back because the man never checked and we always got paid. Chandell parked and the twins and I brought out the water cooler and we spied on the man all day. He liked to sit in his underwear in a hammock tied between two scrubby pines. He read or napped with his cap over his face and his boots standing next to him. Sometimes we could see him fooling with a long antennae. I zeroed in on his back muscles, where they moved over his ribs. Sometimes he wouldn't come out except to open the camper door and pee in an arc over the cinderblock step.

Other times, he shot a popping little .22 up into the air at the vultures that turned in circles over the valley. Sometimes he didn't miss, and a bird would stop and drop to the ground. I dreamed of him sometimes, although he was old.

Why doesn't he go to work, I asked. Chandell said Because he's a fuckup! I didn't believe her. He could be like Jack Keruoac, I said. He's living apart from society as a statement. Yeah, he could be, said Chandell. But he's not moving.

Still I continued to believe that he had a purpose higher than moving rocks. Anytime he appeared in his boots and underwear, we grappled for the binoculars and went into a frenzy of monkey laughter. Jill and Sally pretended to make out with each other and roll around on the ground. They kissed with their hands in between. I imitated his goofy straight-backed march. Chandell criticized his hygiene. After a week of spying, we called him The Professor, for he always read books.

Eventually we were fired for not moving rocks. My stepdad told me to get another job. The twins and I were too young to be hired by a business, so we detassled corn in the mornings. Chandell got hired selling candy at the pool and got a boyfriend, so she never let the twins and me ride in her truck. I still thought about The Professor, though, but could not mention him because the wicked twins would say I was hot for him. Maybe in a way I was.



One day we were bored after detassling corn and Jill suggested that we go see about The Professor. Sally said she wanted to get close this time. I kept quiet and feigned disinterest, but I did not have to be persuaded. He was the first man I had ever seen naked.

We rode our bikes along the highway and tossed them in the ditch. If we get caught, we could get shot, I said, pointing to the spray painted NO TRESSPASSING sign. The twins said Fine, stay here you candy assed wimp! So I followed them through a hole in the barbed wire fence.

It was a long walk up there and we had no water with us. We hid behind some scrub pines and watched the camper, but nothing happened. The cows dozed in the shade kneading their mouths. We crept close enough to hear the papery sound of them ripping grass out by the roots.

He's gone, said Jill, and I said, No he's just inside. We heard a generator kick on.

Come on, said Jill, but already we were in the stand of trees by his hammock and already we could see the blue blanket over the window, and boot prints in the mud. Jill sprinted across the yard and stood up on her toes to see in the window. She framed her face with her hands and tossed her hair back. Sally and I breathed hard huddling in the stand of trees, ready to run. Next thing, the door of the Airstream slapped open and the .22 was out with the barrel in Jill's side. Jill's hands fell from her face. Come out or your friend

gets it, the man hollered out towards the trees. The cows turned their heads but did not stop chewing. Sally and I stood up.

Come closer, he said, jamming the barrel into Jill's side. She turned to us and nodded, biting her lip.

We walked forward, for some reason keeping our fingers laced on our heads like hostages in the movies. What are you doing here? Didn't you get fired?

We nodded. Jill said Stop it. Sorry, he said, and put the gun down at his side.

Who knows you're here?

I said Nobody sir. Sally punched my arm. My dad knows we're here, actually, she said. Even though she, like me, did not have a real dad.

He's expecting us home any second, she said.

He drew the gun again, this time pointing it at us. He wore his usual outfit of underwear, boots, and a cap. Up close I could see alarming details about him, such as the stubble on his cheeks and a trail of dark hair that started at his chest and disappeared into the band of his underwear. I pried my eyes away from his groin. His eyes, it turned out, were blue. We'd been thinking they were brown.

I looked up a little bit, seeing the big vultures wafting overhead, just like the movies when somebody is about to get shot. Everything looked so clear, like when you clean your glasses after a long time. I didn't feel scared exactly, just like it was a moment.

Get inside, he said gesturing with the gun. We staggered forward and ducked through the door of the camper.

The inside was dark and narrow. The windows were hung with strips of blanket. A dorm-sized refrigerator squatted in the center of the room. Stacks of books lined the walls and cluttered the floor. There was a musky smell of sweat and scalp and dirt and breath. A man smell, like the smell that hit me in the face when I opened my stepdad's bedroom door in the morning. In the back of the camper I could see his nest, a sagging bed on metal legs, with no sheets on it and a dented, greasy pillow. A chime made out of tin cans and baling wire clanked when the door closed. It was rigged to announce a visitor.

The four of us stood huddled in the center of the camper, unsure of what to do. The twins held each other's hands so I stuck my own hands in my shorts pockets and looked around. Dishes and batteries and tools mingled together. There were scrawled-on legal pads, stray shot shells, and even more books. I saw a Bible there, and a copy of *On the Road*. I briefly rejoiced at my intuitive powers. He ordered us to sit.

We sat on a long bench with a single duct-taped cushion on it. He pulled a folding chair into the center of the small room and kicked some shirts aside so he could put it right in front of us. He sat with his arms folded along the back of the chair. I could see his silky armpit hair and the strange muscles that wrapped over his ribs. His skin was slick with sweat.

You, he gestured to Jill. You're the one with the nerve. You'll grow up to be a real ballbuster, I bet. Jill squeezed Sally's hand.

You, he lifted his finger at Sally. You are the ugly twin, or you think you are. Your hair will never be as blond and your legs won't ever be as long, and you'll go away to law school and never look back, but you'll never think you're worthy. Sally looked at her knees. It was true that she was slightly thicker than Jill and that her eyes were a little closer together. But we all knew she wasn't smart enough to go to law school.

You, he looked at me for the first time. You you you. His finger wagged as if he was trying to touch something but couldn't find it. He closed his eyes for a minute, his finger still wagging.

You are not that good looking, or that original considering you've been following your imitable friends. He paused for many seconds, then his eyes flicked open. You, he said. You have a hard life at home and your daddy doesn't love you, and the first man who

expresses the slightest interest in you, you'll love him with immeasurable fidelity and be his loyal slave.

This assessment seemed to intrigue him. He looked at me with keen interest, first my shoes, then my scuffed mosquito-bitten shins, then my shorts, then the part where my shirt didn't quite meet the top of my shorts, then my face. He asked my age, but then said, Nevermind. It's not important.

Sally squirmed a little bit away from me and I felt hot in the face, fixed upon the man's eyes as if he had told my fortune. I did not believe that all of this was true. It was too harsh for the truth, but there was a small rightness to what he said: My father didn't love me that much.

He asked if I liked to read. I nodded.

Well, reading teaches you about people, especially women. I can read you just like a book.

He ignored Sally and Jill and spoke only to me. I did not know where to direct my eyes. Here, he said, and kicked open the small refrigerator. He pulled out a green bottle and uncorked it with his teeth. He passed it to me. It was white wine, which I had never had. Thirst made me glug it down. The cold sharpness stung my nose.

You aren't very good looking, but I think you are charming, he said. He took the bottle back from me and took a swig. See? He wagged the bottle at me. I have just kissed you. And your lips were sweet.

Come here, he said. Have you heard of Emily Dickinson? I lifted myself up, looking back at Jill and Sally. They turned their twin faces up at me with the same maniac expression. I realized that they were having fun. Jill tapped her temple and rolled her eyes. Loco, mouthed Sally. I smiled and shrugged.

He pulled out a book and lifted the blanket from the window to let light onto the page. My life had stood a loaded gun, he read.

I stood close smelling his sweat.

In corners till a day. My owner came, identified, and carried me away.

He stopped and looked at me. This is about you, you know.

It isn't about a gun? I asked.

He smiled, No. You are the gun, and I am the owner.

His hand closed around my arm. Behind us, the door smacked shut, jangling the tin can chime. Through the window I saw the twins jogging across the brown grass, tripping over limestone rocks, leaving me behind.

## NIGHTS

### *The Runaway:*

When I first arrived here I hid. I stayed in the communal house all day believing myself pursued by imaginary police, narcs, my father maybe cruising the streets looking for his lost daughter. I hid during the day. When the sun went down, I moved outdoors.

My housemates had left home in much the same manner as I had. We had a sour, lumpy sleeping bag on a living room floor. We slept on it together. We piled like puppies and pushed up against each other in ways that we immediately forgot. We had no can opener. We opened our black beans and ravioli with a tire iron. We had no dishes, no spoons, no towels. We licked the sauce off of each other's fingers. We didn't know anyone here but ourselves.



At night when I felt it was safe, I left them there in the circle nest of the sleeping bag. I had to escape the reek of our scalps and the shrill of our giggling. I had no place to go. I owned a purple sundress and a wooden ring and that is what I wore. We lived by the river, so I walked there.

The river is brown in the daytime, and its banks are littered with refuse. At night it is silver and black, and the darkness brings it romance. At night the river people come out and build fires outside of their garbage bag lean-tos. Each night I walked by their encampment, thrilling in danger, hoping almost to be caught. I listened to them laugh and once I heard them hurt someone. They drank beer and threw the glass into the fire-pit to see if it would burn.

Further down, the Corps of Engineers had reinforced the banks with giant limestone rocks. Possums moved in and out of cracks. The river smelled like mud and blood and I missed my father very much.

Sometimes I walked far down, away from the town, following the dim yellow aurora of the nitrogen plant. Other nights, I stayed near, under the Great Bridge, in the circle of the sodium lights, in the roar of the hydroelectric dam. I liked to pick up sleek pieces of driftwood and fashion them into walking sticks. Sometimes I ducked away from passing human shadows and kissed my ring to keep from being seen. Alone, I liked to balance on the edge of the dam and feel the tremor of a million pounds of water.

*The River People:*

A certain static number of us have always lived by this river, although from month to month, our faces and names change. Each day we spend preparing for each night. We collect driftwood for cooking fires and scavenge for building materials. Each day we move toward the town where we stand in the mouths of alleys and ask for money. We wear feathers in our hair and smooth gems of melted glass encrusted with dirt. We wear clothes we have found in piles in dumpsters. In town we walk invisible, but at night by the river, we laugh and sing.

We have watched many people wander through the burr tangled periphery of our campfire. We have seen runaways and suicides. We have seen the saddest people in the world. They walk by us believing themselves to be invisible, but we see them. Some believe they can cross over, and some do. Mostly they have the sterile smell of town upon them, and we ignore them. In early spring, the fishermen come.

*The Runaway:*

When fishermen started appearing on the dam with their Coleman lanterns and tobacco juice, I retreated to a copse of trees by a vacant boat ramp and sat on a washed up tree. There I could hear distant trains and family dogs. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, everything looked clear and colorless. There I threw rocks in the river and wondered what next.

This is how I met him. I should have been wary of him, but I was seventeen and had this wish that was undefined. I was hungry for something to happen. I had just been balancing on the dam again and I had almost fallen in; my driftwood staff had snapped in half and my low-slung hem had been sucked into the air current of the fast moving water. I knew nobody would miss me if I died.

I didn't see him at first. He had this thin, quick body and his skin was dark. I wouldn't have noticed him but for the creak of the driftwood log beneath my hand, and then looking up to see an untied boot, a man standing by me, looking out at the water also.

*Angel Morales:*

There was a time shortly after my mother died that I became a man. I paid an artist to tattoo a winged motorcycle across my shoulders and told my sister I would quit the university and go up north. She cried and threatened not to speak to me again. I told her that my journey was necessary and got on a deisel bus and eventually arrived in a middle-sized town by a river.

*The Runaway:*

I jerked away, thinking this man was here ruining my river, that everywhere you go there is already someone taking the experience away from you. My dress caught on a branch and ripped. He jumped down after me and put his hand out. He shook his head and waved me back.

He sat down beside me, so close I could feel the warmth of him, but he did not touch me or look at me again. After sitting there for a time, I threw a stone out into the river. He threw one farther. Pretty soon we were off of the log, sifting through the dirt, throwing rocks. When the morning birds started screeching, he left. I heard a car start behind me as I picked through the brush toward home.

*Angel Morales:*

I thought it was a pity she was here ruining my river, that everywhere I go there is already someone taking the experience away from me. However, she did not look dangerous so I let her sit close to me and watched her sideways. She was not adult yet. She threw rocks at the water and I felt this joy as they plunked down deep.

*The Runaway:*

It was three days before he held my hand. He did not talk much. He didn't know the language. He smelled like fry grease. He was from far South, beyond the equator.

His back was perfect and lithe. He had a winged motorcycle tattooed across his shoulders. His eyes were probably brown but they were black and silver at night. He allowed me to touch where the ink lifted the patterns up from his skin. He had beautiful hands. He often placed them on my face.

Sometimes I came to the river and did not approach him. From a safe distance I watched, rubbing my superstitious ring so I would not be seen. I watched him pace up and down

the length of the log and eventually lie down on it with his arm over his face. When I did approach him, then, he would give me black glares and then leave. I could hear his car peeling out on the asphalt behind me. I would stand in the road and watch his tail lights, then, wishing he was still with me.

*The Wooden Ring:*

I had been worn on so many hands at the time that I had little recollection left of who was my original companion. The runaway found me in a parking lot shrubbery shortly after I had passed through the digestive track of a dog.

I was made in the thirties by a man in Zaire. He sanded me down from a cut green branch. He spent twenty nights rubbing me smooth with a rag and then traded me for a sack of flour. Since then I have been sold more times than I can count.

I can't make my companion inconspicuous, but she thinks I can.

*The Runaway:*

Most of the time we met there and held hands in the dark.

This continued for many months. Later I gave him my driver's license so he would have a picture of me all the time. He kept it tucked inside his boot. Sometimes we drank out of a canteen he brought. Sometimes we waded out into the river and released catfish and

turtles from the river people's trotlines. Sometimes we stood in the water in our clothes and I put my face on his chest. His heart went faster and harder than mine.

The last time I saw him, he showed me his car, an old Camaro, and I sat there with him while he played me a song on the stereo. The only word I understood was corazón.

We never saw each other naked. We never had a conversation. Sometimes I think I made him up. Other times I think he is the only person I have known.

## CONDUCTING AN AFFAIR WITH SOMEONE ELSE'S HUSBAND

### *Step 1: Meet the Man at Shared Place of Employment*

First, you must meet the man, preferably at your shared place of employment. This technique has several successful precedents, the first of which being Cynthia and Brad at the Water St. Fabric Emporium. Later came Farrah and Sumeet, Diane and William, and Rupert and Duane of Applebee's Neighborhood Grill, the chicken processing plant outside of Wamego, and the United States Air Force, respectively.

Selecting an appropriate man may take as long as six full workdays. Depending on your taste, he might be the quick young man who lifts the boxes or the beaten older man at the desk. In this time, you must determine your overall score on the Mistress Value Assessment Calculator (attached).

With a score above 12, you may consider a man with two or more children and a wife who practices environmental law or writes poetry. With a score below 12, you may be eligible for a man with fewer than two children and a wife who snowboards. With a score below 7, you may be eligible for a man whose wife has gained some weight.

*Step 2: Intrigue the Man*

Once you have selected the man, you must intrigue him. This can be accomplished by listening closely when he tells you about his children's lemonade stand or by lifting up your shirt when he looks up from the tuna sandwich his wife packed for him. This step typically takes a single afternoon, but you can expect results in two to three weeks.

You will know that Step 2 has taken effect when the ring comes off, when the photo of the kid holding a soccer ball disappears into the filing cabinet, when the comb-over achieves a more realistic effect, and when the work shirt gets tucked into the best pair of Dockers. The man will begin to notice you in a strange auroric light and will believe himself destined for Hell.

*Step 3: Begin Affair with the Man*

Following a short period of reflection brought about in Step 3, the man will approach you. He will have experienced a range of emotions. He will be plagued with a newly discovered boredom with his wife's repertoire of undergarments and the arrangement of furniture in their dining room. He will begin to see himself anew, cast in the glow of a flattering soap opera light, decades younger than his peers, full of radical idealism and sexual promise. He will have started writing again.

Now you can begin your affair.



*Step 4: Help the Man Believe that the Plan was His Plan*

After a time, the man will come to believe that the plan for the affair was his, and that you were only complicit in it. *Do not disrupt this ideal.* Feigning complicity in your own plan (while allowing him to believe that it was his) ensures a long-lasting and robust love affair and guarantees his enduring fascination with you.

You can expect:

- Secret rides in the mini van.
- Phone sex at dawn when his wife has gotten up to nurse the baby.
- Not meeting his parents.
- Promotions at work, if he is the manager.
- Gifts of polyester underwear and pineapple scented lotion.

## MISTRESS VALUE ASSESSMENT CALCULATOR

**Directions:** Use this Key to calculate your value as a mistress. All values are approximate.

VALUES	3	2	1	0
<b>Fitness Level:</b> Measure waist, just above hip.	20-23"	24-26"	27"	28"+
<b>Mother Potential:</b> Your age in years.	18-20	21-23	23-24	25+
<b>Social Value:</b> Record the letter listed on your bra tag. (If you had a single or double mastectomy, calculate "0.")	D +	C	B	A
<b>Femininity Quotient:</b> Locate the number on the bottom of your shoe. (Half-sizes round up. Amputees calculate "0.")	5	6	7	8+
<b>Adherence to Cultural Beauty Standard (U.S.):</b> Rate your reflection's likeness to Scarlett Johansson.	Strong	Moderate	Low	None

## DEER

On my last morning as a normal person, I was late to work because the bus was late, and the bus driver was this young man, not old Marianne whom I like very much and talk to about her kids each morning. Where's Marianne, I inquired, and it turned out that she had died or fled the city. And the new bus driver was not very friendly so I just plopped down in my seat and didn't say anything else. Few people got on the bus besides me (usually you can hardly find a seat), and one of them who did was looking really gross. I mean his face looked like someone had hit him with a hammer, and he was letting out these disgusting phlegmy coughs and I glared at him to express my desire for him to shut up and stop being gross, but he didn't even notice. He wore Dockers and a striped tie below his scabby purple face. Already pretty much the entire city had died of plague, but those of us who remained alive still went to work.

Outside the bus window there was a weird grayness in the sky. I mean, it is always kind of gray here, but light gray. You can see birds flying and stuff. Well today it was dark dark gray, like just before nighttime when the colors disappear. There were hardly any cars on the highway, and the Target parking lot was empty. I was awake, but I felt this feeling that something terrible was going to happen to me, or that it already had happened and I was just not realizing it yet.

On the last morning that the world tried to be normal, I was scared that I'd get another write-up for being late and so I ran all the way from the bus stop, but once I was inside my place of work, there weren't very many people there either. Cindy, who usually gets the coffee started was gone, so I had to make the coffee, which I hate doing because I want to get right to my desk and check my e-mail and the news.

The cubicles in my office were dark and empty. Most people by this time had died or abandoned work to stay home with their sick children, who all died too. There wasn't room for all the bodies. The graveyard was full and the coroner had died. Cindy was probably burying her kid Shawn in her vegetable garden. Shawn had once made me a cutout snowflake for Secretaries Day.

Once I had my coffee I walked the floor to peek in the empty cubes. Out of fifty or so cubes, there was only one other person there: Fritz. I like Fritz, but his wife doesn't want him talking too much to other women, especially younger women from the office, or that is what I hear from Cindy. Which I don't blame his wife for really, because Fritz

is so cute. He wears sneakers and his ear has about thirty piercings, and his eyes are always sunken in and bruised looking because he never sleeps. He plays drums for a band called The Daft and they have shows every night.

Mabel. What's going on? Nobody's here, he whispered.

I said, Well, I don't know what's wrong, but I think it's officially pointless to come to work now, and it looks like it is going to storm like crazy! Fritz stood up to look over his cube wall at the darkness beyond the window.

Yeah, he said, it's pretty freaking dark. But it doesn't smell like rain at all.

I had no idea what to say to this besides, What should we do? The boss isn't even here to boss me, so I might as well be at home.

Well, if you leave I won't say anything, but I can't risk losing the hour, said Fritz, and so I just said Well, talk to you later and went to my cubicle. Without anyone watching, we would not make money. That much was clear. Would we still need money, I wondered, and the answer seemed to be Maybe. Everyone was running away even though all of the other cities were just as bad as ours. Money was something that people still used, although it was beginning to lose meaning since you could just as easily take something as pay for it.

I felt this kind of hollowness beneath my lungs and a dusty dryness to my mouth and a regular cycle of scaredy cat thoughts, like When am I going to start dying? And worse: What if I am the only one who does not die. What then?

Before I left work for good, I stopped by Fritz's desk. He slept with his head on his arms, so I stood there thinking maybe I should wake him up and tell him to go find his wife? Outside, sheets of paper blew around in the wind, and a pack of abandoned family dogs cantered down the street. So I stuck a Post-It to Fritz's hand that said,

*Hi Fritz. I am going home because I don't think anyone will care anymore. Don't be scared when you see that you are alone. --Mabel (Pierce)*

The bus was late, which was no surprise. I began to walk towards my home. The streetlights blipped on while I walked away from the bus stop even though it was probably only noon.

I was alone. It is weird when you think about it, how much of your day is populated by all these other people, who kind of distract you from your thoughts by just being around. And then it's just as weird when all the people are all of a sudden gone, and it's just you. And then you kind of miss all of them, even though maybe you didn't care about them at all before. It is over four miles to my house, some of it inhospitable terrain, especially as you get out more into the suburbs and have to walk on a large highway buttressed by concrete pylons. Luckily there was not much traffic, although there were plenty of cars

pulled off onto the side of the road and abandoned. I had to walk around some of them, and one even had its lights on, and the beams cast a long alien shadow before me for a long time.

Other cars went by slowly, blinding me with their high beams but of course not stopping to say hi or see if I needed a ride. I would have taken a ride from about anyone because my feet were dying in my work shoes, which are this pair of squeaky pleather dress boots from K-Mart.

I cut across a large expanse of yellow grass in between the highway and a Home Depot. I thought it would maybe save me some time and steps, but the heels of my shoes sank into the mud and the knotted dry grass kept tripping me up. I slipped and landed and right next to my hand was this little sunken wreath of grass and sticks that I recognized as a bird's nest. In the half-light I could barely see three little pebble colored eggs inside of it, but there was no momma bird. Other items in the narrow field included Styrofoam cups from Texaco, a strip of tire that looked like a snake, and a man's left shoe.

At this point the wind picked up, the cups whirled away. My hair wrapped around my face and got in my mouth, my blouse billowed like a sail so that I thought I might blow away. I hunched down with my face next to the pebble colored eggs. They were so tiny and perfect! You think of eggs as these dumb white things that come in a carton at the store, no more varied or special than slices of Wonderbread made in a machine. These were different.

I heard a man shout Hey what are you doing? And I was so grateful to hear someone's voice. It was Fritz standing up on the side of the road with his Honda beside him.

Come look at this nest, I shouted. He ambled toward me shouting something but with the wind I couldn't really hear it. When he got to me, I slowly parted the yellow grass so he could see the small pebble colored eggs that I had nearly crushed with my hand. Why are you lying here? He asked. He had to shout into the wind.

I asked well what was he was doing here and he said, There is something kind of fucked going on. The roads are all closed so I had to go this way. I thought you were a dead body.

I told Fritz that I was just walking home. Well, let me take you, he said. He offered me a hand. As we trudged up the hill, a car launched off of the road and rolled down into the trashy meadow. It could have hit us, if things had been different. I gripped Fritz's sleeve and watched as the car bounded over the bumps and then came to rest against a berm.

The driver's head flopped against the horn so that it blared.

I began to run towards it to help, but Fritz stopped me. He said, People are getting so sick that they can't drive, I think we should just go. I ran over to the car anyway and Fritz waited while I peeked in the window. Fritz was right. The driver was covered in blossom-like purple bruises and his eyes were sealed shut with puss. When I pulled open



the door to give him CPR his body flopped out onto the ground. At least then the horn stopped, but I couldn't bring myself to touch him, for I have never seen a dead body up close except at my Gran's funeral, and this one was so different without the embalming.

Fritz pulled me up the hill, for I was very upset and not really crying so much as lowing like a cow, thinking of all the people being sick and dead like in a zombie movie, and wondering where everyone I have ever known was at that time, and if they were okay. In the Honda I told Fritz that I had a really awful premonition that something terrible was happening and he just nodded.

I have to find Sally, he said. Sally—my wife.

I said, Yes, I can't get my boyfriend on the phone.

Honestly, I don't have a boyfriend anymore, but I could not bear to be the only one without someone to lose. Sally, he murmured. I must get back to Sally.

The road was full of cars, most of them still, others creeping past them. Their lights were on, but somehow that made it harder for us to see.

At my turn I told Fritz, Hey, turn here! But he just kept on weaving down the highway acting like there's no way he could hear me. Fritz, I said, Look at me, I need to go home, but he did not listen.

I must get to Sally! he yelled and gripped the steering wheel as if I might try to grab it from him.

Just slow down please so I can get out then, I cried, but he would not stop so I grabbed his arm and bit it, tasting shirt. Bitch! he screamed and slammed the brake so that my head blasted against the air conditioning buttons on the console. You are not holding me back from my wife!

Fritz what is wrong with you? I asked, but I could clearly tell that he was crazy, thinking that Sally was dead, and that it was nothing personal.

He said, It's nothing personal Mabel, but get the fuck out of my car. Here, he said reaching into his pocket. He handed me the bird eggs. For some reason this offended me more than anything else he had done and I said, You are a truly hideous man! How can these live without a momma bird?

I slammed the door of his Honda as hard as I could and stood on the side of the highway with the three small eggs cupped in my hand.

He was the last person I knew and he drove off into the darkness with his middle finger raised in my direction. I didn't even feel the miles back to my apartment building. My feet ran sloppily below me and I felt a blister pop wetly inside of my shoe, and

everywhere I looked there were dead bodies and fires, and the occasional still-living person running away from me. The darkness was like an eclipse, which I had seen once in middle school through a hole in a spray painted Quaker Oatmeal can.

I jogged over lawns and playgrounds and ducked between houses where all dogs wagged to see me thinking that someone had come to feed them finally, but I just stopped to let them out of their cages and unlatch them from their tethers and run on.

My apartment building is this huge bunch of buildings all painted yellow and lettered A-Z. I am in M. My neighbor's hand was sticking out her door and I didn't even stop to see if she was okay because I knew already that she wasn't, and in truth I couldn't feel sad about it at that time.

Inside, I tried to flip on the lights but they would not come on. The television did not come on either and even the radio was dead. My cell phone had a blank face on it like it was out of juice even though I had just charged it in the morning.

I walked into my bedroom, where I generally feel safe. At one time, I shared it with a boyfriend named Jake. He took the bed when he left, so I slept on a pile of blankets and sweatshirts in the corner of the room. This is where I sat down to think.

Eventually, I got up and looked out my window. There were maybe a dozen deer standing in the field behind the apartment complex. It's a vacant lot that's all earth

moving machines and little developer's stakes, and although it is advertised as a green space for tenants, no living thing ever went there. But there they stood, all these deer.

Behind the vacant lot there is this really shitty sad row of pine trees that Jake and I went walking in one time, and it is supposed to be some kind of nature trail, but mostly you could just tell that it was left there as a noise buffer from the adjacent highway or maybe because it was illegal to put a residence under twenty feet from the road. There was trash up in the branches of the trees where people threw things out their car windows, and we couldn't even talk because the traffic was so loud. We ended up bringing our picnic back to the apartment and eating it on the curb by Jake's truck. Anyway, this really narrow scraggly forest could have been home to nothing at all, now I saw even more deer kind of wandering out into the clearing to join the others.

I stood at the window for a little while just kind of watching them, because have you ever really seen a deer in person? I fed one a ham sandwich when I was a kid and my family went to Yellowstone, but other than that just road kill and the occasional glow-eyed highway sighting.

I could also hear dogs howling, probably all the family dogs I let out. They had found each other also. From their joyous yipping chorus, I could tell that this was the day they had always dreamed of while they sat in their crates and on people's laps.

The deer started walking toward building M. There were forty or fifty of them. I watched the herd walk into the open stairwell in between the apartments, then I ran into the living room and rolled up the blinds only to see them coming out the other side, walking across the parking lot and down the street. They were almost out of sight when I pulled on a sweatshirt and ran outside to follow them.

They rounded the block and crossed the intersection and streamed onto the highway. I walked slightly behind them. I could hear the clicking cadence of their hooves on the asphalt and the huffing of their breath. Their smell seemed strange to me at first, like wet leaves and warm hair, but it was better than no smell, and better than being alone. As we walked, more creatures emerged from the rough grass and short trees to walk in this direction too, and I guess we are all heading somewhere new.

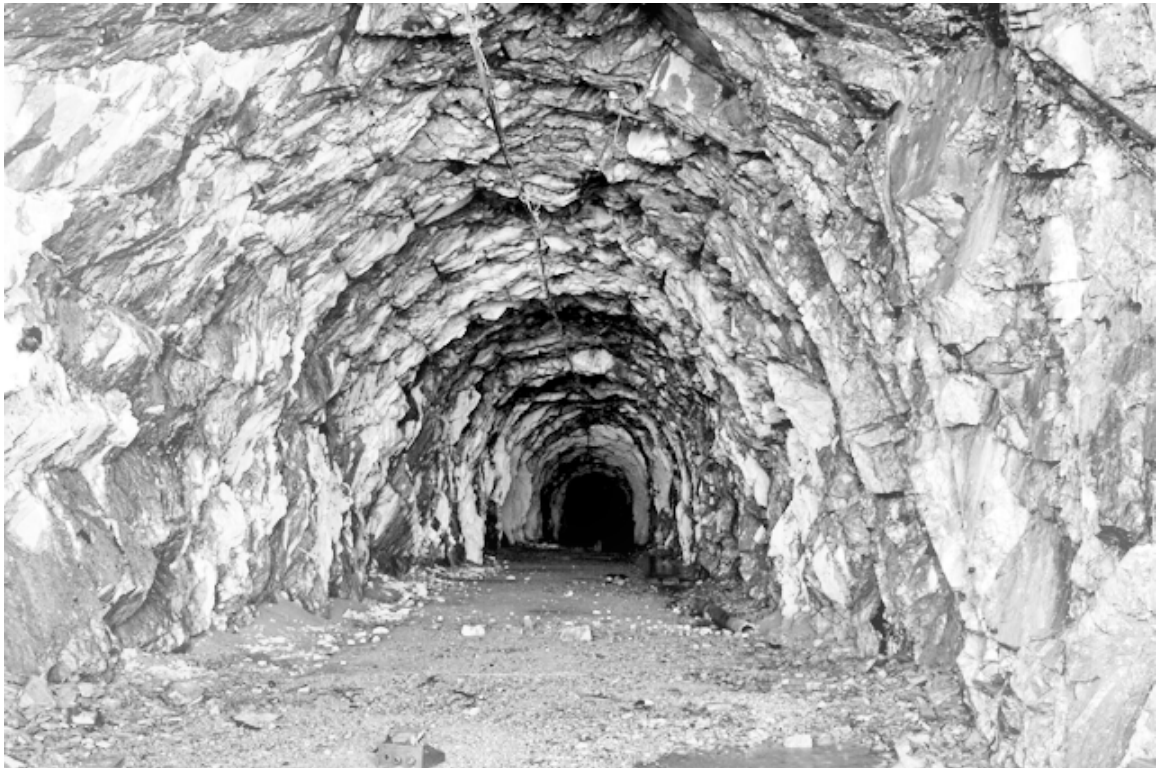
### XXX. THE USHER

One of the **original incantors**, the usher's primitive incantation takes the form of **lantern**. Like the romancer, she accesses the formidable braincase using non-invasive methods. The usher may choose to incant by using sounds that mimic the rhythm of the water-moving machine (MUSIC) and by lowering the levels of light. This slows the inner water-motion, diminishing the its jagged oceanic waves until it becomes still and placid. Mesmerized by the stillness of his formidable body, a spectator enters a trance and arrives in the **blank area** (THE SUBCONSCIOUS).

Upon arriving in his blank area, a spectator notes an amazing expanse of **darkness**. At the usher's behest, the lantern embodiment flickers on, exuding **frequencies** of hopeful, friendly light. The spectator then follows the flickering lantern across the rutted grasslands and the rocky escarpments of the blank space. Using the **lantern technique** (FOLLOW THE LADY), the usher leads the spectator to the edge of the **final escarpment**, wherein lies the original cave (101.0).

Sensing the inevitable, the spectator may attempt to resist the usher and escape the blank space. Unable to locate an **exit**, he runs frantic and without direction, sending futile messages via **chemical mail** to all areas of his body (EMERGENCY, EMERGENCY).

Upon entering the original cave, the spectator may experience feelings (NERVE BLOSSOMS) of acute distress and confusion (THIS IS IT?). However, the area below the tabule and **recent memory module**, when left unoccupied, soon becomes inactive, rendering the spectator peaceful and calm (FINISHED). To complete the incantation process, the usher scoots a **large rock** over the aperture of the cave.



*Fig 101.0 The usher leads the spectator back to the original cave.*

