

EVERYTHING
SAVED

poems by
ISAAC PICKELL

WILL BE LAST





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Cover Art: "figure 2-6" by Gerald Flynt. Used with permission.

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-016-1

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editors@blacklawrencepress.com

Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

imbrute

I knew I was black when I was
seven-years-old and only knew

because before seven I knew
I was white. You are still

fitting in the spaces
you are and are not

allowed and your mother,
she is sadder than mine;

we are both pigeonholes
written over the top

of historical bodies, excesses
washing out our pigment

and other bruises [I've known
I been good; why do I need

to remember I've been black]
I could run from tomorrow, but

we are more than mere endurance,
a controlled insertion of bodies

seamlessly inserted into this other-
wise you-less life where days seem

to end as they began, entirely
imaginary, making them

not any less real, just
gently waiting bright

and lucent as you
always imagined I could be.

AT
FIRST
&
THEN

POEMS

Danielle Rose





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Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

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Book and Cover Design: Amy Freels

Cover Art: "Isadora Duncan in the Parthenon, Athens." Photograph by Edward Jean Steichen / Wikimedia Commons

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-015-4

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Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

this is a trans poem about swans

which begins in the boston garden / where people sit inside giant wooden swans

& i am the swan / this is normal / i watch the families cross the footbridge like balloons let adrift or pigeons darting after scraps of bread / because this is a long journey / it is something like orpheus a vertical transformation / but i could not pretend to cultivate myself like a garden / this body is something i am forced to touch when i suddenly grasp for love in the middle of the night / i want to become a myth that travels under & then above again but emerges different / to become something beautiful like a swan fleeing from itself forever / this is a trans poem about swans & i desperately wish for it to be beautiful / but beauty does not escape & become a silent parking lot / in an emergency it cannot be trusted to shuffle quickly toward the nearest exit / it will never bring me away from where this body started / & so i am the swan / opened / because this is a trans poem about swans we must see entrails spilling / her flesh cut open with surgical precision / this is my body a temple under renovation / a pristine bright surgical center / a way to perhaps swim forward / after

**MOTHER/
LAND**

**ANANDA
LIMA**





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Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

Cover Design: Zoe Norvell

Book Design: Amy Freels

Cover Art: "A Mother's Love" by Paula Langstein. Paula is an abstract artist located in Manhattan Beach, California. Her work can be viewed at www.itspaula.com.

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-026-0

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Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

Inflight Entertainment while the Domsday Seed Bank is Breached

My son's face is blue
with the soft light of Ice
Age falling on his round cheeks
the voices in the animation contained
by the cups of his child-sized earphones
muffled by the shush of turbines
so constant, so similar to the soothing
sound of waves, we forget the aggression
of their volume

On his screen the body
of a desperate little mammal
is repeatedly crushed by gravity
rocks and metal, the creature still
unable to reach the nut, as its head is smashed
between two stainless steel plates, its eyes bulging
out of their sockets and my son laughs, he understands
what is expected of him now
In this type of movie, there are always good
guys who always win. When we walked in the dim amber
light in the Natural History Museum, surrounded
by bones, we were told we were the sole survivors
the lonely branch of the human family tree
because of our superb adaptability
and we chose to differentiate
ourselves from the dead
with a postfix
"sapiens"

The picture of the Global Seed Vault
in the Arctic made me think
of architecture and the architect
who said “a vida é um sopro”
life is a breath, at that speed
the floor of the poet’s green room
is damp, now wet, now water covers the wrought
iron feet of the bed where she sleeps with her lover

and water fills the Natural History Museum
and we float above the tallest of bone structures
our heads tilt against the ceiling
as we drink from the mouth of a whale
the last sliver of air and I hum
and hold my son’s hand
and I think of the cow carcasses
in the drought-cracked soil of the Northeast

The walls in China, Germany, Palestine, the barbed-wired
wall around my mother’s condominium and the futile future
walls sprout one after another in an accelerating stop
-motion video, then blur, then crumble
and soon there will be no need for green
camouflage uniforms, gone will be the beautiful
armaments celebrated in the old news, gone is music,
gone is the green of money and the green poetry, gone
were the paintings and recordings in museums, mathematics
gone, long gone have been architecture and those seeds
in the abandoned coal mine in the Arctic

On the colorless surface of the moon
imprinted in its sterile dust, undisturbed
by wind or water, there will always remain
a footprint

But for now, I turn my screen to a map of our journey
our airplane tiny, surrounded by blue

THE VIOLENCE ALMANAC

MIAH JEFFRA



Black
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Press

www.blacklawrence.com

Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

Book and Cover Design: Zoe Norvell

Cover Art: "Hard Determinism, Series 20 #34" by Heather Goodwind

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-836-5

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Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

BABIES

“I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide.”

—Toni Morrison, Beloved

FLOATING SIGNIFIERS

“What’s wrong with Mary?” Noah asks, his large brown eyes peering beyond his mother at the bathtub, his feet on tip-toes, a single Cheerio stuck to his left cheek. He shifts his feet, looks behind him, then back at the tub. “Can she swim?” He already knows this question will not be answered. He knows it’s not a good question. It doesn’t feel good to ask it. He pinches and pulls on his ear. He doesn’t know why exactly, but he thinks that he shouldn’t look directly at his mother. She is on her knees in front of the bathtub. She is still, quiet, her straight brown hair hiding her face, like it does all the time. He looks back to his baby sister Mary,

who has her face down in the water. There isn't a lot of water in the tub, but she is kind of floating, and doesn't move. He grips the sides of the door moulding, and looks behind him again. He thinks it might be good to get out of here, let his mother and Mary be alone, like he shouldn't be here, like he walked into a place he should never be. And, right now, he should be outside, maybe climbing the Ash tree in the front yard, maybe going up near the top where the leaves are thick and where no one can see him. But Mary isn't moving, and his mother isn't, either, and it makes him not move, too, and it makes him feel like he's stuck in mud, and it upsets him. He begins to tear up.

"Mommy?" And he knows he shouldn't say her name, especially with tears in his eyes, and that he should run to the tree and climb as high as he can, but he's not sure what else to do.

"Come here, Noah," says his mother, her back to him, still facing the bathtub, where Mary is floating and not moving.

Noah doesn't move. He's afraid to go to her, but he's also afraid to not listen. He flexes his fingers on the door moulding. The tears get hotter. "Mommy?"

"Come here, Noah," says his mother, still facing the bathtub, her voice soft, maybe a little tired, which confuses Noah. She doesn't seem angry with him for not listening, doesn't seem angry about Mary floating in the water, not moving. But he still feels afraid to get closer, and afraid to move. Maybe Mary is afraid to move, too.

"What's wrong with Mary?" Noah asks again. This time, his mother turns around to look at him, and he sees her face, and it's not angry, and it's not upset or crying. But it's scary. It looks like nothing at all.

He runs, to go to his room, where he can shut the door, where he can close out his mother's face until she gets better or until his father gets home, until someone else comes into the house. He hears her footsteps behind him. She is running, too. She is chasing him, but not like the way they play tag, where they will run around, him and his brothers, in the

front yard, laughing, and she will say, “I’m gonna get ya”, and scoop him up in her arms and tickle him until he almost pees his pants, wetting his cheeks with loud kisses. She is not saying anything, and he only hears her footsteps, and he knows he can’t let her catch him. He is almost at the door when he remembers: the Ash tree. She won’t be able to catch him in the tree, and he can climb up to the top, and hide in the leaves, and wait until someone comes to the house, and can make everything better.

He turns back, but she is there, and her arms are out, and he feels confused, and looks back at the bedroom door, but knows he has to try to get to the tree, because she can’t catch him there. So he balls his fists, and puts on his mean face, because he knows he’s going to have to run down the hall right towards her if he wants to get outside, to get to the tree, and he pretends the Ash tree is calling him, Red Rover, Red Rover, send Noah over, and he runs, and he sees her arms grabbing for him. They are on his shoulders, his waist, his head. But he gets through, and he is running towards the door, and the little window by the door shows the tree outside, the leaves thick and green in the summer, that will hide him all day. He is opening the door, and can see the crack of light flood into the room from behind the big heavy door, and then he feels her arms wrap around his waist, and they pull. His hand loses the doorknob.

Noah screams. He screams, “No, Mommy!” She is dragging him backward, back to the bathroom, back to the tub, where Mary is floating and not moving. He tries to grab anything on the way, the armchair, the wall, a picture frame, and then the light of the bathroom is bright and yellow. He tries to hurt her, just a little, scratches at her arm, but he can’t do much, and it’s his mother so he doesn’t want to.

She grabs the back of his neck, and he is surprised by how strong his mother is, by how much it hurts, and he turns to tell her, that she’s hurting him, and he sees her face, and it’s red and blotchy like it gets when she chases him and his brothers in the yard, when they play tag, but it is still not angry or upset, and it still looks like a nothing face, and that

makes his tears even hotter.

“It’s time,” she says, and his mother forces his head forward, and he feels the water on his face. It is warm. He closes his eyes so they don’t sting in the water, but he forgets to close his mouth and all the water comes in, and he tries to pull up so he can cough it out but his mother’s hand is really strong. He tries to cry out for his mother, to help him, and he swallows more water, and his chest hurts really bad and he can’t breathe. He opens his eyes, and Noah sees Mary, her arms over her head like she is flying, her thin hairs blowing all around in the water, and it’s like air, like she is flying above him, and he is at the top of the Ash tree, and she can’t see him, either, even though she’s flying above him, her little hands really puffy, her face really puffy, her little nose, her eyes open, her mouth open, her little nose.

SIGNIFIER OF THE SIGNIFIER

The biographer highlights words, simple words, in the document, looks up synonyms in the online thesaurus: agony becomes anguish, sadness becomes desolation. Motherhood. What else can motherhood be? Guardianship? Too clinical. Custody? Too...small. Motherhood seems to reach in all directions, she thinks, the rays of a sun, the arms of Vishnu. Does the word fit in this context? She slides her fingers around the stem of her glass, pulls the California wine to her California lips, feeling the sophistication of the gesture in her hand, her slender shoulders, and stares at the word, flickering on the computer screen. She sighs, as that is what one would do, contemplating a manuscript in the night with a glass of red wine cupped close to the face. If she were feeling more confident about her process, she might betray the moment with a giggle, laughing at herself.

Should a mother, a mother in motherhood, ever be so conscious? Or, should she be more so, absolutely?

The biographer is a mother. Perhaps that is what drew her to this book project, this profile of Andrea Yates, of an act so forbidden even her writer self would never indulge on the page. Maybe that is exactly why she agreed to the book—it gave her permission. Now, the publisher asks her to write this story for a fascinated and horrified audience, for a craving audience. Tell this story. People want to read it. When one craves, they desire a thing inside of them, to enter their bodies, to eat it. Consume. That's the word.

The project allows the biographer to recall memories of her son, in moments she chose to bury. As a baby, when he cried all through the night, and in her exhaustion she entertained smothering him with the pillow. Or, when he screamed at her for taking him out of the toy aisle at Target, and all she wanted to do was slam the yellow dump-truck into his face. When she caught him smoking pot in the garage, and in his pubescent and insular torture he told her to “fuck off”. How the flames in her eyes wanted to burn everything in her periphery. At that moment. Just for a moment. But, a moment, nonetheless.

The biographer sets the glass down and assumes the upright writerly position, her fingers hovering above the keys, and asks herself the same question: should Andrea be slovenly and unaware, a mousey, self-loathing woman who let herself go? Why does she feel the need to remind herself of this question? What is she trying to affirm? She glances at the corkboard above her desk, at the mug-shot photos of Andrea, the orange jumpsuit, the glasses, the flimsy straight hair that falls flatly against her face, the impotent bangs flopped on her forehead, all her features downward. The biographer wishes that she hadn't given up smoking, because she thinks it would be so, so nice to light one up and let the smoke dance around her fingers, delicately twisted as if to illustrate her present resolve of this particular scene, her indecision with how to paint the image of this woman, this monster, this woman, this mother. She instead takes a sip of her wine. There is a complexity here that defies law and trial. She

imagines the Yates children in the back room, laid out on the bed, the wetness of the bathtub still clinging to their hair and soaking through the thin white sheet that covers them, and Andrea at the phone in the kitchen, quietly calling her husband. She imagines Andrea's hands folded in her lap, her knees turned in, like a child knowing she's about to be punished. Would it look like that? Would she possess this kind of unconscious reflection? Which Andrea would she be as she made that call?

Religious fanatic? Exhausted mother?

The biographer takes a large gulp of the wine absently, highlights "unconscious" and looks it up in the thesaurus. She selects "unwitting" and replaces it. Yeah, that's better.

SIGNS, SIGNS, EVERYWHERE THERE'S SIGNS

Andrea wakes up to the sounds of husband Rusty clomping his big feet on the floor of their room. "Andi, have you seen my belt?" She does not answer. Her dream still lingers, and she holds on to it, of her flying high above the ground, high above their small house, high above Houston, where she can just see the curvature of the earth, that great big ball of green and brown.

Rusty sits down on the bed beside her. He asks, "How are you feeling?" She only nods slowly, the weight of her head in this waking world so heavy, made of lead, her whole body, made of lead. She stares at the comforter, and into the already fading impressions of her dream, of the crisp air blowing briskly around her face. Rusty pats her thigh. "I've already fed the kids; they're in the kitchen." He gets up and walks over to the dresser, jerking open drawers, shuffling their contents. "That belt's gotta be around here somewhere. I just wore it yesterday. You know, the brown one, Andi?"

She shakes her head at the comforter.

"It's gotta be in this room. You didn't do anything with it, did you?"

You know, the brown one? Maybe you picked it up, not thinking, or something. Does that ring a bell at all?”

She shakes her head, the last bit of that huge Texas horizon leaving her memory now, the soft curve of the otherwise flat land gleaming along its edge from the clean yellow light of the morning. She thinks this is what astronauts must see when they come back to earth from a far-off mission. She wants to ask Rusty if he has ever seen pictures of this, maybe some of his co-workers at NASA collect these types of pictures, arrange them in neat black lacquer frames, and hang them all over their houses. She would like to see some of them. Wouldn't it be nice if Rusty asked them for a picture or two, to hang in her own house, in a frame.

The children make their usual erratic sounds from down the hall: laughing, raising their voices to best the others, all talking at once. She hears one say, “That’s my Cheerio!” It’s Luke, newly versed in what is his and what isn’t, what is mine and what isn’t. There is some clinking of spoons and bowls, and Noah asserting his command as the eldest, with his new voice—one of reason. “There are more Cheerios, Luke. Let John have that one and I’ll get you another. Jeez.” Andrea closes her eyes, lets her head fall back. It annoys her when Noah uses words like “Jeez”. What’s more, it was probably she that said it first, that planted the seed, when she was in one of her moments, when the kids are all around her, Mary in her arms, John climbing on furniture, Luke yelling across the room, Matthew pulling on her pantleg, when she cannot commit to a single action, her body stuck, with so much of the world happening all around it. Rusty is now with them, because Andrea hears him say, “That’s right. You want more, Luke?”

And then Rusty is back in the bedroom, his long torso and neck leaning forward, like the thick brow of his head was a searchlight leading the way for his stringbean body. He had such a nice frame, but his ducked posture, as if he was embarrassed by his height, somehow took the man out of him. “I still can’t find that darn belt, can you believe it? I gotta be

at work soon, and if I don't find that belt my pants may fall down. Can you imagine that, Andi?" He is not so much searching as merely shuffling things around, making noise. "Did you do laundry or something? Maybe I left it on my pants yesterday. You think maybe you washed the pants with the belt on? You think they're in the washer or something? Did you wash clothes yesterday?"

"No, Rusty."

"Alright. No biggie. I just can't find that belt. How does something just disappear like that? It was just here."

"Yes, it was."

"I guess I'll just have to hope that my pants don't fall down." Rusty laughs, tips his head back, glances at Andrea, the thin translucent sheet barely protecting her slender, yet softening, body. He moves to her, picks up her chin, kisses her gently on the lips. "You think you'll be all right until Mother comes?"

The smell of his breath—coffee and milk, and the faint onion that always lives in his mouth—makes her pull away, and she immediately wants to say sorry, for ruining the sweetness of the moment, but she doesn't feel strong enough to say it, and the smell. She hopes her lowered eyes will be the apology he needs, so he doesn't regret kissing her, so he doesn't regret loving her.

"Okay," he says, either ignoring the slight or not noticing. "Don't get into too much trouble. Mother will be here in about an hour."

Andrea musters a nod for this, she owes him that at least.

She listens for Rusty's good-byes to the kids, and for the inevitable slam of the front door—Rusty never notices how hard he handles things—and then sits in the bed in relative silence, her flimsy straight brown hair matted to her pale face. Noah is softly speaking from somewhere within the walls of the house, and she imagines Paul, who so adores Noah, gleaming up at him, and John trying to feed Luke something he shouldn't eat, a piece of hardened Texas mud caked on a sneaker, or a ball

of lint, so he can hear him squeal, “yucky”, and Mary in her crib on all fours, pushing to sit up. And all of this at once, and in the next moment something else altogether, and more and more talking and squealing and pushing and yelling and smacking and pulling and noise and energy. Savageness in them. And it’s her fault, because she can’t help but allow it all to happen. She can’t wrap her arms around it all and keep it. One at a time is all she can manage. One at a time.

She slides off of the bed, fixes and smooths the comforter with her hand. She moves to the closet, pulls Rusty’s belt from the bottom of a box of old winter sweaters, the smell of stale wool and cardboard, brings it to his dresser drawer, and drops it on top of his white athletic socks. She closes the drawer, careful that it stays open just a bit, the way he left it, walks out into the hallway, into the bathroom, and opens the faucet to the tub.

“Paul, honey. Mommy needs you.”

OPPOSITIONAL READINGS

Seventy-five minutes after Rusty leaves for work he is back at home. He is on the front lawn, pounding the ground with his fist, the spit around his open mouth rubbed with grass and dirt. What is it about intolerable pain that forces our mouths to open? And why can’t he close it, this simple action?

The cold in his stomach, creeping up to his armpits, made his hands shake on the steering wheel, even in the summer Texas heat, on this ride home. How many times had Andi said into the phone, “It’s time. I did it. It’s time,” and how did he know what that meant? Why did he know what it meant, this cryptic mantra, so much so that he leapt out of his desk chair and ran down to his boss’ office to ask to be excused? And if he did realize it, what did it mean that he left her with the kids, in any case? Was there something unusual about Andi this morning, something

more unusual, something that he should have noticed? How did he have a wife—choose a wife—that he wouldn't notice when she was different in some way, in some very big way?

Rusty was flooded with images on that short drive home, but they were not of Andrea's "illness"—a diagnosis he did not believe real, a mere scam for doctors and pharmacists to bleed money out of their bank account, to prey on those that are not strong in their convictions, in their faith. What came to him instead were random moments: Andrea in the scrubs she wore when she worked at the hospital, swing dancing with a patient and laughing, her head tilted high, hair falling easily down her back; Andrea in her wedding dress, grinning during the vows as if the two of them were privy to a secret told only to them, her lips pink and glossy; Andrea running in the yard with the children, playing tag, the giggle-screams echoing off the other houses in the neighborhood; the milky smell of his daughter Mary's thin hair.

He always knew Andrea had doubt in her heart. This was normal for anyone in the faith, but he knew that what tortured her was knowing the truth yet being incapable of letting go of the doubt. And that's what one needed to do with doubt: let it go. Doubt was an addiction, one that we gripped, wrapped our fingers around, that felt more tangible than faith. Rusty tried to help her through it, to feel the truth for what it was, something just as real, that for some reason was much easier for him to hold. When he saw the truth fade from her, in moments of quiet, or in the car on the way to Church, or even at the dinner table—it spread across her face like an imperceptible bruise—he would immediately take her hand and pull her down to the floor, or pull the car over, and pray. Best to address these feelings of doubt at the moment they occur.

Rusty drove back home anxiously, biting the inside of his lip until it bled, but did not once exceed the speed limit.

The paramedics were already there. Their faces were all white as the wet sheet in the back room, even these men who dealt with the dead

every day, with dead flesh every day, with blood, with eyes wide open staring into nothingness. The police would not let Rusty come into the house, but he could smell the feces, the vomit, the death from inside. He searched for her, a glimpse of her, this woman whom he married, had made a family with, whom he loved. He ran to the side window, to the back door, searching, and for one brief moment he caught a glimpse of her inside, her mousy brown hair stringy and gnarled around her deathly gray face. This is not the image he wanted to see. He immediately thought of that day when he took her to Glamour Shots in the mall, where they blow-dried and sprayed her hair, dressed her in that really nice jean jacket with the rhinestones on the collar, where they made up her face with rouge and pink lipstick. And the pose. She looked so confident, her chin pushed out, her eyes focused and full of ambition. She used to wear this pose every day, a woman so smart and quick and full of wonder for the world. She was the valedictorian of her high school! She was a dedicated nurse! She had everything it took to be the perfect partner in Christ, to be a perfect mother.

But then, she was gone. He couldn't see Andi, somewhere hidden, twisted in the angles of this house that he already hated. And Rusty screamed, "How could you do this?" It came out high-pitched, shrill. What startled him, upon raising the question was that he didn't know whom he was directing it toward.

"it is the supreme way to hurt my husband" —(Medea, 140-41)

ARGUMENT

She knew it was illegal and wrong. There were plenty of signs supporting that. She waited until her husband had gone to work so he would not stop her. She prepared. She was methodical. She called the police afterward. Her mental illness was not relevant. She had knowingly done it to escape

a life she hated. She wanted to punish her husband. Luke had strands of his mother's hair clamped in his little fist. Here are the pajamas of her children, enter them into evidence. It shows how much smaller these children are than their mother. Yes, yes, take a look at this PowerPoint. It details psychosis at length. Yes, she may have been having delusions about harming her children, but what makes her sane is that she did nothing to protect her children from the delusions. Andrea herself even declared that she knew that what she did was a sin, and isn't that enough evidence that she is not insane? She covered the bodies with a sheet. Is that really the action of an insane person? The sheet signifies that she felt guilt. She kept the plan secret because she knew it was wrong. She also watched Law and Order, and saw the episode where a woman drowns her child in a bathtub. It inspired her. This gives her actions the quality of premeditation.

Now, let's be silent for three minutes, to experience the length of time each child endured the water, before dying.

(Excerpt of the screen adaptation of the biographer's hardback bestseller, Maniac Mother: Murder and the Medea Complex, but the Made-for-TV film is titled, simply, Maniac)

FADE IN:

A typical Houston lower-middle-class suburban street, sunny and quiet, no cars on the ambling street. Houses are painted white, beige, and brown. They are small, clean, a little run-down. Leaves green the tidy row of Ash trees lining every yard.

EXT. A FRONT YARD – DAY.

A tricycle lies upside-down on its handlebars, its front wheel spinning.

NOAH sits under the Ash tree, looks up into its leaves, the sun peeks through in small moments. NOAH looks at the small beige house with worry.

INT. A BEDROOM – SAME.

RUSTY paces at the foot of the bed. ANDREA sits in the bed, blankets around her. She holds her stomach. Her thin brown hair is a tangled, twisted mess around her face.

ANDREA

I can't, Rusty. I don't know...

RUSTY

Andi, it's a blessing.

ANDREA

Of course it is. But, I don't know...

RUSTY

Maybe it'll be a girl. You've always wanted a girl.

ANDREA

Yes. It's...so much.

RUSTY

Can you imagine if it was a boy? Another one? Five in a row? What are the odds? No, it'll be a girl. We can name her Mary. Wouldn't that be nice?

ANDREA

After Magdalene.

RUSTY

No. Of course not. The Virgin Mother.

ANDREA

But what about the boys? It's so much. I feel like I can't even take care of them, the way we are meant to. You know?

RUSTY

The boys are fine, Andi. They're doing good. And, I'll be there. I'll help you.

ANDREA

But when you're not around, sometimes, I get these awful thoughts, like I'm doing something terribly wrong, like I'm... poisoning them.

RUSTY

Don't be so hard on yourself. Why are you saying these things? It's a baby. It's a blessing.

ANDREA

Yes. Yes, Rusty.

RUSTY

It is our duty, isn't it? And God has given us such fertility for a reason. To spread love, to spread faith.

ANDREA

You make it sound like they are the same thing.

RUSTY

What?

ANDREA

Love and faith, like they're the same thing.

RUSTY

Well, they are. If you give your life to God, fully.

ANDREA

No, Rusty, that's where you're wrong.

RUSTY

Andi, what is this?

ANDREA

Sometimes, when I'm playing with the boys in the front yard, and we're laughing and running, and I stop to rest because my body can't keep up with them, my heart bursts with this overwhelming feeling of love. They laugh like angels. And then, a second later, my chest gets cold, and a terror comes into me. I can't keep them safe. I'm winded from running for a few minutes, Rusty, and I can't go further, and I couldn't protect them at that moment, if they needed me. At many moments. My faith in God, it disappears whenever I feel...the most love for the boys.

RUSTY

Andi, I don't understand this weakness in you.

ANDREA

I don't think it's a good idea, Rusty.

RUSTY

What are you implying?

ANDREA

The doctors said it is inadvisable. It's...I might get worse.

RUSTY

The doctors?! What do they know about our life? About what's important? If I didn't know better, I'd think you were falling into their trap, Andi. Doctors. There is no morality in doctors. Were you suggesting we...not have the baby? What kind of evil has come into you? The doctors.

LUKE, 2 years old, comes into the bedroom, pinching his penis through his cotton pajamas.

LUKE

I gotta pee-pee, Mommy.

RUSTY grabs LUKE, a little harshly, by the shoulders, turns him directly towards ANDREA.

RUSTY

You see this child? This beautiful, sweet boy? What? If you would

have listened to the doctors, he wouldn't be here.

LUKE

Ow, Daddy.

ANDREA

Rusty. Stop.

RUSTY

What has come into you? Don't you see what poison they're feeding you? How can you be like this, Andi?

LUKE

(whimpering)

Daddy.

RUSTY

We are not on this Earth to listen to doctors. You have a duty, as a mother, as a woman.

ANDREA

Stop it, Rusty! You're hurting him.

RUSTY

Hurting him?! You're talking about something far worse.

ANDREA

(crying)

Stop it!

RUSTY

Don't you want your children to live?

LUKE quietly sobs, while his pajamas slowly darken as he wets himself.

*"I loved to swim. I used to see how many summersaults I could do
underwater with one breath."*

—*"Noah", on the site yateskids.org*

DRAGON-PULLED CHARIOT

The biographer sits at her desk. She is drunk off of her California wine, her eyes watery smudges. There is an open notebook, and there is a pen laying, lying on the blank page. She has recently become prone to sitting here not to write, but to stare out the window, to look into the moments that occurred before, to recall the writing. How did it come, exactly? How did she fill pages, then fill bookshelves, then fill theatre seats, when she knew no more about Andrea than when she had begun? Andrea. Maniac Mother. That title was the publisher's choice. What else had been? The publisher told her, this is your story. Take liberties. This is your story. And now, that story is being read. Being eaten. Consumed. But there was so much more the biographer had hoped for. She wanted to understand, not just Andrea, but the Andrea inside herself.

And what of children, like her own son, that grip women's insides, and tear the most tender of flesh to guarantee a first breath? How is it that women love such a thing, love it with a ferocity that mirrors the violence

of its birth? There is a lot of vicious emotion in all of it, some kind of fury, and we know how fury moves: it shoots out in all directions with little control. And the intensity is more uncontrollable, more powerful, the closer to the source. She wanted to understand.

So, they die. They can die. Who knows this more than the one that brought them life?

And what of the mother? She will cut her hair. She will file her nails. She will replace a hip. She will vomit. She has the right. When does an excising of the body warrant lament, like an unpleasant dream during a troubled sleep?

Perhaps Andrea did believe that her children were on their way to Hell. Maybe they were. Maybe there was no madness at all, but a clarity that presents itself the way light slices through gaps in curtains that sway with wind against a cracked window. Or maybe Andrea's own doubt was the gap, that her children would fall through, down into a life that terrified her. The fear consumed mothers well before Andrea, and perhaps they summoned their own stories and presented them to her in these folds of mania. Would they recommend a repeat of their own actions? Whatever happened to these mothers?

Medea ascended the sky like a set of stairs in a dragon-pulled chariot, some say of fire, into the heavens, her face twisted in both a grin and grimace, her hair like a fury, extending outward in every direction behind her, all volume and power.

Andrea went to jail.

What does it mean that the biographer has never believed in God, or the grace of God? How can she understand Andrea if she herself has never felt that pull towards anything divine? She thinks of her own son, imagines him with children of his own, wondering the exact same thing at a similar spot in his own home.

The biographer wanted to write this, all of this, but how would it have made sense? How would it have been understood? The publisher

knew it wouldn't. The publisher implored the biographer: Make it more simple. Take liberties. For the sake of the reader. If Andrea is too human, the reader will be confused. All stories need a villain. Simplify.

The biographer looks over on her bookshelf, Maniac Mother. She sneers. The biographer knows this is not Andrea's story. It's not even hers. Why does that make her feel like scrubbing her fingers until they are raw? They now pull the wine glass to her lips.

The biographer sits at her desk and drinks. The biographer sits at her desk. The biographer sits. The biographer. She is eaten. Consumed.

*What we don't expect
some god finds a way
to make it happen.
So with this story.*

A CHAIR IS A CHAIR IS A CHAIR

Andrea sits in a polished wood chair. She wears black slacks, a blue-gray printed button-up and a white cardigan. Her glasses reflect the fluorescent lights of the courtroom, and disappear into her wilted brown hair. As the sentencing is read—life in prison, but spared the death penalty!—Andrea nods with small, jerky gestures, yes master, yes master. She turns to her attorney, a man with an astonishingly white and thick head of hair, a man who could have been a country star in the 80s, and smiles. She smiles perhaps at him, to say thank you for trying, or perhaps she is relieved. Or, something else.

She had to recount to so many strangers the specifics of the morning in the bathtub—as she thinks of it now—so many times: the where of it, the when of it, the what of it, the words spoken, the actions laid out in time, the moment and then the next, an almanac of violence. Now, as they read the details of her sentence, she thinks of it differently, the way

she felt then. A cutting away, releasing the doubt, to preserve what good they had left in them. God would never damn a child to the abyss, she had reasoned then, but if she kept on to them, held them close in this world, her world, they would all fall into that gaping hole, the one of eternal torment, her doubt, her weakness. She had to cut them loose from her own fate. It was the only way.

But why not herself? Well, that is the question she wonders now. And, perhaps that is the guilt she will live with forever. Why not me?

There were many times, even as a child, where she felt the pull into this abyss, even when she hadn't a language for it. One time she clearly recalls, amidst the glare of the courtroom lights. She was with her mother at a discount department store, like a Target or Walmart, but neither of these. Her mother had just gotten in the cashier's line, her cartful of kitchenware and plastic knickknacks tumbled about in the chipped wire basket. Her mother, moments ago in the aisles laughing with her about boys—particularly Kevin Armstrong, the one with the round-rimmed glasses and the crush on Andrea—now appeared sad, staring ahead into nothing, all the lines in her fine face drawn down. Andrea, no more than eleven, looked to the left, to the other lines of filled up carts and men and women, some children, also staring blankly, straight ahead, some peering over to the magazine covers that wall-flowered the aisle. Then to the right, the same. They were simply waiting to buy their goods, and would probably be all right once they made it past the cashier, but Andrea could not push off the watery feeling of dread low in her belly. She loved people, found them marvelous and complex and fascinating, and this image of them blank and listless felt like a betrayal. And so, in came the dread like a hose filling a kiddie pool, swirling around the bottom of her gut. She isn't sure why she remembers at this moment—among the many, many times she felt this liquid weight, this particular memory—but here it is. It wasn't the first time she had felt it, and certainly wasn't the last time, or even a time she felt it more profoundly. Maybe it was the lights

in the store, the fluorescent lights, much like the ones in the courtroom, that caught the thin film of sweat on the shoppers' foreheads, or maybe it was because she would get her period later that day for the first time.

Andrea never had a language for the way she felt in these moments—at the store, in a fast-food drive-through, at the airport, at the family dinner table—until Rusty. They were walking along McKinney Street on a pleasant spring afternoon, not far from where they met a few months prior, enjoying ice cream. It was then that she first shared those feelings, ambling beside women loaded with shopping bags. And very calmly, with no hesitation, Rusty said, “You were moving towards the devil.” She hadn't thought of this. She hadn't thought much about the devil at all, or God, for that matter. All she really believed was wrapped up in people, the way they treated one another, what they thought about, how they lived. It never occurred to her that the dread came from anywhere beyond humanity. And then, there it was: the devil, which means there was also God. Rusty said the words, and just like that the whole idea appeared to her. And she felt guilty that she had not conceived of it before. So, just as she experienced her first moment of faith, so did she of guilt.

And now Andrea is sitting in this polished wood chair, and knows that in mere seconds she will be carried away, down into a series of hallways, one of them leading to her prison cell, a small square space with dark walls and a slat of a window, where the light will pierce instead of glow on her face. A photographer is snapping pictures of her. She looks out into the large courtroom, the cavernous ceilings, and allows herself to return to one of her favorite dreams, where she lifts off, rises into the air, through the roof, over buildings and freeways, cities and suburbs, and over Texas, the horizon slightly curving like the edges of waterlogged wood. And she flies over the home she grew up in, the rusting swing-set lodged crooked in the ground, her mother serving hot dogs on ridged and white paper plates, next to the horseshoe pit. And her home in Houston, and its small front yard with the Ash tree, the one Noah loves to climb

into when the leaves go full bloom, and as she floats directly over the tree she sees, yes, she sees Noah, his small dark eyes, like a bird's, looking up into the sky, waiting for her to fly overhead, he hidden in the safety of the leaves.

But that is not what the people in the courtroom see, and it is not what millions of others see when this same picture is printed in Time, or the Washington Post, or on the internet when they Google her name late at night, many years later, ashamed of their own recurring fascination with this woman who murdered her five children. What they see is a woman staring blankly, a mother, staring straight ahead, into nothing.

Paul D: "Was it hard? I hope she didn't die hard."

Seth: "Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part."

**THE
MATING
CALLS
OF THE
DEAD**

STEVE KISTULENTZ



Black
Lawrence
Press

www.blacklawrence.com

Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

Book Design: Barbara Neely Bourgoyne

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ISBN 978-1-62557-020-8

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Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

THE ROSENSTIEL CYCLE

Fred Rosenstiel, who spent his life planting gardens to brighten the lives of his fellow New Yorkers, and to alleviate an abiding sadness in his own heart, died on Tuesday at the Western Queens Community Hospital in Astoria. He was 83 and lived recently in Astoria.

— OBITUARY, *THE NEW YORK TIMES*, 1997

He worked Astoria, where the skyline
is cut to human height, and beauty queen dogs
grit at tetanus-laden wounds
in the rick of their paw pads,
these injuries small New York insults
of broken glass and bent needles.
No vistas left in the great flat of Queens,
the outback past Manhattan,
except Fred's eight-by-ten forgotten plots,
coveted now by someone
with connections and confidence
that the city's last orphan gardens
could turn a lively profit
as another outpost of paid parking.

Up the block, four teens, front porch grackles,
taunted Fred the gardener about his knee socks
and short sleeves, the plastic glasses,
brown paper totes filled with hand tools
and shit he carried on the subway.
Queens boys, in backwards Yankee skullcaps,
who could not know why Rosenstiel
crossed the street, how he could not

inoculate his heart against
the viral memories of Europe,
and cringed at their schoolbooks, the top one
a manual for the repetitions
of first-year German. *Arbeitsheft*–
workbook–just its hint of freedom,
tantalizing, the flash of that one word
enough to make Fred burp up his hate.

Near sundown on a Friday, the boys
shooting dozens and dice, strong
with malt liquor boldness, called Fred out,
watching the care he took to wrap his tools,
the way he forsook cab after cab, walked
past the last bus stop; the teen sergeant
asked the old gardener the question of his faith:
Slick, why are you so weird?
Fred could not answer how
he'd been conversant with the dark
since 18, since the Dutch Navy
never offered him a chance to fight.
Fred only gave up one sentence:
*I have seen all the truth of the world I need;
only its truth has made me strange.*

At the Old Mill Luncheonette,
Columbia students took to calling him
Professor, the way his daily routine
was to harangue, cajole, plead with them.
Rosenstiel dreamed his own master society

sprouting in New York, minions turned radical
in youth; fifty years after the war,
he still conjured a better world,
where *der Führer*, pants rended to his ankles,
could have run a gauntlet of spitting grandmothers,
or lived to stand trial. Rosenstiel, old now,
could not have had less faith in youth,
less faith in the promise of a new day—
he believed only in solid things,
things of the earth, a moistness
he could wring out in his hands.

He'd been doing this Lord's work
since summer '46, with London
still gone gray like rotting teeth,
young Fred giving a lover's attention
to wildroot and herbs, four square meters
of faith in the alley behind a youth hostel.
The idea of the place was positively Marx;
everyone should give their sweat, their noble work,
and this young Fred, avoiding the dishes,
built his supreme calluses
at the turn of a hand spade, weeding out rocks
and chunked plaster, coaxing small stalks
of beauty into the city center.
Tending the garden, turning the earth,
Fred's only close-range combat was
fighting the ruinous creep of knotweed,
his garden a large dose of bismuth
to soothe the burn of his surviving guilt.

He'd kept to it in New York,
working empty corner lots, leaving them
blooming with graces now forgotten,
little gifts his hands brought back from the dust.
It was an accident, finding this life's work.
During the corruption of his own body,
Fred kept to these mordant tasks,
even when in August the city emptied
like a bathtub; the last growing season
he worked late, searching for the sparse twin spirits
of New York summers, quiet and darkness,
to come down in late afternoon.
In the geometry of buildings—the vertical
fire ladders, the ejaculating fire hydrants
spitting straight out over the gummy asphalt—
he saw how all the right angles of Queens
dissolved into the voluptuous curves
of heat. Buses with mewling brakes
lumbered by. Maybe he hadn't
consciously learned the similar natures
of gardening and atonement,
how the hard work of both happens on one's knees.
Still Rosenstiel met his daily obligation,
dressing the juvenile growth of his plants,
each application the consecrated work
of his blistered hands, Fred anointing
each leaf and stem with minerals, manure,
his own mad chemist's pomade. Only work
could raise him up, and when he finished,
he wandered between boroughs, Fred just

the great mole of the subway, tools in hand,
shouldering up Amsterdam Avenue
between grandsons of Viet Minh and Cong
and Salvadoran grandmothers
who did piecework for the Christmas
bonus of a four-pound chicken.
Rosenstiel went to the luncheonette and
put his mind to business there
in the corner booth, over the drone
of a re-chromed Wurlitzer juke
that played the scratched 45s
of bands who were half-dead,
the old man and his one cup of coffee
just another commuter of loss
poring over the headlines,
The Daily News no truer
than Westmoreland and his body counts.

And back on Amsterdam Avenue
none of the slickee boys knew
Rosenstiel and his biggest dream:
to plant corn, perfect rows of it,
six plants per row, four rows,
on the corner across from Mattolo's
Auto Body; he thought he might be lucky
with five ears per plant; maybe
he'd yield a bushel, but he wasn't
growing for the food; the food
he'd gladly give away. No,
he wanted to grow for the harvest,

and the empty weeks after, the way fall
reduced his work to dried husks,
corpses as smooth as ancient tablets.
Planting is always a leap of faith:
you have to work hard and start early
to grow anything in New York.
You have to remember to start in June.
You have to remember how Rosenstiel cried
when summer came, a reminder
of what he was, what was taken away,
how he once had been, how all of us were then,
working on our knees in bloodless dirt.

www.blacklawrence.com

Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

Book and Cover Design: Zoe Norvell

Cover Art: "Pink Eucalyptus" by Leonie Cheetham

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ISBN: 978-1-62557-832-7

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Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

*MORE ENDURING
FOR HAVING BEEN
BROKEN*

AND OTHER SHORT STORIES

Gwendolyn Paradise

Black Lawrence Press

MAMMOTH MOOR

My father called this hotel The New Lion because the ghost of Saint Andrew told him to. I've never seen the saint, but my friends tell me they have. All of them—the rats, the spiders, the lizards, the roaches, the cats, the mice, and the bats (but never the moths because I've stopped inviting them to dinner since they tend to try to eat the runners and linens)—have reported him, the closest thing I have left to my father, some battle-granting sage floating the halls in a brown cowl, chanting passages from the *Book of Hours*. Perhaps I have not seen him yet because I've never been about to lose a battle; that's when my father saw him for the first time, though he rarely talked about it: the day we lost our court case and fled Scotland for South America.

My father also called this place New Moor even though it looks nothing like the village we came from. I know he missed the grey-washed sky, the deep browns and greens, the bleating of roaming sheep, the sound of bells in the morning, the coolness of our low stone house, the softness of Scotland. We arrived here with closely guarded suitcases, money hidden also in the folds of our shirts and pants, and bought the hotel. My father tried to make it like home. He hung small Scottish flags in our bedrooms and when guests were eating fried plantains and rice he made us porridge and “new” kippers. But in the end this place was too different, so textiles and decoration and traditional food gave way to the jungle with its heaviness and violent green leaves and Scotland became more memory than place.

He needed to feel less uprooted and because he was not good with Spanish, he always named things New _____, and this was a great

source of amusement for our guests who resorted to hand gestures and badly drawn pictures on hotel stationery to communicate their needs. But this place is not New Moor. And there are no lions. This is a tropical, forested mountain, and this hotel is on a cliff above a river that is now brown and sends up foul smells. Our guests stopped coming when the river became polluted, a few months before my father fell ill. Now I fill the rooms with birds that eat the sick fish below and I try to make them comfortable as they die. Each day I climb down the stairs carved out of the cliff face, down to the river, and collect the fallen birds.

I try to maintain the hotel; however, I am not even a man and it's a fair amount of work. Four stories tall, Baroque Spanish, the roofing tiles now bound with green algae, it overlooks the waterfall that is part of this river. Now the waterfall and river are drying up, both a blessing and a curse.

*

I am preparing to reopen the hotel. It may not be as scenic without the water, but I refuse to let this place be a wasteland. In the morning and evening the mists come and the hotel looks like it is floating in the clouds. Tonight I scavenge the pantry once full of aluminum and brightly colored labels and my friends and I are eating tinned carrots and green beans, some hard cheese, and fresh bananas. I ring the dinner bells and they come from all over the hotel, attuned to the brass choir. They have no manners. I try to tell them to sit in their chairs and to say *please* and *thank you* but they talk with their mouths full, swarm the table. I preside over them like a hopeless school master. I don't know if they'll ever learn.

The balcony doors are open and the night air is cool. Moths sit on the railing, their wings coated with dew. The sun is beginning to

set. The jungle is becoming quieter. Soon we will all prepare to sleep. The spiders will fold into shadowed corners and the lizards will drape themselves over the backs of chairs. The mice will find their nests of frayed thread and the beetles their dark homes between pages of swollen books. I dread this time, when I am alone in the darkness. Some nights the hotel is swallowed by it, thick and humid. Those nights feel like the night my father died. Outside the hotel, even the monkeys are quiet, clasped to branches or nestled in the crooks of trees. When I draw water from the well, I see that the bucket is becoming slick with algae again. I hum gently to myself while I work in the dark.

Before I retire to my own room, I check on the bird. There were ducks in the green room until two days ago, but now there is only the egret in the blue. It takes five trips up the stairs to fill the bathtub with water I've drawn. I put the bird into it, have to hold it up, its webbed feet trying to find a rhythm in the water. It seems to perk up when I do this. But then it becomes exhausted, its already deteriorating body beginning to fail, and I take it back to its bed where I feed it shredded fish I've caught from what's left of the river.

After this, I make my rounds: four levels of the hotel. All except for the servants' quarters. I carry my father's rifle in the case of intruders, although I've never seen anyone. Really, I am looking for Saint Andrew, but I can't admit this to my friends. I think they would make fun of me.

"Good night, Good night!" The crickets chirp back in song, and I call out to them that they're always invited to eat with us. I have not told my friends that our food supply is running out. I am afraid they will mutiny, or worse, leave.

*

On nights like this, when the fog billows in the river valley, I dream of my father and also of the mother I never knew. In these dreams we are in a bunker on the steam ship from Scotland to South America. My father is bent down to look under his bunk—he's hidden something there and it's obscured by his wide back. He looks like a giant fidgeting with children's toys. He is rearranging something—I see his shoulder blades working under his shirt, see the sweat matting down his red hair, damp at his neckline. He speaks softly and laughs when I ask him what he's doing. It's like I'm not there at all. He never responds.

When he gets up, closing the door behind him, I scurry across the room and suddenly the bunk is massive. I am miniature and can see every crumbling bit of hard bread on the floor like large rocks, the dust and dirt embedded in the planks like railroad tracks.

Under the bed is a birdcage, as large as a mansion. It looks Victorian, painted white with a domed top, like a church made out of bars. Inside it is lit with white lamps and looks like the cottage we've been forced to abandon. I put my hands against the metal and look inside. There is my mother, and she wears a brown wool robe, loose and wide in the sleeves. She is sitting at our table; she is resting her elbows on it and gesturing with open hands to a man across from her.

I know he is Saint Andrew, but he is made of bone and his fingers break off. They become slim gold bars like the ones my father hid under our clothes in the suitcases, and my mother takes them up in her hands. She grips them so hard her hands are white and shine like the lamps around them. Saint Andrew tells her, "Take them to the end of the earth where they'll be safe," and she nods her head.

*

When the sun comes up, the monkeys come out. I hear them screaming in the jungle. And this is all I hear. The sound of the water hitting the pool in the bottom of the gorge is gone. I get up and look out the window. I need to clean them badly but have run out of window cleaner, lemons, and vinegar. There is no waterfall.

I run down the stairs. The carpeting has come loose and I must find a way to tack it down before the hotel reopens. When I enter the dining room, I see that my friends have not cleaned up, again. In fact, they've left the balcony doors open and clearly the moths have gotten in. The seats are looking more threadbare.

Where the waterfall used to be, now there is only river stone, the cliff behind it smooth and concave like a spoon. When I look over the edge of the stone railing, there is only rock and mud. The fish have already died, I suspect.

Without any fish, my bird will starve. The stairs lead down to the bank and I take them two at a time. Some of the stairs are slick and I must remember to scrub them down. At the bottom, I search the drying river bed, feet sinking. Thank goodness I have no more shoes or they would be ruined. But this is a small victory because all the fish are still. I pick each up, assessing the time of its death. It's hard to tell how long they've been gone, and I collect a few just in case.

There is also something else here. White rods sticking up out of the mud. I lean over to inspect them, feet plopping and sticking. Each is different, white and brown, some broken and hollow. I do not know what they are so I leave them to take care of the bird.

In the blue room, the egret refuses to eat. I think it knows the fish aren't fresh and it turns its head away from me, lays it on the pillow. Its eyes are slits now and it's already beginning to flatten. It will be gone by the end of the day. I say a prayer for it, call to Saint Andrew to keep it company. I cannot sit in these rooms and wait for death.

*

The fog has burned off by the time I am done with breakfast, black beans and oatmeal, and I get to work cleaning the front of the hotel. My father once told me that ivy isn't nearly as beautiful as it looks. While romantic and curling, it sends out tendrils into mortar and brick, silently destroying over the years. The building is covered in ivy and I need to pull it all down.

My hands are red and raw by afternoon. The ivy is stronger than it looks. I draw water from the well to scrub the front steps, but the image of the white rods in the river bed keeps coming back to me. What could they possibly be? Not metal of course, and not plaster. Perhaps bone. Perhaps they're the leftovers of some great beast. I begin to construct its story: centuries ago the river was much larger. The beast was trying to cross it when it got stuck in the mud, just like me. It was too big to combat the vacuum its attempt to break free created, and it died there, leaving bones for me to find. This is enough to convince me I need to take another look, but before I walk down to the river bed I check on the egret. It is almost dead; I can't even see its chest moving. The sheets have rumbled its feathers and one wing is thrust out like a fan.

The river bed looks terribly dry already, though the clay surface breaks under foot to reveal the treachery I only just managed to escape earlier. While some of the rods are lodged between rocks, others are not, and it's not until I dig into the stinking mud and pull one free that I realize it *is* a bone. A giant bone. I fall backwards in disbelief and look around. I count seventeen, six of which, I think, are part of a massive ribcage opening to the sky. It might be a dinosaur. Nothing I know of is this large, except for an elephant, and there are none of those around here. A fish is impaled on the broken edge of one of the bones, the inside a honeycomb of dried marrow and dirt.

Without the waterfall, the only attraction I have is the mist. Perhaps a dinosaur would also entice the guests back. I pick up the bone I've uncovered, straining because it's heavier than I thought it would be. It is five feet long, as tall as I am, and it weighs about thirty pounds. It's tough going up the stairs. I have to move between bear-hugging the bone and lifting it up each step or carrying it across my shoulders. Neither is comfortable. By the time I drag it through the hotel and out front to clean it off, I think I've figured out what it is: a leg bone. I remember a skeleton chart from my old science class. This bone has two rounded bulbs on one side, stone-like onions that should fit into the pelvis.

I wait for it to dry in the sun while the monkeys across the dirt road drop down vines and branches, hanging low and shouting at me. I've never been able to understand what they say. When I was first alone and desperate for company I used to walk to the tree line and call out to them, invite them to dinner, but instead of accepting my invitation they threw down anything they could find, pelting my head and shoulders with fruit and flowers and even the eggs of birds who'd left their nests unattended. They're harsh, primal beasts. Sometimes I see them fighting, pulling at each other's fur and limbs. Once I even saw one smash another's head in with a rock.

Their white faces appear as flashes amongst the leaves. A thud hits the ground and a green papaya rolls towards me. I doubt it's a gesture of friendship.

When the bone is dry, I take it into the lobby. I see how I'll need to hang rope, or ivy, from the beams to string it up. I think it will be a good addition. The white and green-veined marble floors contrast with it nicely, and I hope it will all fit. This room is twenty feet high, and still may not be large enough.

*

At dinner I tell the spiders about the bone because the other animals are gluttonous and frenzied eaters—concerned with food, not me—but the spiders are at least half interested, though they are busy searching the webs they’ve strung up between dusty glasses and old cans for flies and other small flying bugs.

“No, really,” I say when Martha pauses to listen to me. Her legs bob up and down on her silk, sewing machine needles testing weight. “I think the whole thing must be down there. I guess the pool at the bottom of the waterfall kept them in place instead of washing them down the stream. It’s about ten feet deep by the way. I know you’ve always wondered.”

I cannot determine where her eyes are; she is too small. But I think she’s looking at me. She whispers something that I have to strain to hear.

“Can you repeat that?” I ask.

“A cave, a cave,” she whispers. “It smells like chemicals and white. My heart is in my abdomen and I keep it there to protect it.”

All the spiders talk like this. They either cannot follow the logic of a real conversation or they feel comfortable enough to give up their secrets to me.

A mosquito hits the web and she hurries off. I sigh. The rats have eaten what is left of the cheese and my stomach still growls. Soon I’ll have to go into the forest to find more food. The banana trees won’t be enough for all of us. I wonder how many bullets my father has left behind and shudder at the thought of having to kill anything, even one of the monkeys.

While the sun is setting, I go outside and wash my pants in a bucket. I have been naked most of the day and it feels both odd and liberating. It is something I’ll get used to if, or when, my pants give out. I worry

this will happen before I can find a way to the city for more clothes. And money. I'll need money for new pants but for that I need the hotel to be open. For the hotel to be open I need decent clothes. A naked boy as a bell hop will not be good for business. I am smaller than my father but I'll have to make his clothes work, I suppose. The thought of going back into his bedroom makes my breath catch in my throat.

*

When I return to the bird it is gone. Its body seems smaller, I think, because its soul has fled. I have no more tears. I'm becoming a river bed.

I strip off the sheet, wrap the bird carefully, and carry it outside. My clothes become stiff with drying sweat while I am digging its grave. I didn't think this all through when I began to tend to the birds, and there are humps of dirt all along the road that ends in front of the hotel. The guests will ask what they are and I can't very well say graves. I must remember to pat the earth flat, plant some shrubbery. This is the last of them though, my egret, my white-feathered bird. I think I've served them well.

*

The next day is taken up with unearthing a grave, not digging one. I begin excavating the dinosaur. I've stripped the ivy of its leaves and will use the stalks as rope to hold it together. It will have to do for a while. Now, if I can only decide how it's supposed to look.

I stand over the railing of the staircase, a pile of bones on the floor beneath me, green papaya tied with ivy in one hand. I toss it up, almost lose my balance as I lean over. It misses the beam and hits the floor, cracking open into two halves. I try again, this time tying the heavy

brass bell on the front desk to the ivy. In three more tries I get it over and the first loop of makeshift rope dangles. I hoist up one bone, and then another. It's hard work and I have to secure the ivy to the railing as I adjust heights. When I'm done it doesn't look much like a dinosaur. It looks like a collection of dangling bones. At least the ribcage is decipherable.

Dinner conversation tonight consists of what to name the dinosaur. The lizards want the dinosaur to be named what they are named, but they didn't even have names until *I* named them so I am not going to consider their suggestions.

"Waterfall," a mouse squeaks hopefully.

"It needs to be scientific," I say. "Does anyone know Greek or Latin?"

The mouse's ears go back and she is clearly confused. I sigh.

"Green peas!" a spider shouts. "I have lost my egg sack!"

"Scientific," I say again. "Like amdrolopithicus or quentonandon."

"Quentonandon," the mouse suggests.

I sigh again and close my eyes.

There is a soft tapping at the glass of the open door. One of the moths is asking for permission to enter. "Only one," I tell them, and a large, brown moth flies in while the others walk like cards turned on their sides to the doorway.

It stands on bow-legs at the edge of the table. "Mammoth," it says. Its voice is like tissue ripping. I have never heard them speak.

"Why Mammoth?" I ask.

"Because it is one. We may not live long, but our memories are wood worms, hiding, hiding, buried, buried."

I rub my chin. The room has become quiet and everyone is waiting to hear what I will say.

"Mammoth!" I shout, standing up and knocking over my chair. I lean forward and slam my fists on the table; I hear my pants split. The

moths are fluttering and my dinner guests are mumbling, but still, I can tell they're excited about our new addition. As a thanks for the suggestion, I leave a pillowcase on the balcony for the moths. They take to it immediately and are eager to help me name other things, like the hotel and the plant life, but I know the names for these already.

*

When my father died, he didn't look like my father at all. He looked like my grandfather, red and grey salted beard, sunken cheeks. The look of a man who used to be bigger. Too much skin the body no longer knows how to hold. He begged me to leave but I told him I wouldn't. I told him we'd been through too much for me to let him die alone. His was the first grave I ever dug, and the largest. I lined the bottom with orange and lemon rinds. I gritted my teeth and then cried every time I dropped him on the way from his bed to the front lawn. I thought for sure Saint Anthony would take care of me then, appear like some great general out of the mists to tell me what to do, how to live, but he didn't.

I am shocked when I go into my father's bedroom, not a large, opulent guest room, but a small servant's quarters room, and the imprint of his body, curled on its side, is still on the sheets. I do not remember it being there; I tell myself it has though, and turn my attention to the dresser, selecting taupe linen draw string pants. I have to pull the waist so tight that the legs bunch like bundled curtains. I decide it is very Robinson Crusoe and that it will be the new style.

As I stand, unwilling to go now that I've entered, the bedroom feels dark and smells stale. I have not been here since I took his body to burial and it's a forgotten shrine. There is a thin layer of dust on everything, all except for the sheets where my father's imprint is. I wonder if Saint Anthony has been sleeping in his memory.

*

I've pulled all the ivy off the hotel. I have scrubbed all the floors and washed the mirrors and windows with well water. The dust in the curtains has been batted out and plates and silverware are shining. The carpet is tacked to the stairs with finish nails I found, and tomorrow I will wash the sheets on the beds and air out the ones that are stored. I will polish the tarnish off the keys and then I will make sure Mammoth is clean and gleaming. When I am done, I will walk to the city, a three-day journey I think, and spread the word that the hotel is open again. The candelabras will fetch some money, they're silver through and through, and then I will buy food and hire a car back. I cannot wait to hear a human voice again.

Conversation at dinner is a somewhat unpleasant one. I have to tell the animals to clear out.

"Where are we supposed to go?" They ask in unison.

"You can stay," I tell them, "but not here, in this room. You can stay in my room."

They look at each other dubiously. They are not eager to share everything. But neither am I.

A beetle crawls out from under a placemat. "We were wild before," he says. "We can be wild again!" There is a surprising amount of enthusiasm in his voice. "Come on," he moans, and his iridescent back splits open into wings. "You've all gone soft. You wonder why the monkeys never come to dinner? It's because they don't want to ruin themselves. Every civilization falls, from Rome to Britain. Better never to go soft, if you ask me. Better to be wild than to find yourself unable to live without silk and hot water and food *given* to you."

My guests are stunned at this admonishment. They look to me to argue for them, but I can't.

“He’s right, you know,” I tell them. Two of the bats scoff and fly out the door, the beetles behind them. They are angry at me, or they know the truth of the words. I shrug my shoulders because I don’t want to look hurt. “It’s up to you,” I say. “Maybe, maybe it would be better to not be cooped up in the room all the time.” I regret the words the minute they leave my mouth. I don’t want to be alone.

They begin to slink away and I know I will not see them again. You cannot tame the wild for its entire life. Only one mouse stays. Its ears are almost translucent and her veins pulse redder than normal, a kind of mouse blush. “I’ll stay,” she says. “Mirabell will stay.”

“Mirabell is welcome to stay,” I tell her, silently grateful that not everyone is abandoning the names I’ve so carefully crafted.

*

I must go into my father’s room again for a shirt, not only to wear to town, but so that Mirabell can go with me. She is scared to stay here by herself when I leave. She cradles in the cuff of my pants, waiting for a chest pocket to slip into.

The sheets on the bed look different. The imprint on its side with its knees up towards the door is now facing the wall.

“Mirabell,” I say, “have you ever seen the ghost my father said is here?”

“Of course,” she says, as if this is commonplace.

“Why do you think I’ve never seen him?” I sit on the bed and run my hands over the folds of the cotton.

“I don’t know,” she admits. “He’s around often enough.”

“How often?”

“Well.” She climbs up my pant leg and onto the bed where she can look up at me. “Not *every* night. Sometimes I sleep early. Sometimes

I'm just not where he is. But often. He sits with your birds when they are dying, strokes their chests and wings. Maybe he's confused now that there are no birds."

I do not tell her that the birds have not been here that long. That the ghost has had years to appear to me, and never has. She is just a mouse, and a hopeful one, and neither of us are privy to St. Andrew's desires.

In the dresser I pull out a white shirt with a large pocket. "This will have to do," I tell her. "Are you ready for the rounds?" She has never been a part of this ritual and is eager to see me climb the floors with the rifle. When it is uneventful and boring, she sighs against my ribs and says she wishes something exciting would happen.

In the lobby I check the front door; it is locked, like I left it, and Mammoth is creaking in its cradle of ivy. Tonight the fog is so thick and high that it settles just under the windows in my fourth story room. Mirabell is on the pillow next to me. I've never slept with a mouse before and worry I will roll over in my sleep and crush her. She assures me that my movement will wake her and she will move out of the way. I pray to Saint Andrew to help me, but Mirabell says he is not in the room.

*

When I wake it is full dark and I am shaking. I sit up and look at my hands, painted in shadows from the moon's light streaking through the window. But they are not shaking. The *shadows* are jumping, and the coverlet beneath my hands vibrates too. I am not shaking; the room is shaking. The window treatments are ocean waves and bits of plaster fall onto my face when I look to the ceiling above.

"Mirabell!" I cry, scrambling from the bed where I fall onto the floor,

the ground roiling beneath me. I claw for the shirt I stripped off hours before and throw it on, eyes frantically searching the bed for her. She's huddled next to my pillow, her tail arced to curve around her hunched body. I scoop Mirabell up and drop her into the shirt pocket, rushing for the door as candle fixtures fall from the wall.

The stairs are groaning under us and the marble is splitting. Its sharp cracks are like gunfire and I think I may be screaming. Shadows leap at us while we flee down, down, and at the landing I see furniture beginning to slide on the floor, sliding away from us in the direction of the river bed.

Mirabell is wailing, an awful high-pitched noise that makes my ears buzz, and the ceiling to the left drops away, revealing dozens of dim stars.

At the base of the stairs I rush towards the front door and the whole hotel is shattering, shouting its death in the rumbling of the building as it disappears down the cliffside. The brass railings tear from the walls and I am running past the dining room towards the entry, but the dining room is already gone. The balcony is gone. In the moonlight I can see a few moths fluttering, confused at their disappearing beds.

In the lobby Mammoth is swinging from the vines. It looks to be dancing, and for a moment, I am convinced it has come to life. Its heavy body, moving for the first time in centuries, does not have enough room. The memory of what it was is too weighty and is breaking the hotel off into the river bed. One of the massive bones lurches and punches into the plaster, embeds there before the ground shifts again and rips the entire wall from the frame in the mammoth's desperate move for freedom.

There is no time to wonder, to question, and I pull the keys from behind the front desk. Miraculously they have not been knocked to the floor. I look at the tile buckling under my feet. And then I am fumbling

with the key, the brass cold on my hand, and the front door is open and we are rushing through it.

I pitch forward, tripping on a pile of ivy in the dark, putting my hands out to catch myself, to protect Mirabell who is still crying in my pocket, her nose buried into one corner. I hear my left wrist snap, but there is no pain. Instead it is numb and when I roll over to look at it, it is a talon in the moonlight and the cliff around the hotel cracks. The whole building falls as if a bomb went off.

Then there is nothing. I lay on the ground looking at a space that should not be empty. I can hear muffled thumps and the sliding of rock into the gorge. At the edge of the cliff, trees are bending and swaying; somewhere behind us the monkeys are screeching in fright. And then it is over.

Gone. There is some dust, but quickly it is quiet again. The jungle hushes in the shock and confusion. We are all too scared to make any noise. My breathing is the loudest sound now. The hotel is gone. Like it was never there. The new ledge is raw dirt and old stone.

Mirabell's whiskers are scratching my chest and I lean forward, putting my good hand over my eyes.

We sit like this for a long time. Long enough for the monkeys to begin their howls again. Long enough for Saint Andrew to come find us.

He is short, much shorter than my father, and he wears a brown robe tied at the waist with rope. Through him I can see the banana trees, the clumps of dirt from dozens of graves. He motions for me to come join him.

"No, no," Mirabell quips. But she doesn't try to stop me. She stays right in my pocket as I stand, legs still quivering, my hand broken and bleeding, and follow him into the jungle.