ABSTRACT

THE MOST DELICATE PARTS

by Anne Bilancini

The Most Delicate Parts is a collection of stories in which the fantastic collides with everyday life. Oksana Baiul becomes a swan in the skating rink. An ancient king haunts a bachelor’s downstairs bathroom. And a girl automaton enters a beauty pageant. The collection is especially interested in creating images that recall the strangeness of fairy tales and magical realism. This attention to image creation often serves as an alternative method of gaining access into a character’s carefully guarded interior, perhaps the strangest space within these stories.
THE MOST DELICATE PARTS

A Thesis

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The Curse

When she’d finally had it, the witchy woman cast her curse.
“I will burn you, lovesick teens,” she said, “Burn you.”
Of course, she didn’t actually intend to burn them. This was a witchy woman whose witchy ways were tied to a kind of self-awareness that discouraged her from giving in to the tropes of a typical crone: a heady moth strafing, a blight of disfiguring boils, a village-wide internet outage. No, this was the kind of homely enchantress who could really give you what for, but what for with panache. To put it mildly, we didn’t see this one coming.

The final having had it happened when the witchy woman stumbled upon a pair of lovesick teens in her azalea patch, pawing and sucking teeth. This was not the first time she’d stumbled upon some lovesick teens in the throes, but this was the first time they’d nestled their lovesick bodies under the blooms of her beloved, award-winning azaleas, the very same award-winning azaleas that, because of an ages-long tradition of conditional enchantments on blooming shrubs, were not allowed to be touched human hands. When the lovesick teens grasped the wooded stems of the bushes while practicing a new and exciting entrance strategy, the azaleas quickly withered and died, allowing the witchy woman, who’d been spraying for aphids, to spot the offending youths. Giggling and scurrying, the sweaty teens made off with twigs and dead blooms in their hair, leaving the witchy woman alone with her most prized of prized plants, her chamomile, her most prided of joys. This pissed off the witchy woman. It pissed her off something fierce. And thus, she flung her malediction.

The lovesick teens would finally succumb to their chronic lusty condition.

For a week, the town was a veritable orgy of naked teenaged flesh lust, a raging ménage à deux, a generally underage raunch-fest. Even the rabbits where shamed by the teens’ collective
boinking. Mayhem, as it were, ensued. Shops were forced to close; mothers’ eyes were so perpetually shielded that accidents happened and limbs were broken; fathers couldn’t get their hands on the slicked-up bodies of their horny teens quick enough to engage in some good old-fashioned daughter-locking.

But then nearly a week into the great hormonal rage, the schtupping stopped. Dazed, dog-tired, and itchy, the lovesick teens fell into a shared post-coital funk. They moved about the town unsure of what to do with their hands, where to direct their gaze. Their skin, no longer fed by the bloodglow of constant wiggling, erupted into subcutaneous acne. For the bedraggled town, it was a welcome change, but it quickly became clear the witchy woman’s wickedness was far from over.

In the months to follow, the tautness of the lovesick teens’ bellies softened and gave way to pregnant roundness. For many mornings, the echoes of teens retching into toilets and trashcans bounced off brick and cement. Some teens soon had to be put on bed rest. A few announced they were having multiples. The town showered the teens for a month straight just to keep up.

All the while we braced ourselves for the inevitable birthing event. We assumed we’d be blasted with days of agonizing labor screams, splattered with quarts of placental goo. And where exactly would we put all these new people? We hiked up through the forest to the witchy woman’s cottage and begged her to reassess her hastily executed mumbo jumbo.

“Consider the negative economic effects of population surplus!” we cried. But the witchy woman remained unrepentant.

“All my problem,” she said and continued to prune her other less conditionally enchanted garden fare.

The first expectant teen went into labor in the early hours of a Sunday morning, and then one by one the rest of them followed suit. For hour upon hour, the town vibrated with the heaves and wails of the teens’ aggregate labor pains until the onslaught of babies began. Out they whooshed into the world and into the arms of anyone willing to snatch up a slimy infant. The streets overflowed with the birthing and born. The town selectman tore from teen to teen trying to record the sex and name of each of the newly minted.
Bottoms were smacked with trembling, excited hands; liquids were siphoned away with straws and turkey basters; cigars were smoked by any who cared to indulge. Even the witchy woman, who was rumored to be skipping town in favor of dryer climes, was drawn to the streets to witness the mass birthday and suck at a finely rolled Cuban cigar.

We were caught up in the joyous, life-affirming miracle of it all. Together with the teen parents, we held each other, exhausted and drinking in the cacophonous howls of new life.

“Witchy Woman,” we cried together, “thank you! Thank you for providing us with this beautiful gift! This unforgettable event!”

The witchy woman smiled.

“Give it time,” she said. “Give it time.”
The Boy and the Window

The boy’s bedroom window turned into a giant mouth during the night. When he awoke before dawn, he pulled up the shade to look at the last of the moon and found a pair of closed lips like two fat earthworms where his window had once been. The boy stepped back in fear and as a courteous acknowledgement of physical space. The lips parted to speak.

i.

“Good morning!” said the mouth.
“Good morning,” said the boy.
“Today is going to be a beautiful day!” said the mouth.
“I wish I could see it,” said the boy.
“Ah. You can’t, can you?” said the mouth.
“No,” said the boy.
“I wish I could help,” said the mouth, “but I am just a mouth. I am merely an opening to the throat.”

The mouth opened wide allowing the boy to peer beyond the tongue and teeth and down into the dripping cavern of the throat.

“Are you going to eat me?” said the boy.
“Yes,” said the mouth, “I am. The bedroom door is locked from the outside again, and everyone knows how these stories end for little boys who make mischief. Please don’t think I want to do this. It’s just my job. It’s all I know.”

The boy took a step back, but it was already too late. The mouth sprang off the wall and devoured him, but was careful to leave behind the most delicate parts: the wrists, the tarsal bones, the eyes, the inner ear.
“Good morning.” said the mouth.
“Good morning.” said the boy.
“The moon is still up,” said the mouth.
“I wish I could see it,” said the boy.
“Ah. You can’t, can you?” said the mouth.
“No,” said the boy.
“I can’t help you. I’m just a mouth.”
“Are you going to eat me?” said the boy.
“Perhaps,” said the mouth. “It’s what I do after all.”
“But you don’t have to,” said the boy.
“No, I don’t have to,” said the mouth. “But your bedroom door is locked from the outside again, and I didn’t ask to be put here in the first place.”
“Where are you supposed to be?” asked the boy.
“I belonged to the face of a very old king.”
“So why are you here?”
“To feed the king.”
“He can’t feed himself?”
“You ask so many questions for someone so close to death.”
“You said you wouldn’t eat me.”
“I said I didn’t have to.”
The boy took a step back.
“The door is locked?” asked the boy.
“The door is locked.”
“Will the king die if he doesn’t eat?”
“What do you think death is?” said the mouth.
The boy took another step back.
“The end of life,” he answered after a while.
“Exactly.” said the mouth.
“I don’t understand.”
“I’m thirsty,” said the mouth running its pale pink tongue along the top row of dark yellow teeth.

“You can’t eat me,” said the boy.

“And why not?” asked the mouth.

“Because I’m alive.”

“What do you think death is?”

“I told you, the end of life.” The boy moved toward his bed as he spoke.

“Exactly,” said the mouth.

The boy burrowed his small body back under his covers and shut his eyes tight.

iii.

“Good morning!” said the mouth.

“Good morning.” said the boy.

“Today is going to be a beautiful day!” said the mouth.

“I wish I could see it,” said the boy.

“I’m sorry,” said the mouth, “I wish you could see the moon before it fades into the morning sky.”

“You can’t help it,” said the boy.

“They locked the door again,” said the mouth.

“To teach me a lesson,” said the boy.

“What lesson?” said the mouth.

“Children aren’t to be seen or heard,” said the boy.

“So they locked you in?”

“Yes,” said the boy.

“They can’t see you in here, but who’s to say they wouldn’t be able to hear you?”

“What do you mean?” said the boy.

“Yell something,” said the mouth smiling.

“Yell something?” said the boy.

“What’s a mouth for anyway?” said the mouth, “I’ll help you.”

“But they’ll just beat me again,” said the boy.

“They beat you?” said the mouth no longer smiling.
The boy didn’t answer. He could only look at his feet, his legs, his small body.
“Then I’ll sing,” said the mouth. “I’ll sing to you. Quiet, like a mother would. Go back to bed and I’ll sing. In the morning I’ll be gone. Then you must leave this place.”
“But…” said the boy.
“This is a fairy tale,” said the mouth, “Sometimes the children must win.”
The boy went to his bed and burrowed his small body back under the covers.
The mouth sang quietly, and when the boy awoke again, the mouth was just an open window letting in the breeze and the sun and the scent of the morning.
St. Stephen, the First Martyr

St. Stephen lies amidst a battalion of haystacks somewhere in Middle America. He has been here for hours now staring up at the clouds and watching the wrens dodge the crows. It’s a nice break from acting as a saintly muse for Baroque artists who paint him carrying tiny churches and forever being stoned.

Do you think martyrdom is easy? he whispers in their ears. Do you think this is what I’d always wanted? I had plans. I wanted to work with my hands, too. But the painters don’t hear him because he’s dead. They only paint, paint, paint. Incessantly memorializing the last moments of his life, and willfully forgetting every other recorded moment of his existence. Like the time he saw that vision of God and God spoke to him and He seemed like a perfectly nice, normal guy. Or the time Jesus cured his horse. Now that was a really beautiful moment. But no. It has to be a tragedy with these guys. It has to be the time a bunch of pious jerks threw a bunch of really dense rocks at his face until he died. These artists want the blood and the guts and the “St. Stephen, Yes. He died so fearlessly. He was our first martyr.”

But this is what the artists don’t know: rocks take forever to kill you, and they never aim for the head at first. The idea is to crush your lungs and your gut. They want you to think, to comprehend your pain. Not just feel it. Know it. They want you to understand that, even though ending a life is actually quite easy, destroying the body is an undertaking. It takes many hands and many stones. They stone you until you’re an expert at dying.

And then eventually you do die.

And this is how they want to remember him.

Even the prayers for intercession are preoccupied with his death. For two centuries now, people have invoked his name, praying for patience, for guidance, for deliverance in times of trouble. The tribulation of his stoning has become an allegory for final exams, bankruptcy,
venereal disease, childbirth, prison, even a broken right thumb. And the list goes on. It’s not that he doesn’t want to help. He loves these people. He wants them to walk through life unscathed and unafraid. But he doesn’t understand the parallels the people behind these prayers insist on forcing. And frankly, he’s sick of the reminders. He sits up in the grass and whispers the words of his own prayer to the birds: May the serenity and peace which were yours at the hour of your stoning be ours as well as we wait in hope for the coming of the Lord Jesus who lives and reigns forever and ever.

Serenity, they say. Peace. They can’t be serious. I was being stoned to death, he says, I cried out to God to make the pain stop. Life isn’t a stoning. Death. That’s a stoning. Even now he can hear the prayers of scared people in Denmark and Nebraska. By the grace of his martyrdom, they ask him to grant them salvation from a failing relationship and algebra, respectively. He digs his heels into the dirt and sighs.

It’s not what you want, he says to the birds as they zip and dive. It’s not what anyone wants. I didn’t want to die. I very much liked being alive. Well, except for that whole lack of antibiotics thing, but God wanted me to live, too. He told me so. He gave me lemonade and said I was doing a good job. He cried when I showed up all bloody and smooshed in. I didn’t want to die. But I am dead. I’m dead. And I can’t go back.

Some wrens land near him and peck at the ground. Their eyes are blank and unaware. They can’t see the incorporeal man in the grass, can’t hear him quietly sob for what he’s lost, what the world thinks he’s gained. A crow swoops lazily into the throng of small birds and sends them in a scatter. St. Stephen leans back in the grass and listens to the soft shudder of their wings against the air.
Our Own Ghosts

When I tell my boss Gail about Steve, she nods, goes, “Mmhmm.” She adjusts one of her rings and says, “I can get you in touch with this medium I know.”

I imagine a woman about Gail’s age with an unkempt perm and a caftan lighting candles around my apartment, shaking the bangles on her arms, and summoning the ghost of my dead fiancé just so we can ask him to leave.

“It would be a very congenial affair, though,” she says. “I mean, yeah, we’re going to exorcise him, but it’s not like you think. It’s not like the movies. No freaky blond kids. No Indian burial grounds.”

“So you believe me?” I say. She toys with her rings again, polishes a fat opal stone with the pad of her thumb.

“I was possessed by the ghost of Marlene Dietrich for two weeks in my twenties,” she says without even looking up.

Steve has been hanging around for about six months now. He showed up about a week after he died in our bathroom. I haven’t told anyone but Gail because Gail wears mood rings earnestly. She drops agate and jasper into her ice water after a night of too many cocktails “to balance her soul”.

And Gail never met Steve.

Our apartment is one of six in an old converted home. The plumbing in the house itself was galvanized steel from the 40’s before the landlord had it replaced about four months ago.

The old pipes drained slow because they were leaky and thin. Our bathtub would take forever to let out. You could fill the tub up without stopping up the drain and lay submerged under bubbles for a good twenty minutes before your shoulders met air.
It didn’t help that my hair was constantly clogging up the pipes.

What happened was that Steve took a shower while I was out walking our border collie, Ingrid. When he slipped in the tub, he hit his head, but what killed him wasn’t the fall. It was the poor drainage. The tub filled and filled, and when I found him his lips were a bruise on his face. After they took him from the house, I pulled a tangled plug of my own hair from the drain.

His mother and I buried him on a Saturday. He was sitting on the couch with Ingrid drooling at his feet the following Friday. All I could do was stick my fist in my mouth. It was how I kept my heart in my chest.

It’s not Steve, that man I found on the couch. I don’t know who this person is, really. It’s a phantom of my fiancé. He walks around the apartment tidying up, pouring cereal, making coffee, petting the dog. But he doesn’t talk to me, the me that exists now, at least. At night he sleeps in our bed and replays conversations we’ve had in the past. He tells a past me about how the secretary at work who just gave birth recently is pregnant with her first child. He asks me about our future children. What their names could be.

For a while, I thought I was the one that had died. I thought I’d gone to hell.

At work, Gail tells me it’s time for me to get back out there. She tells me I need a distraction from my home life until the medium can come and clean up the mess. I tell her I’ve been thinking about seeing a therapist. She tells me that living is therapy. She tells me I have to live and hands me a moonstone to suck on.

Just before lunch she materializes in my office door.

“We’re going to find you a distraction, now,” she says. “Go home and get your dog. Men love dogs.”

When I get to my apartment, Steve is sitting on the couch watching a daytime talk show. Ingrid is curled up next to him, panting.

“Hey,” he says. “My mom called. She said the florist is willing to include the dahlias for half price. Those coral-y ones you liked.”

“That’s great,” I say like I did the first time.
I call Ingrid over to put her leash on. Steve gets up and goes to the kitchen. He pulls a glass from the cabinet and sticks it under the faucet.

When I walk to the door, I hear him say, “Hey, I think I’m going to hop in the shower real quick. I feel disgusting. See you when you get back.”

I grab a plastic bag and a handful of treats on my way out.

Gail is already at the park when Ingrid and I arrive. She has scoped out a potential distraction: a man sitting alone on a bench dipping a croissant in a cup of coffee. She grabs me by the arm and we move. Ingrid tries to pull in a different direction. She’s sniffing the ground like she’s on the hunt for a place to relieve herself. Gail’s gemstone ingestion seems to have paid off, though. She strong arms both of us within spitting distance of the distraction’s bench. She’s the first to speak.

“Lunch break?” she says.

“Something like that,” says the distraction. He waves his croissant like an auction paddle.

“I’m Gail,” she says. “This is my colleague Lydia.”

“This is Ingrid,” I say, motioning to the dog.

“Doug,” says Doug.

“You two should talk!” says Gail. She pops her moonstone in her mouth, refusing to notice that Ingrid is struggling to take a shit in the grass while I struggle with Doug, who says he does something with other people’s money for a living. Doug also pretends not to notice Ingrid’s public constipation because he is kind and because he is a stranger.

“So Lydia, what do you do?” Doug asks as Ingrid strains in circles.

“In all honesty, Doug, I do my best to avoid situations like this. That’s what I do.”

The next day at work, I tell Gail I’m going to take the rest of the week off. Maybe I’ll go on vacation and take Ingrid with me. Let Steve have the apartment for a while. Gail takes a swig of agate-infused water, gurgles it and spits it into the trash. She tells me about the time she ate a bowl of powdered sugar because her hairdresser mistakenly asked about a husband that didn’t exist. This was before she discovered the true healing stones, of course. She says I can’t let this week be my bowl of sugar. She assures me the medium will help, that she will ask her to visit the apartment this weekend. I tell Gail I can’t handle this much longer and that it’s becoming
painfully clear that Ingrid is constipated, and I haven’t had time to get her to the vet. I tell her she shouldn’t worry because I don’t bake.

“You can’t move forward if you’re always moving backwards,” she says.

“Gail,” I say, “my dog can’t take a shit. Nothing is moving.”

Later that day Gail calls me into her office. She says, “Listen up because this story has meaning for you.”

She tells me a story about how she used to work retail. She says she was often placed in the denim section because she could see the sad in a woman before the woman could see it in herself. She says she’d seen women weep when they stepped out of the dressing room and into the world to witness their thighs, their calves, their souls swathed in a perfect measure of fabric. There they’d stand in a three-way mirror reborn, Venuses in their seashells, goddesses spun from flesh and stretch cotton. She tells me she understands the transformative power of a good pair of pants.

“Now what did you learn from that story?” she asks.

“I learned you think women’s pants will exorcise my ghost fiancé,” I say.

“You’re not hearing me,” she says. She taps her mood rings on her desk to show me she expects more. I try again.

“I’m sorry. What did I learn?”

“You learned that sometimes even the simplest thing can bring about a new beginning.”

She smiles. I can tell she is very pleased with herself.

“You know, I’ve been thinking,” she says. “I think your problem might be related to your inability to let go. I think maybe this could be a way to begin to let go of Steve. You need to release him from your life to release him from your apartment. You need a revelation.”

“Do we have to go shopping to come to this revelation?” I say.

“Or maybe we could go this masseuse I know. He puts these hot rocks on your back. Straight from a volcano in South America.”

That evening we go shopping.
Gail takes me to a boutique nestled in the restaurant district where everything smells faintly like meat. She pillages the racks and shelves of the shop, stopping every so often to drape my arms with pants in every style and texture. She pushes me to the fitting room.

“Trust me,” she says. “This is Church. Pretend it’s Sunday. Now worship, girl. Worship.”

I slip on a pair of jeans from the pile and walk back out into the hall toward the three-way mirror. An older woman with shocking red hair opens the door of her fitting room and scoots next to me in front the mirror. She pats the sides of her thighs, turns and gives her backside a healthy inspection.


“Good fit,” I say with a nod.

“But I mean, the crack. It’s really about the ass crack.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t think I follow.”

“The crack, honey. How is it?” she asks indicating the gap between the bottom of her shirt and the top of her jeans. “Here, let me let you in on little secret.” She fidgets a bit in her jeans, turns, and lifts her shirt up to show me the secret.

I look around for Gail.

“The crack is what gets ‘em, see?” she says with her back to me. “At first you think it’s your smile or your rack or your thoughts. But if you want to land the whale, you’ve got to flash the crack. It’s how I got Hank and Frank and Hal, the former seminarian. The former seminarian, honey. For-mer.” She pinches my shoulder and begins to laugh as she reenters her fitting room.

“Do yourself a favor, honey,” she shouts over the door from her room. “Find yourself a pair of low risers and get a little strange tonight.”

I think about her advice. I imagine wearing a pair of these ridiculous pants home, sidling over to Steve’s ghost on the couch, asking him if he’s ready to get strange.

I imagine for a moment this is what it would take for a dead man to notice me. Then I shove the pants in the fitting attendant’s arms, and leave before Gail can stop me.

Gail shows up at my apartment the next day with her medium.

The medium is nearly seventy, but her blunt pageboy haircut is dyed a blue-black that makes her face look obscenely youthful.
Gail introduces her as Maude.

“But you can call me Waru,” says the medium. “It’s the name I use to bridge the gap between our world and the spirit dimension. And how you can find me on the world wide web.” Waru winks.

Steve is on the couch when Waru and Gail enter the living room. They can’t see him, but Waru insists she can sense his presence.

“He’s very unhappy. His aura is very dark.”

Steve shoves a spoonful of cereal in his mouth, stares blankly at his bowl.

“My mom called,” he says as he chews. “She said the florist is willing to include the dahlias for half price. Those coral-y ones you liked.” He smiles at me.

“That’s great,” I say.

Waru shoots up from the floor where she’s been placing tea candles and colored sand.

“It most certainly is not great!” she says. “An exorcism is no time for sarcasm. This is deeply serious.” She returns to the floor. Her pageboy sways like fringe.

Gail frowns at me. I can hear her teeth click on the stone burrowed in her cheek. I sit on the couch, let Ingrid hop up between Steve and me. Waru lights the tea candles with a butane lighter.

“All right,” she says, “this is a fairly complicated procedure, though it shouldn’t take long. Lydia, I will need something that belonged to the deceased, a talisman of sorts. Something that represents your fiancé’s essence.”

I go to the bedroom and open the closet door. His clothes are still there. His ties. His shoes. I rifle through the contents looking for something to give Waru. Then I go to the vanity and take his wedding ring from my jewelry box. It’s small and cold in my hand. I slip it on my finger for a moment. Then I put it back in the box and grab a tie from the closet.

“Here,” I say, handing Waru the tie. It has a pattern on it like the keys of a piano. Gail looks delighted.

Waru places the tie in the center of the circle she’s made with candles and sand. We all sit around the circle together. Waru instructs us to hold hands. I grab each woman’s hand: Waru’s gnarled and veiny, Gail’s sheathed in gems.

Steve sits on the couch crunching his cereal.
“Now,” says Waru. “I want you to focus on my words. Will them as I will them. Ready?”

Gail looks at me and nods solemnly. I nod, too.

“Let’s begin.” Waru lets go of our hands and produces a jar of salt. She sprinkles some of it on the tie.

“I bless this salt,” she says. “I bless this salt to make it fit for the rites we are about to perform.”

She sets the jar down and picks up the tie.

“Now, spirits, I ask that you take this tie and use it as a vessel for the negativity that inhabits this place.”

She raises the tie in her hands like she’s a priest exalting a communion wafer.

“We, the believers, the faithful, ask you to release the spirit of negativity that haunts this place. We ask you to relieve this poor woman’s fiancé of his suffering, to release his spirit from this space.”

Gail bores her eyes at the tie as though she’s trying to move it with her mind. Sweat on her upper lip beads and glows in the candlelight. Steve picks up the magazine next to him and flips to an article about a politician who was exposed for some dirty-doings eight months ago.

“All right,” says Waru. “Now we will beseech the spirits to protect us as the negative spirit is exorcised. This is going to take all your emotional strength, dear,” she says to me. I nod, then look at Steve. His eyebrows are knitted with concern as a reads. He is distraught by the article. He is always distraught by the article. Has always been. Will always be. My heart lunges in my chest. I realize we’re exorcising the wrong things.

“Blessed be!” Waru says. “Blessed by the spirits who will rid us of this spirit! I ask you now, spirits! Rid this place of Steven’s spirit. Rid this place now!”

Steve turns the page of the magazine briskly, still engrossed by the story. Gail whimpers and opens her eyes. She looks around expectantly.

“Well?” she says. “Did we do it?”

“Yes,” says Waru. “I sense that this place has been purified. Our work is done.”

After Waru cleans up, I show the women to the door. I thank them for their help.
“Don’t say I never did anything nice for you,” Gail says. She squeezes my hand. When I close the door, Ingrid is behind me with her leash in her mouth. The apartment smells vaguely like vanilla now, like Waru’s candles. Steve turns on the TV in the next room. The news, I think.

The next morning, I need to take Ingrid to the vet. She’s still constipated and starting to look like the pain is getting to her. Steve is in the kitchen pouring a cup of coffee when I clip the leash on Ingrid’s collar. She’s panting like she knows something.

“Hey, I think I’m going to hop in the shower real quick. I feel disgusting,” Steve says. “See you when you get back.”


“I love you,” he says.

At the vet, Dr. Lessing tells me Ingrid can’t shit because of a bowel obstruction. I tell her nothing in her diet has changed. She says with air quotes that maybe Ingrid has been “getting into something” and that dogs have been known to ingest non-edibles when they’re anxious or depressed. I tell her there’s nothing for Ingrid to get into. She says an x-ray might give us a better idea of what the problem is and leaves the room. Ingrid looks at me with human eyes even though she’s a dog because dogs can do that sometimes. I say to Ingrid, “Come on, girl. It’s going to be okay. I’m going to makes sure it’s okay,” because that’s what humans do sometimes, we say things that might not be true because we can’t remember how to tell ourselves the truth, how to exist in reality.
The Tallest Woman in North America

The tallest woman in North America did not boil her baby in a pot on the stove. She did not kidnap small children from the neighboring towns. She did not sleep with the husbands of various ladies from the PTA. She did not lash out at random in the supermarket. She did not smoke unfiltered cigarettes. She did not give unfiltered cigarettes to the children in the park by the church. She did not set fire to the church. She did not loiter outside the bowling alley or the library, nor did she abduct Doreen Fleischman’s lawn ornaments and attach crude phallic shapes to their plastic pelvic regions. She did not engage in sexual congress with the teenage boy from down the street, the one with the patchy, new facial hair. She did not tell the ladies in the PTA to “fuck off” collectively with “that look, you know the one.” She did not smother Mrs. Gordon’s twin cockatiels. She did not blackmail Pastor Richards using what can only be considered exceptional photoshopping skills. She did not put the dead roach in the tricolore salad at the church picnic. She did not piss on the lamppost near the bus stop. She did not make lewd gestures with the genetically enhanced carrot from the Lyon family farm. She did not perform unspeakable acts with a summer squash. She did not encourage the feral cats in the alley with stinking dead fish, and she did not sell their kittens out of a black garbage bag near the elementary school last Tuesday.

She did none of this.

The tallest woman in North America brushed up against you in the elevator as she walked past. She stopped for a moment, apologized quietly and walked away.
The King in the Bathroom

The dead king haunts the man’s downstairs bathroom. It’s becoming a problem. Or, it’s more like, the king haunts the man’s toilet. His bowels are blighted with some Reformation-age disease, and he spends a good deal of the day atop his new throne straining and crying.

The man has begun to wonder whether his bathroom is a hellmouth. He’s read enough about the king to know he probably got damned when he died, and it seems the king is in constant pain, with his cramping and the loosing of his bowels into the toilet. It’s quite possible the king’s eternal punishment really is endless bouts of diarrhea, and perhaps that’s appropriate. But it’s also gross and unhygienic. To the king’s credit, the man does hear him wash his hands from time to time.

It’s not really such a big deal, except the man wants to have friends and family over from time to time, perhaps even a lady. And he’s not so sure they could handle the dead king. But the big game is on today and the man wants to throw a party. He decides to chance it. He wants to maintain a healthy social life because he is in his late forties, and he’s read prolonged loneliness can kill.

The king is crying again when the man comes downstairs dressed in his game day jersey. He goes to the bathroom door and listens. The king groans. It sounds like he might be on the floor. Please, he says. Please. The man knocks. Yes? moans the king. Listen, says the man. I’m having some friends over soon. Would you mind keeping it down for a while? I’d really rather my friends didn’t know about you.

The king opens the door and peeks his head out. His crown is askew and his eyes are bloodshot. Suddenly, the man feels ashamed. The king really is in a great deal of pain. You could go take a nap in my bedroom while my friends are here, the man says. I can change the sheets for you if you’d like. The king sniffles and thanks the man but says he can’t accept the offer. He’s not allowed to leave the bathroom. I could at least bring you a pillow or something, says the man. The king shakes his head. I’m not allowed to sleep, either, he says. I can’t sleep. I’ve tried.
So you just do this all day and all night? says the man. Yes, says the king, and his eyes well with tears. Then there is a knock at the door. The man closes the door and leaves the king alone.

The man tells his friends that the downstairs bathroom is being renovated and ushers them all into the living room. He brings them a tray of chicken wings and nachos and ice cold beer. When the game starts, the man is feeling pretty good. He and his friends are having a wonderful time together, cheering their team and ribbing each other about work and women, the computer games they like to play and their softball league. The man feels very content. He is part of a community.

At halftime, a moan escapes the bathroom, and the man knows his friends have heard it. One of them, the de facto leader, gets up and approaches the door. What was that? he says. That does not sound like a plumbing issue. The man isn’t sure what to do, but he knows he won’t be able to fend off his friends for long. The de facto leader puts his ear to the door. There’s somebody in there, he shouts. The other friends all get up and go to the door. Feeling helpless the man says, I’ve got more chicken wings in the kitchen, fellas. And: How about some more beers? But the clock is ticking on an explanation, and the de facto leader is looking at him expectantly. The man knows the jig is nearly up, so he opens the bathroom door. He braces himself for a reaction as his friends peer in and see the king, who is huddled in the corner next to the toilet sniveling and clutching his gut.

Miraculously, the friends all begin to laugh. Before the man can say a word, they all crowd into the bathroom and force the king to his feet. Look at this sorry son of a bitch! they say poking him in the stomach. That’s some robe, says the de facto leader. Yeah, where’d you get your crown? Tiffany’s? says another. The king hangs limp in their arms and looks at the man helplessly. The friends continue their taunts and barbs, roasting the king about his anachronistic attire, one-upping each other with the nastiness of their zingers.

Meanwhile, the man is fraught with indecision. He is well-versed in humanity’s potential for cruelty, and this could all get out of hand very quickly. But he’s enjoyed spending time with his friends. Things were really starting to jibe there for a while, a real brotherhood of man was in the works. The beer had been appropriately icy and the chicken wings, pleasingly tender. He was
proud of the gathering’s orchestration. He had done a commendable job, and it seemed like this kind of event could become a regular thing in his life. But perhaps now, the friends were too drunk to handle the situation gracefully. Perhaps now, a cooler head needed to prevail.

Before the man can appeal to the group, however, his friends have begun to drag the king from the bathroom. Let’s get him drunk! shouts one friend. Let’s make him snort tabasco sauce! says the de facto leader. The man stands in the doorway and begs his friends to let the king be. At least, he says, let’s leave him here. Hey listen, fellas, he says with false brightness, I’ll go grab you some beers. You can sit here and make fun of the king. Let’s just let him stay in here, okay? The friends consider the man’s offer for a moment. They let the king slump onto the toilet. Then, a shout: Let’s make him run around the house naked! The friends all cheer and lift the king to his feet again.

They drag the king from the bathroom so that the toes of his shoes are scuffing up the floor. Tears stream from his eyes and he’s beginning to moan again. The friends laugh harder as they pull his crown from his head and toss it back and forth to one another. The man tries to stop them, but they’ve turned the crown toss into a game, and the man is clearly the pickle. Finally, one of the friends punts the crown into a wall leaving a rather sizeable dent in both the crown and the wall.

Now, the friends are pulling off the king’s many vestments. They hoot and they holler. The king sobs harder and harder and clutches his stomach, but the friends are too far gone to care. The man sees now what will happen; the situation has taken on a great and terrible inertia. Please, the man begs. Please, the king cries. I’m in so much pain, he says. I need to get back to the bathroom. The friends are stomping his jewels and tearing at the sleeves of his long johns when it happens. The king lurches and heaves. He doubles over. He yells, Oh! Oh! And then he drops to the ground and cries into his hands.

The friends cease their destruction when they realize what has happened. Are you kidding me? says the de facto leader. Are you kidding me right now? he says again. What the hell is the matter with you? the friends all shout. They back away from the disgraced king.

The man stands between the king and his friends. Look what you’ve done! he says. This isn’t his fault! It’s yours! You should be ashamed of yourselves, he says nearly crying now. The friends can only stare back at him dumbly. Get out! shouts the man. Get out of here! One by one,
they pick up their things and file out of the man’s home, leaving him alone with the soiled and sobbing king.

The man helps the king back into the bathroom. The king retreats to his corner next to the toilet, still crying. I’ll bring you a change of clothes, says the man. Maybe something more comfortable than those robes you had on. He leaves the king to clean himself up and takes the soiled long johns to the laundry room. The living room is littered with signs of the party, reminders of the potential the occasion had had. The man shakes his head. What a waste of a day. What a waste of a chance to fill his large and lonely home with friends.

When the man returns to the downstairs bathroom, the king has cleaned up and put his robes back on. His crown is resting in the sink.

I got you these, says the man, handing the king a pair of sweatpants from his college days. The king waves his hand at the man. No thank you, he says. If it’s all right with you, I think I’ll wear my robes. It’s a dignity thing, I guess, he says. The man nods, understanding. He sets the sweatpants aside and sits next to the king on the floor.

I’m sorry about today, he says.

No, I’m sorry, says the king. I shouldn’t be here. I just don’t know how to leave.

It’s okay, says the man. I don’t mind. Stay as long as you like.

The man and king sit together quietly for a while because the bathroom tile is very cool. It’s a nice way to spend time.
I. The bear cub discovered

The story begins in Romania in 1912 before she even got her name. The small brown bear, born only weeks before, is introduced to humans for the first time when two poachers kill her mother. The poachers spare the cub because her bright blue eyes are like no blue they have ever seen in nature, two cerulean marbles welling with fear. Instead of killing her for her pelt, they force the cub’s small plump body into a cage. She rasps and growls for her dead mother until she falls asleep, exhausted by confusion, hunger, and the overwhelming new smells of the men and the metal.

When the bear cub wakes again, the poachers are talking to another human. They sit at a table smoking cigarettes and making terrible sounds that the small bear does not know is laughter. The new human pushes a stack of gold coins across the table, and the bear is sold. She is not released from her cage until she arrives with the man in London two weeks later for auction. The man makes double what he paid the poachers, and the bear is sold again, this time to an American called Zero Culpepper. Culpepper is a good businessman, and the cub’s genetically inexplicable eyes blink like two bright dollar signs on the auction block. He taps the bars of her cage with thick pale fingers and whispers, “You’re going to be my springtime, sweetheart.” He names her Proserpina.

Culpepper takes the bear with him across the Atlantic to be a member of his traveling show, Culpepper’s Grand Family Menagerie. She is placed in a large cage in a train car full of other animals: a catamount, two sad-eyed dromedaries, a chimpanzee, a Bengal tiger, and hundreds of screaming birds. The other animals are from parts of the earth she’s never known and carry with them odors she can’t process. They move across the country in darkness. Only the birds make noise.

II. The Goddess Bear in repose
For the first few years of her life, Proserpina is simply there to look at. She sits in her cage in different cities billed always as “Proserpina the Blue-Eyed Goddess Bear.” It says this on a hand-painted wooden sign above her cage. Circus-goers walk past carrying the odor of boiled peanuts and popcorn. Children stop to point at her shocking eyes until impatient parents push them along. She stares back at them trying to make sense of their shrieks and high-pitched enthusiasm. The Bengal tiger across the aisle paces in his cage.

At night the big top lights up and the aisles go dark. The tiger, the catamount and the dromedaries are led into the tent. The crowds cheer. Proserpina sits alone in her cage. Her pupils fatten on the darkness until her eyes are only two thin blue rings hungry for the murmur of light that escapes the distant big top.

During a stay at a city by the cold, grey ocean, Culpepper brings a slight, middle-aged man to Proserpina’s cage. The man is called Iosif Rabinovich, an animal trainer from the outskirts of Saint Petersburg, who moved to America in 1904 to escape a wave of pogroms that left many of his family dead. He has a thin, ruddy face, and the capillaries on his nose have surrendered to years of drinking and solitude. Culpepper tells Iosif that he has big plans for the small bear with blue eyes. She will become a showcase act in the big top, and Iosif will get her there. “I never thought I’d hire a yid, but your kind really do have quite a way with these beasts.” He leaves Iosif alone with the bear and the echo of his epithet. The training begins.

III. Rabinovich, the man

Iosif has worked with animals since he was very small. Instead of learning to read, he learned to rein in creatures twice his size. His father had been especially fond of the biggest, most dangerous animals: elephants, big cats from hot climates. But it was bears his father had loved the most. He taught his son how to properly manner a bear by blowing quick bursts of air into the beast’s nose.

Iosif was still a young boy when he first got up close to a bear. His father was training a large male brown bear from Kamchatka for The Saint Petersburg Circus. The bear stood unmoving as his father lifted him up to meet the animal’s gaze. Little Iosif could feel his whole body tremble outward from a pulse buried deep in his abdomen. He couldn’t look at the bear’s wet black eyes, so he settled on the pair of dilated nostrils before him. His father’s hands were warm on his sides.
“All right,” he said, “now you let him know you share the same spirit. Blow into his nose there, and he’ll feel that we mean him no harm.” The bear’s own warm breath dampened Iosif’s tiny face. “Come now, son. Let him know.” Iosif took in a shallow breath, closed his eyes, and blew. When he opened his eyes again the bear was still staring at him, but now the bear’s face had softened somehow. The wet black eyes were still wet black, but now they were staring back at Iosif, focused intently on his tiny face. And just like that, Iosif fell in love.

IV. Changes in the air

Iosif enters Proserpina’s cage and approaches her slowly. “Hello, my pretty one,” he says to her gently. “Hello, my girl. Look at those beautiful eyes.” She grunts quietly, unsure of the sounds he makes. “Ah, yes, dear one. Privet. Hello. I am Iosif, and you are our little Proserpina, our springtime girl.” The man’s voice is soft and even, but Proserpina is still unsettled. She hasn’t been so close to a human since the day they killed her mother. Iosif crouches down near her and sits. He remains unmoving until he becomes part of her cage, a familiar presence. Proserpina and Iosif sit in silence for nearly an hour.

Time moves in different ways for the man and the bear. Iosif counts his breaths. He tries to focus on the feeling of his heartbeat, what it means to be perfectly still. Proserpina tries to sense changes in the air. She sniffs at the wind and smells the man, the filth of the other animals in the aisle. The air is not yet swollen with the bustle of circus-goers.

Finally Proserpina grows curious. This man simply sits with her in her cage. He has a scent she does not recognize, but he does not seem to mean harm or pain. She moves toward him, then stops. He does not react, so she keeps moving. Iosif stays still and allows her to approach. She sniffs him, his old soiled coat, his stale breath. She finds his odor somehow pleasing. When she begins to advance again, he makes a low humming sound. It comes from somewhere below his chest, swelling behind his navel. She doesn’t back away. “Now we will be friends, I think,” he says. He lightly blows into Proserpina’s snout and she feels suddenly warm and calm. The warmth puddles and grows into a kind of trust only bears can know.

Over the next few months, the pair moves about the country with the circus and Iosif teaches Proserpina to follow simple commands. She sits, stands, nods, claps and rolls at Iosif’s word. She understands that certain sounds Iosif makes carry certain meanings and call for certain reactions, and she understands that he is her sole handler. But most of all she understands that he
brings her food. Day in and day out, he arrives at her cage and her hunger ceases. He feeds her
the food that Culpepper provides, but when he can manage it, he brings her sweet kosher meats
that taste like the soft, toothsome things her mother used to bring her. He cooks the meat himself
and eats his own dinner in the cage with her. It’s a habit she comes to expect each day. She
understands he will be there while she eats, before she falls asleep at night.

But there are things Proserpina cannot understand, things that slip by on the wind: the
slurs circus workers whisper under their breath when they walk by the cage, the way they quietly
threaten the man who feeds her. She only hears the sibilant mess of their human sounds.

V. The Goddess and the Buffoon

One day in early February, Culpepper shows up at the cage. Iosif has been working on a
routine of more complicated commands with Proserpina, and Culpepper is ready to feature their
work in the big top. Tonight they will perform their routine after the Bengal tiger is finished
jumping through a series of flaming hoops without even so much as singeing the tips of his fur.
Culpepper’s lips peel away from his teeth to signify a smile. His accompanying laugh sounds
like coins rattling in a jar. Proserpina listens through the clatter for a command, but there is
nothing familiar about the noise he makes.

Iosif returns to the cage that night with dinner and a rucksack. He gives Proserpina her
meal and then dumps the contents of the rucksack on the floor of the cage. He picks up a bright
blue and white trench coat with shiny black buttons and slips it on. “To match your eyes,” he
says. Then he picks up a box from the floor. “Now, I’ll turn into Iosif The Great,” he says. He
winks at the bear as she gracelessly tears into a hunk of meat. While Proserpina eats, Iosif
carefully applies greasy make-up to his long, bony face until his eyebrows are permanently
turned up, his mouth is drawn into a fat red frown, and his broken-veined nose is uniformly
scarlet. He hums a little waltz as he puts the finishing touches on his uniform. “Tonight, we will
show the whole world all our hard work, eh little one?” Proserpina listens to the
painted man as he hums. The sound is pleasant and she feels very safe.

An unfamiliar man turns up at the cage holding a large piece of dark brown leather.
“Strap this on the bear. Culpepper is ready for you,” he says. Iosif’s painted frown deepens. “I
can’t muzzle her,” he says, “She’s never worn one before. Please, understand. She cannot wear
that while she performs.” The man shoves the muzzle through the bars and into Iosif’s chest. “No
muzzle. No show,” he barks. Proserpina registers the aggression in his tone and stands up tall. The unfamiliar man smells like tobacco smoke and something else she doesn’t recognize but it burns her nostrils. She grunts. The man backs away from the cage. “Control your animal, you miserable heeb,” he says and walks away. Iosif shakes his head and wrings the muzzle in his hands. “This isn’t right, little one,” he says, “We are professionals. Artists. You deserve better treatment than this. We both do.” She can sense the distress in his voice. She longs for him to hum the calming waltz again so she can feel warm and safe. Iosif untangles the muzzle and lets Proserpina sniff at the leather. “I’m sorry, little one,” he says and gently slips the muzzle over her snout. She tries to back away, and Iosif’s grip tightens for just a moment. She shakes her head, but the task is complete. The leather strap binds her jaw shut. Iosif sighs. “At least they will see your eyes,” he says, “Come, little one. It’s time to give them a show.”

VI. The Goddess Bear in the ring

The big top is a large canvas tent filled with the scent of hundreds of people. The dromedaries, the catamount and several cages filled with exotic birds line the sides of the center ring, a circle of packed earth littered with props. The Bengal tiger and his handler are still in the center with two stocky circus workers who are dousing the flaming hoops with buckets of water. The handler leashes the tiger and pulls him to the side away from the rest of the animals. Culpepper emerges as the crowd roars with applause. “Hello again, everyone!” he shouts, “Hello! It is my distinct pleasure this evening to introduce a new act to the Culpepper Grand Family Menagerie! I assure you fine folks this is an act you will remember for a lifetime or two.” The crowd laughs. “Tonight, I would like you to meet the newest members of the Family, Proserpina the Blue-eyed Goddess Bear and Hymie the Buffoon!” The crowd explodes with laughter and applause, a noise Proserpina has not yet heard at this volume. She looks at Iosif filled with a new feeling that isn’t quite fear and isn’t quite confusion. He places his hand on her paw and leads her proudly into the center ring. As they near the center, the noise suddenly dies down until the big top is a hushed and odorless vacuum. Iosif turns to Proserpina and whispers, “Ready, little one? Let’s show them.” He raises both his arms above his head and suddenly the big top fills with another new noise, Strauss’s “Vienna Waltz.” A calliope lilts out the up-tempo waltz, and the space is alive with sound. The notes seep into Proserpina’s fur, and she is awash in the familiar rhythm. Iosif lowers his arms slightly and waves to the crowd. “Volna,” he says,
“wave to your fans, Proserpina.” She latches on to the command and performs her trick. Turning to face the crowd, she stands up on her hind legs and waves her paws back and forth. They cheer and clap along to the music. “All right, now let’s take a little walk,” he says. They saunter around the ring together, and she waves some more. Then Iosif stops. “All right, now poza. We’ll pose for them,” he says. Proserpina brings her paws together and places them under her snout, framing her face like a beauty queen. Iosif does the same. The crowd roars with laughter.

They perform trick after trick and it drives the crowd into frenzied cheers. Proserpina somersaults and walks on her front paws. She climbs up a ladder and curtsies at the top. She balances on a rolling ball. And all the while her blue eyes ring with the light of the big top.

It is when she wraps Iosif in a hug that looks like affection that Iosif breaks character. He loops his fingers under the leather muzzle on her snout and a sob escapes his throat. She can feel his thin body tremble. He catches himself and funnels his sobs into a low hum that matches the tune of the calliope. Proserpina focuses on the sound that she doesn’t understand is a melody. She feels safe in the man’s arms. The crowd roars, convinced of the bond shared by this man and beast. They scream and cheer for their blue-eyed goddess bear.

After the performance is over, Proserpina is taken back to her cage. Culpepper strides up the aisle, flushed and puffed up. “It’s a hit! You’re doing this performance again on Friday. The world loves Hymie the Buffoon!” he says and shakes Iosif’s hand. “You and this bear are going to make me rich!” Iosif smiles weakly and Culpepper bounds away, muttering the word rich over and over. Proserpina keeps listening for a command. Iosif turns to her and gently pulls off her muzzle. He blows warm air into her nostrils and she relaxes. “You were wonderful,” he says to her. “I am proud of you, little one. I will see you tomorrow evening with a special treat from the city.” Iosif leaves the cage and walks into the heavy night air. She feels warm and sleepy, but she misses the scent of the man when he’s gone.

VII. The Pomegranate

Proserpina spends the next day checking the air for the man. She sniffs at the breeze, but everything smells like popcorn and animal stink. Culpepper shows up at the cage in the afternoon. His face is wound with panic. He, too, is looking for the man. He mutters something the bear does not understand, then he kicks the cage with the toe of his boot. From the corner of
her cage, Proserpina lets out a low growl. Culpepper kicks the cage again and shouts at her in a way that sounds like it should be a command. He leaves without feeding her.

By dusk the bear’s stomach is baying for food and she’s thirsty, and there’s still no sign or scent of the man. The crowds have disappeared from the aisles leaving her alone with the catamount, the dromedaries, and the fluttering, scritching birds. The Bengal tiger skulks in his cage across the aisle, glowering and panting.

Then the man is there. She picks up his scent on the wind and she wanders to the front of the cage. But there is a new odor, too. Something she doesn’t recognize right away, something sharp but like the forest underbrush, earthy and rotten like the other bear, her mother, when they killed her. It makes her mouth water but she doesn’t understand why. But the man is back, and so she will eat.

He comes into view and walks slowly up the aisle. As he approaches, the new smell gets stronger and stronger until Proserpina can see it blooming from his a new hole in his shirt and his stomach. He clutches a small sack against his side that is also stained deep red. When he reaches the cage, he doesn’t enter. Instead, he slumps down against the bars, and the man and her cage smell like a full forest now, fetid and ancient. Proserpina can’t understand why he doesn’t come in. She is hungry and he is here, so it is time to eat. He coughs a wet-sounding cough and then he finally speaks.

“Proserpina, my little girl, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. I was out finding you your gift.” he says. He reaches into the sack and pulls out a round red object that smells sweet and strange. It has been stabbed with something jagged and sharp and the sweet-strange smelling juice leaks out. “See? I brought you a pomegranate so that you might bring us our springtime just like in the myth that gave you your name,” he says slowly. He places the fruit in the cage before her and she sniffs at it. Iosif coughs up the scent of the forest again.

“I wish I could take you with me away from here,” he says. “There’s not a place in this world for creatures like us. There are people here who do not want the world to love us. But I hid your surprise from them. They wanted to steal it from me, but see? The knife only nicked it. The knife only nicked me, too. I will be fine, little one.” He brings his hands to his blooming stomach, his shirt stained red. He lets out a soft sob and then begins to hum a little until he
doesn’t hum anymore. Proserpina feels very warm and safe, and she swells with a feeling she
doesn’t know is pleasure. The man is here, so can feed her.

The tiger waits at the edge of his cage sniffing at the man, but still. The birds are settling
in their cages. Their wings rustle softly against their perches and roosts. Proserpina sits down in
her cage, her eyes two hovering satellites in the darkened aisle. Soon the man will come in with
her dinner. Yes, soon she will eat.
Recovery

When entering The Disaster Area with your fellow Handler it is important to remember that your Recovery Assistance Dog will ignore environmental threats if you first provide evidence of an Edible Reward.

Exhibit the Edible Reward at the previously specified distance of 2-3 feet and administer the Clicking Sound as taught during Entry Training. The Clicking Sound, as you will remember, is different from the Targeting Trill, which is meant to alert the dog to possible danger. The Clicking Sound is a Positive Reinforcement Factor and is easily created by quickly forming and releasing a pocket of air between the cheek and molars. Produce two clearly audible Clicks to prime the dog for Recovery Scenting.

In The Disaster Area it is advisable to resist the urge to exhibit any reaction to Situational Hazards that might alert the dog to Handler Fear. Negative Handler Reactions, as you will remember, contribute to Recovery Assistance Dog Anxiety.

Signs of Negative Handler Reaction:
1. Footfall Rhythm Deviations
2. Involuntary Fluid Production
3. Evidence of Entreaty
4. Perceptible Reorientation of Facial Musculature

In these moments, it is imperative to remember and execute Protocol.

Proceed through the Disaster Area with your dog and fellow Handler.
Now that the dog is primed, it should exhibit Scent Recovery Behaviors. Allow the dog to perform a Preliminary Leashed Scenting. Follow the dog’s Scenting paths. The dog will likely create several overlapping paths and move at a somewhat frantic pace. This is normal in any non-simulated Disaster Area.

In this initial stage, a dog wants nothing more than to perform an Act of Recovery. Because of this, the dog will move quickly and with a Sense of Purpose. This behavior will likely cease after one hour of Scenting is met without success.

It is important to remember The Recovery Odds at this time.

It is important to remember that your dog knows it cannot receive an Edible Reward until an Act of Recovery is achieved.

It is important to remember your Handler Training Code and that your Mission is to maintain your dog’s morale at all costs.

A Recovery Assistance Dog’s continued efficacy hinges on Perceived Success.

At this time, you and your fellow Handler must provide the dog with a Discoverable Recovery Situation. It is imperative in this stage that you resist Negative Handler Reactions. Be as discrete as possible as you separate yourself from the dog and your fellow Handler. Move quietly through The Disaster Area to seek out your Discoverable Point of Concealment.

Be especially aware of your body now that you are alone. Remember Protocol. Ignore External Stimuli.

Ignore the way the heat seeps up from below the wreckage. Ignore the unsteadiness of the ground beneath your feet. Ignore the color of the sky. Ignore the way that blue makes you feel.
Ignore it all.

Find a place where you can conceal yourself safely. Displace the rubble carefully to create a space for your body. Replace the rubble so that you’re nearly completely obscured from view.

Wait.

Concentrate on the sound of your breath, the hush of the earth.

Know you will be found.

Know that we are sorry.
1.

The same summer I let a boy nip at my earlobe, my mother began to break the plates from the kitchen cupboard. Dad had been dead for six years by then, and we didn’t miss him. She, my sister Sitta, and I had a good thing going on our own. We had a couch and a loveseat. We could sit on either. A choice.

2.

One by one, they’d go. The six o’clock news would come on and Mom would disappear. We wouldn’t even notice she was gone until we heard it, the explosion of glass in the backyard, a sound clear and cold as a gunshot. The first time it happened, we weren’t sure what to do. Sitta jumped out of her seat and hovered there, stuck with fear. I ran to the kitchen. I could see Mom outside swimming through the wet black of the backyard, but I stayed in the kitchen and hid myself in the buzz of the refrigerator. I bit holes into salami slices. Let them thwap onto the counter, unfinished.

3.

We did look for traces of the blast. We searched the garbage and the backyard for shards of shrapnel without a word exchanged between us. We found nothing, so I let the shock fade. I traveled in a pack with my friends. I kissed boys in the rain behind school buildings and under bleachers.

4.

The second plate came weeks later. After we heard it, I sat and waited for my mother to return knowing the broken remains of the dinner plate had already either floated up to the
heavens or wriggled deep into the earth, under the skin of the dirt. There was no room in between.

5.
Sitta and I, we didn’t go looking for what we knew we couldn’t find.

6.
No one could believe how hot it was that summer. People in town would constantly marvel at the heat, the way it bubbled up from the asphalt, the way it trapped your heat-weak body like a bug in amber. Men wiped their foreheads with thick hands and opened their eyes wide with surprise. Girls licked popsicles like secrets.

7.
My mother always moved with the efficiency of a surgeon when she took to a plate: quick work, bloodless, a scar that fades into the skin.

8.
When Henry Forrester took off my panties in the cornfields behind his grandma’s house, he had to roll them down my sticky, sunbeaten thighs. Then he tossed them in the dirt. For a moment I watched them sit there balled up like a discarded sandwich wrapper on the ground. When I got up and ran, he didn’t follow. All I wanted to do was bite into a fresh ear of sweet corn, spit kernels like bullets.

9.
At the dinner table that night, I had my way with a chicken thigh in a bowl. Sitta and my mother bore witness to the assault. I tore the meat from the bone with my teeth and sucked on the fat that hung at the joints. My mother twitched as I grew closer to the bone. Her hands ran over the silverware, the napkin, the water glass. She tapped her feet. My teeth snapped at the stringy
tendons, nearly there. She reached. At last, I sank my teeth. The bone cracked clean under the weight of my jaw as the plate exploded against the wall.
The Fishcutter Seeks Forgiveness

When the fishcutter goes to confession, he sits in the dark hull of the confessional stinking like the ocean after a storm. The priest asks the fishcutter what his sins are and tries not to breathe through his nose as the other man’s rankness seeps through the confessional’s porous divider and settles into his holy vestments. The fishcutter tells him about his impure thoughts: the things he wants to do with his filet knife and with the fish. He tells him about the gulls that nested in the shack at the pier. He goes on in great detail. He’s made a list.

The gulls, they:
Shit and shit
Squawk and squawk
Dive-bomb the fish scrap bins, which contain guts and heads.
Feed babies the fish eyes
Carry diseases, which they spread to the fish
Stole a fish, three times
Stole his lunch, seven times
Watch from the rafters, always

The priest struggles to breathe as he asks the fishcutter what he means by this list. Does he want God to forgive the gulls? The fishcutter begins to cry. He makes a sound like frightened livestock. Somehow his crying makes the tiny confessional even more unbearably fishy, as though his tear ducts leak with the stench of his trade. The priest brings his handkerchief to his mouth and gags. The odor has pushed him beyond decorum.

The fishcutter wants the priest to understand. He wants the priest to see what he deals with. How he is tortured! It couldn’t be helped. What he did to them. It couldn’t be helped! The reek swells and spills from the fishcutter and overcomes the priest. It wriggles through the confessional divider like rotten black worms. The holy man cowers in his chair and begs him to
stop, but the fishcutter is hysterical now. He cries out again. He tells the trembling priest how he staples them to the wall of his shack, each gull bloodied and dead, their wings outstretched. He crucified the gulls! He shouts, What judgment would God have in store for such a lowly man, crawling like a fetid, creeping thing? Like a cockroach! The fishcutter reads his list again, screaming and stinking. This justifies his actions.

They shit and squawk.

They steal from him.

They watch. They’re always watching him!

This proves his innocence. The gulls were sent from hell! They saw what he did to the fish. What he did to those fish! The priest pleads for the fishcutter to stop. God forgives! He forgives us all! The priest runs from the confessional and from the church. He rips off his vestments and flings his polluted body into the ocean. The salt stings as it baptizes and baptizes.

The fishcutter, cleansed of his sins, emerges from the confessional and makes his penance. He dips his fishy fingers in the holy water fount and signs himself before he leaves.
Gas, Vapor, Ashes

Nothing is impossible and we know that nothing is destroyed, it only changes chemically. We burn up a house and its contents, we change the form but the same elements exist; gas, vapor, ashes. They are all there just the same.

-LeRoy Pollack to his son Jackson, 1928

A series of chemical reactions

When Oksana Baiul skates, ice molecules in contact with air cannot properly bond with the molecules of the mass of ice beneath (and thus are free to move like molecules of liquid water). It is hypothesized by some that these molecules remain in a semi-liquid state, providing lubrication regardless of pressure against the ice exerted by the knife of her skate. It does not matter if she is drunk or sober. Though some days, it matters to Oksana.

Oksana and the people

Oksana told USA Weekend in November of 1997, "I don't want people to think of me as the Olympic Champion girl. I want them to remember me for my artistry. I'd like to someday show my grandkids pictures and say, 'This was your grandmother as a flower, a swan, a butterfly.'"

The people responded, “You only exist on the ice. You only exist as the girl.”

Rites and sacrifice

When the girl slips during training, the ice burns her skin. The lesions bloom on her pale arms like flowers: dahlias, peonies, funereal blossoms.
A word on the negative effects of alcohol on the brain
difficulty walking, blurred vision, slurred speech, slowed reaction times, impaired
memory, impaired memory.

After the car crash, the people
You are no flower.

A miracle
This is what you don’t know: when I speak to my fans, when I say my name, I can feel
my teeth migrating in my mouth. Ok-sahn-uh. It’s the sound of a machine-beveled metal on
frozen water. Ok-sahn-uh.

The people and the science
We care not for friction, for heat.

The ice and the blade
No one can control the ice. Oksana understands this. When she enters the rink, her
relationship with the ice depends on her mastery of the thin blades screwed to the boots of her
skates. With these knives on her feet, she coaxes the ice into chemical change. The scarred rink
is a recording of this transformation.

The performance
When Oksana trains she does not think about skating. She does not think about ice or the way her muscles work in concert to make her body move. She does not think about the people. When Oksana trains she imagines herself a swan gliding off into a body of water that puddles from the corners of the rink. She bows her delicate neck under a downy wing, evolving.
The Wizard of Menlo Park

The light bulb is eased from its socket by a pair of small, smudged hands. The hands belong to a young girl, and the light bulb belongs to the overhead lamp that lights her older sister’s bedroom. Watch as this young girl cradles the delicate glass bulb so warm with the memory of electricity, and deposits it under the bed. She slips from the room, undetected and feeling very much avenged for a wrong perpetrated earlier that day by her sister. The bedroom is dark and quiet, tomb-like even. The light bulb is left to mingle with dusty fashion magazines, and because it is a light bulb it thinks only as a light bulb can think: in the recollections of past light. The unlit bulb stores the memories of every version of itself, every brilliant moment of luminosity and every failed incandescence. It knows every inch of every room in every home it has ever illuminated, each space it has ever carved with false light.

Now, it sits unmoving with its curves recalling the shape of a dark, ripe, seed bearing fruit, those curves so right for the gentle cup of a human hand. Its inventor’s hands had fashioned the glass of that first bulb just so, mulling over the great and terrible possibility of harnessing light. Light. Can you imagine it? Command over the darkness. Freedom from the constraints of the passage of time. Freedom perhaps even from the hand of God. The inventor had slaved over this idea for an age.

When he held the finished bulb in his hands for the first time, he thought of his first wife, of a different kind of warmth and wept in a way he had not wept since childhood, convulsing with the regret of one who had devoted himself to the advancement of humanity.

The young girl and her sister, the one who will walk into this dark room in mere moments, do not think of this man, the inventor, or the way he mourned the loss of the warmth of his wife, her breasts, the curve of her throat. They do not think of switches and electrical currents, of harnessing light. They think of cake crumbs and homework, something about the way a television glows blue in a dark room. And anyway the sister has always found the
overhead lamp in her room too bright. She reads a magazine at the window now by the silvery light of the waning gibbous moon.
Fish Speak Fish

It’s been two months since Anya arrived in America cocooned in a bright blue parka, feet nestled in a brand new pair of brown suede mules. She came to live with Craig after he signed some papers to make Anya’s odd beauty a constant, dynamic fixture in his life. When she was young she’d heard stories about women who went to America to live with men who couldn’t find women from their own country to love them, and now, here she is, living in this new place with this man who might do something like build computers for a living.

Craig is quiet and not interested in Anya’s past. He doesn’t care to hear stories of her childhood, the haunting grey-toned landscape of home. He leaves in the morning. He returns in the evening. He watches the news on mute with glassy, unmoving eyes. He eats the dinner Anya has cooked for him, and thanks her for it. He kisses her hard on the mouth, tongue darting like a tadpole spilled from a bottle. He retreats to the closet with the desk and the black-lit aquarium full of fish that Anya caught sight of once, a purple-blue flash in the blackness.

Craig has not yet realized that Anya cannot understand him because he has not yet said anything to her that would elicit a response, but at night in bed with him, Anya dreams of tropical fish. The fish speak fish and she understands them fully.

So here Anya sits in Craig’s kitchen waiting for that momentary exchange when Craig’s lips will wrap around some familiar word. Here she is thinking her thoughts in a language she could speak to dream fishes. She flips on the small television on the counter and turns the dial until she sees people on the screen dancing. They throw their bodies against one another and sway as a song plays. A girl’s voice hisses over the music, “Crazy bitch, crazy bitch.” Anya listens carefully to the sounds the girl makes. The words pop and sizzle like meat frying in fat. “Crazy bitch,” Anya repeats. “Crazy bitch.” She watches the words spill from her mouth and splash onto the counter with wet thuds. They flop, flounder for a moment, and then lie still.
Good Dr. Boggis

A curious, fat yew tree brings Dr. Boggis to the churchyard. The constable called him away from a session—Hannah Bledsoe, the one with the abscess. A man of reason is required at the scene.

The tree is tucked away behind the cemetery and draped in skeins of browning needles. A crowd has gathered at its base. Their necks crane skyward to the haze of black gas blooming from the treetop. Dr. Boggis quietly takes note of the nature of the tree’s emissions: black, vaporous, unorthodox.

“It’s breathing,” says the constable.

“It’s possessed,” says the crowd.

“It’s science,” says Dr. Boggis, taking note of the color of the bark, the sturdiness of the trunk: grayish brown (with hints of—what is that—pistachio green? Lovely.), pleasingly firm.

“Don’t touch it, good doctor!” says the crowd. “The devil has marked this foul plant with his wretched hand!”

Dr. Boggis removes his hand from the tree and waves it decorously toward the crowd. He is pleased by this serendipitous opportunity to educate the masses.

“I assure you, good townspeople,” he says, “This tree is not marked by the hand of any spiritual presence, demonic or otherwise. It is simply suffering from some as yet unexplainable malady or paradoxical behavior that I’m certain I shall clarify with the proper application of logic and reason. Now if you would all please go about your daily affairs, I will now conduct a series of complicated and highly scientific tests on the tree. Do not worry. I will have an answer for you all quite soon.”

“Thank you, Dr. Boggis! Our man of reason! Thank you!” cries the crowd, assuaged by his assurance and his storied intellect.

The constable ushers the crowd through the churchyard, leaving Dr. Boggis alone with the respiring yew.
Being a learned man, a man of vast and varied knowledge, Dr. Boggis knows without pause that the yew squatting before him is most certainly a poisonous specimen.

“You could be the end of me, should I make the wrong move” says the doctor. He plucks a fallen berry from the ground and considers its weight in his palm.

“You coniferous beast. You prince of trees. Look at you. I can hold in my hand the very seed of your being and yet here you stand, tall, proud. A complicated circuitry of living stuff. And yet. And yet…” Dr. Boggis takes a step back to once again observe the tree’s smoggy breath.

“What grieves you?” he says.

The tree responds with a wheeze of new murk.

“Well, shall we begin then?” he says taking note of the volume and color of this newest emission. The tree makes no attempt to answer, but this does not flap Dr. Boggis, who, given his extensive training and willingness to engage with the mysteries of carbon-based substances, is not one so easily flapped.

Dr. Boggis begins to collect preliminary data. Upon estimation the tree itself appears to be nearly twenty meters high. Its trunk’s width measures an impressive two meters in diameter. The needles of the yew, lanceolate in nature and forming the characteristic spiral orientation, appear healthy and abundant. The tree’s location provided adequate sunlight and the season’s rainfall had been quite average, so the tree had access to adequate water levels. It does not appear that any sort of invasive species or parasitic presence has compromised the yew’s immediate ecological unit, and it does not appear that the tree has suffered the scourge of any sort of catastrophic natural event. The conditions are prime for a competently functioning tree.

“A quandary,” mutters Dr. Boggis as a new surge of blackness dissipates into the sky.

“No matter,” he says lowering himself to his knees, “It’s simply a matter of the right application of knowledge. I will know you.”

Dr. Boggis commences his experimentation as he has always done, with the ceremonious unclasping of his supply kit. He reaches with steadied hand into the gaping maw of its science and removes, one by delicate one, a great many glass and metal instruments. He arranges them in
a line along one of the yew’s knotted roots. They gleam with chaste importance in the cold morning sun.

“I will perform a comprehensive inspection,” he announces and accouters himself with a pair of impressive forceps.

Standing at an appropriately cautious distance, Dr. Boggis leans forward and pinches away a flake of bark. With a studious eye, he examines the bark, and, seeing no immediately anomalous characteristics, carefully places the sample onto a slide for further culturing.

“More than meets the eye, I’m sure,” remarks Dr. Boggis as he selects an optical microscope from his arrangement of glass and metal instruments. For one fleeting moment, he allows himself to bask in the gravity of its mechanical beauty, the famous weight of which could reduce even the hulkingest of brutes to its most piling smallness. The great equalizer of us all, he thinks. Then he sets to work.

With the utmost precision, Dr. Boggis places the culture slide beneath the delicate lens of his optical microscope. He eases his eyes to the viewing glass and adjusts the focus.

He draws in a deep breath and readies himself for the observation.

“This is it,” he whispers. An image begins to take shape.

“Why it’s the good doctor!” shouts a voice suddenly. Dr. Boggis flings himself away from the optical microscope, momentarily convinced the tree has spoken, but the voice quickly inhabits the body of a small girl skipping toward him merrily.

“My! Just look at that tree! How strange it is. I should think I’d like to climb that tree,” she says pointing at the breathing yew. She wears a black and grey plaid jumper that seems to match her dark hair. She is small and pale.

“That is unadvisable, little child. This tree is wracked with disease, and climbing it may compromise my testing.” Dr. Boggis indicates his optical microscope.

“But I’ve come here to play,” she says and pouts her lips.

“Please go away,” he says.

“But where am I supposed to play?” she says, letting her pout draw her pale face into a dark frown.

“You don’t have the proper training to be here. You can play somewhere else,” says Dr. Boggis simply, calmly.

“What makes you think I don’t have the proper training?” she says with strange coolness.
“Enough” he says. Dr. Boggis understands the unpredictability of angry children. There is always an inevitable calm before the destructive storm of indignation, so, to preserve a stable environment for successful testing, he decides to acquiesce. “I will allow you to stay and play, but you must promise to stay clear of my work. At present, this is a very delicate testing site.” The little girl’s eyes widen, and for a moment it seems they flicker from black to orange.

“How kind of you, doctor,” she says.

“There will be rules of course,” he says. “To begin with, you are not to yell or compromise my equipment with your undoubtedly sticky hands.” The little girl smiles and puts a hushing finger to her lips, the other hand in a fist behind her back.

“Next, you must be very still while I observe with the microscope. In fact, hold your breath while I look into this optical microscope. You see, air—no carbon dioxide specifically—is very disruptive to the microscopic viewing process.” The little girl takes a deep breath and, still smiling, plugs her nose. Dr. Boggis feels smug in his subterfuge.

“Now I’ll hold my own breath and peer into the optical microscope.” Dr. Boggis once again lowers his eyes to the viewing lens and begins to adjust focus. He holds his breath.

The image begins to come into focus slowly, gracefully. Dr. Boggis takes note of the striation, a geometrically luxuriant pattern creeping across the sample. He notes the various hues saturating the bark, solemn grays, tender browns, and that hint of pistachio green—so lovely. He prepares himself for the aberration, that one telling hint of menace.

“Where are you,” he whispers, “Show yourself.” He searches the slide over and over for any possible sign until his eyes swim with kaleidoscopic patterns of gray and brown. He realizes suddenly that the small girl is still expertly quiet. He glances back toward her. She is still holding her breath, and she is still smiling.

“All right, that’s enough,” he says slightly perturbed. “You’ve done a passable job.”

“I know,” she says, “What’s next?” Dr. Boggis ignores the girl and turns back to the yew. He watches it flower and wheeze like a smokestack. He can think of no explanation without proof.

“I must need to push further,” he says to the tree. “The answer is clearly somewhere inside you.” The tree exhales a silent black puff as the little girl begins to squeal with laughter.

“Silly doctor! How stupid of you to talk to this tree! Trees can’t talk!” The little girl laughs and claps her hands together.
“You are being rather rude, little girl,” says Dr. Boggis. “I know trees can’t talk. I’m simply voicing my observations aloud. Any good scientist would do the same.” This only causes the laughing girl to laugh harder.

“You’ve already broken the rules I laid out,” Dr. Boggis says, “Quiet down or I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” This quashes her laughter. “That’s better,” he says. “Now sit over there, while I set up.” He indicates a shaded patch of grass a safe distance from his arrangement of glass and metal instruments. She sits and once again puts a hushing finger to her lips.

“Hold your breath again,” says Dr. Boggis as he takes up a manual drill from his arrangement of glass and metal instruments. He bores the drill into the bark and penetrates the trunk for a sampling of sap, then retrieving a small beaker from his arrangement, he allows the tree to disgorge its noxious liquor into the container. He sets his Bunsen burner aflame and places the beaker over its fire.

Dr. Boggis waits. The girl sits smiling and silent, watching the flame.

After some time, the sap finally begins to rush with bubbles. Furious pockets of air thrust to the surface of the sap and meet the world with a faint hiss. Dr. Boggis carefully notes the change, a characteristic phase transition for any liquid. Nothing abnormal. Nothing indicating disease. Nothing but steam.

Dr. Boggis steps back to view the tree’s gloomy pant once again. He can feel a small knot of panic quiver in his stomach as he watches the remaining sap evaporate until his own brow is slick with condensation. He’d made a promise to uncover the cause, to sate the public’s thirst for the truth. He is their man of reason.

Suddenly, the girl skips toward Dr. Boggis and leans in.

“Nothing to see, is there?” she says and begins to twirl in place. The spite in her voice does not match the ease of her twirls. Dr. Boggis notices the sudden, biting aroma of sulfur. He looks to the tree top, but there is no black gas leaking from the leaves. He turns back to the girl.

“You’re mistaken. I’m testing the sap for incongruities. This takes time.” But the small twirling child does not seem to hear him.

“Why it’s nothing but syrup! I could drink it if I liked. But, I can do anything I like, really.” She stops spinning. “I can even make this tree stop spewing smoke. Can you?” She
furrows her brow again and her eyes flicker. This time, the doctor is sure he could detect a flash of orange. He conceals his disquiet with polite austerity.

“Little child, please. I am trying to diagnose this tree. Something very serious is occurring, and I am the only person who can uncover its cause. I am the doctor here. You are a little girl. You should be at home minding your chores and doing as your parents say.”

“I wonder,” she says and begins to hop from foot to foot, “I wonder if the townspeople will drive you out when they discover you can’t even diagnose a silly little tree.”

“We’re done for the day,” Dr. Boggis says curtly. He turns his back to the girl and pretends to sift through his arrangement of glass and metal instruments. He hears the girl step forward, and for a moment he thinks he hears the grass sizzle under her footfall. “I wonder if they will drive you out when they discover how willingly you abandoned the Bledsoe girl for a tree.” He spins around to face the girl.

“I didn’t abandon the Bledsoe--” Dr. Boggis stops short. His veins seem to have frozen, his blood gone cold in his heart and his head. “How do you know about Hannah? Tell me, girl! What do you know of it?” The doctor feels suddenly dizzy. His heart batters in his chest. The yew unburdens itself again and black fills the sky.

“She’s nearly dead,” the girl says smiling. “It won’t be long now!” Her eyes flame again and she claps her hands. “Her abscess leaks and weeps! Cancer, you know! But, you know she’ll die. That’s why you left. Left her to die in such great pain. Lovely awful pain!” She hops again from foot to foot and the grass begins to spout little tongues of flame around her.

“Who are you?” says the doctor backing away. “Why are you here?”

“Oh, good doctor. You know well who I am.” The girl takes another step forward, her smiling face grows dark around her horribly white teeth, and suddenly she is in front of the tree. It looms and puffs behind her like a monstrous smokestack. “I can make it stop, you know,” she says. “All you have to do is ask, and I will make the tree well again. Go ahead, good doctor. Ask me.”

Dr. Boggis whimpers.

“So it is the mark of a demon, then,” he says nodding at the tree. The little girl smiles and laces her fingers together. The doctor notices for the first time how jagged and dark her fingernails are.

“A demon! Oh, how exciting! How prodigious!” she laughs.
“And you will make the tree well again?” says the doctor.
“All you have to do is ask,” says the girl stepping closer.
“What will happen to me?” says the doctor.
“That’s a very special secret,” says the girl.
“And Ms. Bledsoe?” he says.
“I could fix her, too.”
“Then do it,” says Dr. Boggis. “Heal her.”

The girl begins to laugh again. She opens her mouth wide and her jaw hangs loose. Her throat smolders with burning red coals until her face is engulfed in flames. The yew tree pukes a great black blast into the sky until the only light Dr. Boggis can see comes from the conflagration still cackling at the base of the tree.

Dr. Boggis is only aware he is screaming when he notices he has also begun to cry. Empirically, Dr. Boggis knows a causal relationship exists between his screams and his tears—his screams, therefore, his tears—and yet, Dr. Boggis cannot stop doing either.

He bleats and wails as the little devil girl burns evermore hungrily, consuming the tree and the sky with her hellish fire. Through his ululations he tries to recall his purpose, the reasons he’s gone into medicine: the succor of logic, the righteous pursuit of knowledge.

But the doctor can only see one image, the girl, Hannah Bledsoe, the one with the abscess, that weeping abscess that should be her end. He sees her sit up in her bed, marveling at her sudden recovery, the miserable, killing pain in her side now gone. He sees the midwife on hand scrape away the dead, dried tissue where the abscess had been with her curette, the wound once thick with toxins now disappeared. He sees Hannah’s smile reeking with terrible, bartered life. It pusses and oozes through the cracks of her smiling teeth and onto the floor of the room. It spills onto the earth and the blackened sky and the burning tree until Dr. Boggis is aware of the sudden quiet. He opens his eyes. The tree is there, unharmed and still. The cloudless sky is clear and bright, and the girl is nowhere to be seen.

The good doctor quickly gathers his instruments into his bag and leaves. He will tell the townspeople of his success.
Anne Sexton Gets a Key to the Underground City

When Anne puts on her mother’s finest fur and pours herself a glass of vodka, we know she’s not long for this world. She’s just returned from a meeting with her dear Maxine and it was all too much. The book is done and it’s fabulous. There is nothing to be done. She’s simply finished. The world can have it.

So she goes to the hallway table, the one in front her the mirror, and she slips off all her rings. She lines them up neatly, each one as hard and bright as the moon. When she looks in the mirror, the reflection is a mask of strong lines that lead nowhere.

She retrieves her keys and goes to her car in the garage. We’re nearly there now. As she starts the car, she begins to hum a song she hasn’t heard in years. It’s Chopin. His “Ballade No.1 in G Minor.” She hums as the garage fills and fills with the killing air. The notes grow louder until she is no longer humming because the notes are real, coming from somewhere outside the car. They fill the garage like the carbon monoxide, and there, in the haze of her last thoughts, she sees her daughter in a white dress. The girl has a sixth finger on each hand, and she’s spiritedly waving all twelve of her fingers at her mother. Speak to her, Anne. Give us one last good line in this world.

“I am almost someone going home,” she whispers. Then takes off her mask and gives it to us.

In exchange for her mask, we give her the key to the underground city.

The city is beautiful, full of white gardens forever in bloom. The city of the living hangs above us like an endless sky of bloated dirigibles. The effect of the flowers and of the swelling city is something like a billowing parachute. This is a soft place. This is a place we can sleep. But Anne doesn’t want to sleep. She wants to explore the underground city. She wants to walk the boulevards and wave to the artists and the queens.
After a time, Anne finds a meadow where a long-dead childhood dog sits among tennis balls. This is where she decides to stay a while. She plays fetch with the dog, laughing and running with it through the meadow until they are both quite tired. Then she lays with the dog, her face buried in the fur of its neck so she can inhale the good scents of her childhood.

Together they rest, and she gazes up to the city of the living as it undulates and swells above her like a great resting jellyfish.
Where to Bury an Animal

The morning of her date with her coworker Ed, Mindy finds her cat dead on the windowsill in her bedroom, and she has to admit, the end has come sooner than expected. Mindy’s house has no furniture in it, so the cat, who could sense that death was near, had nowhere to hide its body.

On the previous day, Mindy had come out of the office bathroom with her skirt tucked into the top of her tights, so Ed, who assumed Mindy’s blunder would make her vulnerable and therefore approachable, approached her and asked her out on a date. Ten minutes later, Mindy had untucked her skirt from her tights and accepted Ed’s offer.

That night at the restaurant, Ed asks Mindy about the fruit-on-the-bottom yogurts she always keeps in the staff refrigerator. He asks if she had a favorite flavor. She tells him there are none in particular she privileges. He tells her about the time he was in a doctor’s office and sat next to a girl who sucked her yogurt through a straw, how the sound of it made him squirm. Mindy tells him anything that intimate would make her squirm. They chew their food and smile.

At the end of the date, Mindy fills the silence on her doorstep with grief, and tells Ed her cat has passed on. Ed says that he grew up in a home that didn’t allow pets, and has never understood the allure of animal companionship. Then he kisses Mindy before she can mention that she is originally from Dayton, Ohio; that she lived in a house with furniture that was nailed to the floor; that because her father was a military man, she and her family were dragged all over the U.S. and even spent time in other countries such as Korea, Germany and The Republic of Congo; that when her family was dragged through the sky to a new destination, the airplane would thread clouds like a needle, but the trail left was not lasting and she could not wear those memories like a coat or a shirt.
Mindy shivers. Then she invites Ed into her house. She makes no mention of her bare floors or the small, dark lump in the window of her bedroom, and Ed does not seem to notice. A dead cat smells like a still alive cat, and so they make love on the floor.

As Ed sleeps on the floor of her newly emptied bedroom, Mindy is outside with a spade looking for a place to bury the cat. To distract herself from the cold, dead thing at her feet, she dreams a sky full of children with arms outspread. As the children lace their hands together, they stitch lines across the sky and through the clouds, and when she reaches up into the night and into the clouds, the bodies of the children wave like laundry on clothes lines, and she pulls at the loose threads to bring it all back down to earth. She heaves her spade into the ground and digs the new little home.
Zyxt

When you’re a child, you have your tonsils snipped out and it doesn’t really matter till you start to feel the subtraction in your throat. There’s this yawning space now for new words and new noises. And so you take advantage. You find your brother’s *Oxford English* and sound out what you can.

A. Aah. Aardvark.

The words don’t stick in your throat like they used to. Their exit is smooth and frictionless as you ease them through your freshly gutted larynx. You sing out the sounds and push them into the world like little word babies. Their first breaths are drawn with each new utterance you offer your brother’s room.


You populate the space with din until his dresser drawers spill open and his bed is unmade. The fan begins to spin as phonemes hang like fat grapes on a vine.


Soon the room is humid and crowded with words fighting for higher ground, rising and expanding.


Those words clamor in all directions, popping and fizzing the paint from the walls, ululating the closet door from its hinges. Wailing into the carpet and zinging out the threads. Blaring and throbbing and singing and crackling until suddenly there is barely space to whisper out ys.

yackyabberyacht

And so you decide to be still and listen to your wild opus because when the bedroom door finally opens, they’ll all want to know what it means.
Unwanted Creatures:

Refashioned Tales

Changelings in the Water

Near Halberstadt a peasant had a killcrop that sucked its mother and five wet nurses dry, all the while eating voraciously (for they eat more than ten other children). Alas, the villagers wrongly feared the child was afflicted by a daemon and called upon the vicar to exorcise the child. Upon arriving, the vicar produced a vat of hallowed waters in which to plunge the child. Unfortunately, killcrops loathe water, so the creature thrashed in protest. The fearful villagers left the vicar with the child and joined hands in prayer outside. Two devils walking nearby heard the villagers’ desperate supplications. Disguising themselves as saints, they descended on the prayerful crowd. “We’re here to save the child!” they said. The villagers graciously bade them enter. The devils snatched the killcrop from the vicar and, believing they’d kidnapped a human infant, ran to the road to celebrate. When the killcrop began to gnaw on their fingers, they realized their mistake and threw the creature into the weeds, where it happily fell asleep. Then the two devils came together, cried out "Ho! Ho! Ha!" and frolicked and jousted with one another, and then disappeared.

The Sea Nymph

One night a number of fishermen quartered themselves in a hut by a fishing village on the northwest shores of an island. The island was scarcely populated, and the fishermen often spent months at sea fishing for merfolk to mate with. But their last bout at sea had reaped no viable merbodies, and the fishermen decided the island was no place to unspool their lineage. Desperate and fearing they’d never escape the barren seas, they consulted with a young sea nymph who often sunbathed on the rocks at the base of the cliff. She advised them to release their spirits to
the middler by severing their bones. And so the men went to the hut to quarter themselves and release their virile spirits.

To perform the act of bodily quartering, the fishermen used a heavy blade the village blacksmith had forged for cleanly splitting heifer bone. They stood in the center of the room and passed the blade from man to man, lopping off shoulders and thighs, letting them thud wet on the floor. Fluid bloomed from the gobbets at their feet as pieces continued to fall away. So happy they were in their collective disassembling, they began to hum songs their mothers sang to them as children. They sawed and sang until their lungs opened bloody like fish mouths. Then it was over and the men lay silent, leaking into the floorboards. They waited for their spirits to flow from the marrow of their broken bones.

A little while later, they heard the distant song of a castrated boy and rolled on the floor, delighted. “This must be the middler come to take us beyond,” they whispered to one another. The song grew closer and clearer and the men grew frenzied with excitement. They would be released from the island and create new bloodlines in the next world. They would forge histories that spanned a thousand generations. They would hold dominion over the land and sea. However, it was soon clear the song belonged not to a eunuch, but to an elderly sea nymph. She entered the hut covered in wet stinking rags. “Are you the middler?” the men asked. The sea nymph said nothing as she waded through the muck of men. “Are you here to take us away?” they pleaded. She remained silent and began collecting quartered gobbets of the men. Using a sewing kit hidden beneath her rags, she carefully stitched together the parts she’d collected with thick thread and constructed a new, whole man. She helped the new man to his new feet and led him to her house at the base of the cliff by the sea. When they arrived she shook away her rags and mounted him. They made love for many hours. But eventually the sea nymph grew tired from the lovemaking and departed. The man sat in the darkness feeling fulfilled and did not wonder or care what had become of the other men.
The Nickert

The Nickert is a small gray person that lives in the water and has a great desire for human children. While full-grown Nickerts are known to abduct human children and feast on their tender flesh, Nickert children often develop a taste for human hair.

There is one recent story of a Nickert child who had strayed from the great lake where its family dwelled and by morning had found its way to a fiefdom where a famous barber resided. The barber was famous because he had revived the tradition of the wig. It had fallen out of fashion for nearly a thousand years, but this barber had resurrected the tradition after a plague of lice devastated the fiefdom. Each morning customers arrived to have their heads shorn and their new wigs fitted.

This particular morning, the lost nickert happened to wander past the barber’s shop as he shaved the head of a young woman with flaxen hair. The starved nickert burst into the shop and began gorging on the woman’s fallen locks. Horrified, the woman ran from the shop and the barber hid behind a barrel full of shorn hair. As the nickert feasted on the hair, the barber came out from behind the barrel now more curious than afraid. But as he pulled himself up, he accidentally knocked over the barrel spilling hair out onto the floor. The little nickert child dove at the smorgasbord of hair textures and colors, ate for two hours straight, and then fell asleep.

The Aged Bride

At a marriage at Nörre-Broby near Odense, the bride during a dance left the apartment and walked without reflection towards a mount in the adjacent field, where at the same time there were dancing and merriment among the elf-folk. The bride was in a trance brought about by tainted mead that had been prepared by the bridegroom’s jealous sister, who so loved her brother as to poison his young bride. But the poison was improperly fermented and thus did not immediately kill the bride as intended, but rather hastened her aging to a frantic pace. As she ascended the mount toward the elf-folk, her hair grew coarse and grey, and her skin turned ashen. When she reached the elves’ celebration she was wrinkled and withered but still trapped in her cataleptic state. The elf-folk, who had never seen a human so close at hand, immediately ceased their merry-making to gaze upon the creature before them. A young elf crept forward and
tugged at her gown. Upon contact the aged bride was released from the trance. “So beautiful,” said the tiny elf child. At these words the aged bride fell down and instantly expired.

*The Clergyman’s Wife*

A clergyman's wife in Swedish Lappmark, the cleverest midwife in all Sweden, was summoned one fine summer's evening to attend a mysterious being of Troll race and great might, called Vitra. The midwife, unsure of why the Trolls would call upon a human, brought her kit as both precaution and protection (she had a great many knives contained within the kit).

She journeyed down into the valley where the Trolls resided and was greeted by Vitra himself. He quickly ushered the midwife into his home where a woman Troll called Huldralee was lying on her back in the throes of labor. Huldralee was smaller than Vitra and naked. The midwife approached the wailing Troll with her kit, but soon realized her human tools would prove useless in the face of the woman Troll’s giant birth canal. She called upon Vitra to fetch her some Troll spoons. He brought her two large soupspoons, which she quickly fashioned into forceps. With all the strength she could muster, the midwife reached the spoons into the vast canal and pulled out a greasy white foal. The foal struggled to Huldralee’s side and began to nurse. The midwife cleaned the spoons, slipped them into her kit, and departed from the valley of the Trolls, never to return again. These spoons long remained an heirloom in the clergyman's family to testify the truth of the story.

*The Tylweth Teg Steals a Child*

This woman had given birth to a healthy and vigorous child at the beginning of the harvest, one wretched and inclement summer. The baby, in addition to being healthy and vigorous, was also widely regarded as the loveliest and fairest child in all the land, and thus was fiercely coveted by the Tylweth Teg, a fairy woman who lived in the forest caves and desired to surround herself with beautiful objects. But the villagers soon learned of the Tylweth Teg’s desire for the child, and so they guarded the child both day and night.
One evening the cunning Tylweth Teg disguised herself as a goat and entered the village. When she reached a trough of slops in the village, she began to eat and eat until she was so bloated with pigswill she vomited up a small slop child. She hid the slop child in a sack hung round her neck and crept past the villagers guarding the fair child’s home. She found the beautiful baby asleep by the firelight with its mother sleeping nearby. The Tylweth Teg crept into the house and switched the sleeping child with the slop baby.

In the morning the fair child’s mother awoke and went to the crib. Where once her beautiful baby slept peacefully, she found the slop child twitching and gnawing at the wooden crib’s frame. The mother cried out in horror, lifted the slop child from the crib, and dropped it on the ground. It immediately began to chew on the wooden planks of the floor, so she hastily called upon the midwife to rid her home of the destructive little slop blight. The midwife arrived and began to heat a pound of salt over the fire in order to dissolve the rapacious little curse.

All the while, the poor mother wailed and screamed with grief until the wind carried her anguish all the way to the mouth of the Tylweth Teg’s cave, where the Tylweth Teg was marveling at the stolen child’s beauty. She’d gently wedged the little baby into the cavern walls, so she could gaze freely at its still body. But as the poor mother’s pitiful sobs echoed into the cave, the little baby began to shudder and cry. The echo of the mother and child’s ugly cries bounced off the walls, growing louder and louder until the Tylweth Teg could barely breathe. She plucked the howling child from the wall and raced toward the village, where the poor mother and midwife were making the final preparations to rid the home of the wicked slop baby. This was done, and when the salt had got white hot, the peevish abortion went away, seen of no one, and they found the other baby whole and unscathed at the doorstep.

The Changeling

Every intelligent grandmother knows that the fire must not be allowed to go out in a room where there is a child not yet christened; that the water in which the newborn child is washed should not be thrown out; also, that a needle, or some other article of steel must be attached to its bandages [diapers]. This must all be so, lest a fairy replace the child with a changeling one.
There is a story of a grandmother who looked after the children of a baroness who had just given birth to a set of twin boys. She watched over the twins each night while the baroness and baron made merry in the Great Hall.

Now, it happened that at this time there was a village of fairy folk living in the forest just beyond the baron’s estate, and they’d grown weary of the merry-making. The revelry would often spur debauched lords and ladies to go to the wood to make wicked advances at young fairies. One night the wearied but cunning fairies noticed the firelight of the nursery had gone out, and the grandmother had fallen asleep. They stole past the raucous merriment and into the nursery where the twins and the grandmother slept peacefully, and made their revenge by slipping one of the infants from its crib and replacing it with a changeling.

The grandmother awoke at dawn unaware of the exchange and began to nurse the twins. The changeling baby sucked and sucked at the grandmother’s breast until the breast was sapped of milk. The grandmother quickly realized the child was an imposter, switched with the baroness’s child when the fire went out. Knowing she would be condemned for her negligence, the grandmother quickly built up a fire in the hearth with the intent to burn the changeling, but the fairy folk were watching her from the trees with the little twin. The changeling’s mother leapt from the tree, snatched her child from the grandmother’s arms, and placed the true twin back into its crib. “Shame!” cried the fairy, "For," said she, "I have never treated your child so badly and I have never thought to do it such harm as you now propose doing mine," whereupon she took the unnatural child and vanished through the door.

The Changeling of Plau

A married couple in Plau had a child that after two years was still only as long as a shoe. But they loved the little child desperately because she was theirs. The couple had tried for years to conceive. They had prayed and prayed and after years of failure and miscarriage, the couple was graced with a healthy infant. The little child was sweet and small, but over time the couple began to worry that her smallness was born of a curse. They took their baby to the village elders, who appraised the baby and said she did not seem cursed. Then they took their child to the midwife. After a careful evaluation, she concluded the child was not human, but in fact a
changeling of the underground race. The couple was stunned at first, but soon realized the love they had for their baby was real. Changeling or not, this tiny creature was their child. The following morning, they went to their baby’s crib and found a full-grown toddler slumbering peacefully. The underground people had taken back their own child.
The Beginnings of an Iconoclast

Little Elsa sat under the table as her parents’ dinner party heaved forward. Silhouettes of the guests moved around her, heavy wool chafing the satin cloth. She was a stowaway sun yanking in these planetary bodies. But a sun is predictable. Science and its rules rein in those celestial spheres. In the case of a willful supernova, an emptied jar of fleas will disrupt the inertia of any orbiting body.

The Fastenings

A small, bright knot formed in Elsa’s thorax when she fasted. The nuns pressed their holy judgments against her like sheets of thumbprint-sized scales. And each scale told a unique story: her future, her past, her bust-to-waist-to-hip ratio. At night in her cloister she peeled away her new ectoderm and wove plaits of loosed skins into the window bars. Give her a divining rod so she might drink, the abbess said. She would swallow it and say it’s a stinger.

Woman’s Dinner Dress

We saw Schiap out at dinner in New York City. The maestra indisposed, contemplating her dinner. “A lobster from Maine!” said the waiter. We sat at a table nearby and watched as she sucked the pith of her invertebrate until
nothing but an exoskeleton remained. After removing her glove, she stuck her hand inside the husk and admired her creation. “You exist for me,” she said.

_Trompe l’oeil_

Elsa takes the finished sweater and slips it over her head. Man Ray, behind his camera, conspires with light and space. He is a great truth teller laying waste to Grecian busts as Elsa poses for his photo.

“That Italian artist that makes clothes”

Every August we collected cicada casings. As the morning tymbal song began, we emerged from our homes as nymphs do and started searching for shells to pluck. We placed the molted skeletons—a perfectly preserved mold—in brown paper bags until they overflowed. We vowed to shed those itching girl skins and find a carapace that gave us harder lines, a more worldly shell.

The Tears Dress of The Circus Collection

Dali took the column of silk and tore images into the fabric. A hundred miles east, the rumblings of a new regime tore images into the countryside. The idea: that art might heal a burned civilization. Wrap a man in fine gauze and call him whole again. When a continent begins to fall apart, what lines can you forge but parallel? It’s not the dress. It’s the body encased within. She knew the body would perish first.
TV Dinner

We watch the cat clean its hindquarters meticulously. Licking with brisk strokes, it etches neat lines of wet fur into its inner thigh. Fresh grids form as the tongue channels dry fur in new directions. It’s a feline inclination we find thrillingly indecent because cat sex organs are still sex organs. We look away, turn to the TV and will ourselves to think about the complexity there. Onscreen a woman smiles with tooth and jaw. From his easy chair our father shakes his head, sips his beer, says to us, The world has gone to hell. Resistance is fertile. We begin to correct him. Then we stop. The cat, seizing a moment of unmistakable opportunity, opens its mouth to speak.
All the children of the neighborhood are chasing the only dog of the neighborhood. They wield sticks and decapitated Barbies with feet pointed like shivs and, for good measure, one boy even has a Wiffle bat. The children are hungry. That much is clear. When they look at the dog, they see an opportunity to fulfill a basic need. The old woman of the neighborhood watches the children of the neighborhood chase the pitiful dog. She peers through her blinds and through her glaucoma to observe the pursuit.

The unfolding scene is scored by the passionate cries of a daytime television actress. She says to the old woman, Don’t leave me. I love you. Don’t leave me. But the old woman ignores the sultry actress with her infidelity, her sequined evening gown. The dog has jumped a fence, and the children are throwing tantrums and reaching their sticky hands through the chain link. The old woman turns to the television and flips off the box just as the actress is readying herself to ingest a dramatic-looking bottle of poison. That’s a bit much, don’t you think, dear? she says. The milky black glass of the television screen responds with a weak fizzle.

When she returns to the window, the children have dropped their weapons and gone home, leaving their Barbies to abide headless and naked at the base of the fence. The neighborhood is quiet. Its ranch-style homes sit squat on lawns eaten short and tidy by riding mowers. The old woman’s son comes to mow the lawn of her home once a week. Every Saturday, he pushes diagonal lines into the grass, and then accepts a glass of iced tea. He drains the glass and tells her that a person who can’t maintain her own home should consider downgrading. She refills his glass even so.

She enjoys her solitary life, the skin of dust over every bookshelf and every table. She enjoys receiving small, cardboard packages in the mail and watching her digital cable, which allows her to engage in a very complex, highly personalized decision-making process that many people will never in their entire lives be able to experience. She is, after all, a person who leads a complex existence.
She has imagined being impossibly close to the young pastor at New Wineskin Presbyterian Church, the one with the lovely family and the Prius. They are alone together and share love in a way no one else has ever known. It happens like this: she is the rocks of a cave behind a waterfall, and he lovingly traces the geologic record of her body along the striated walls of the cave, his silhouette backlit by the sun as he documents his speleological findings in a small notebook. He collects rocks from the womb of her cave and takes them home to study with his beautiful family. His children ask what each rock is, hefting the samples in their small palms. He responds, Sedimentary. Metamorphic.
The Ideal Form

A very great artist spends many years trying to render the ideal form he feels he can see in his mind’s eye. The obsession begins when he is a mere apprentice. His mentor hires men and women to stand naked in the studio and the artist spends days sketching their sinews and folds. He spends a week trying to shade a man’s armpit properly. He spends two weeks trying to capture the subtle protrusion of a woman’s hip bone, the way the lights of the studio reflect off the flesh-covered bone.

But the artist is not satisfied with his work. He finds that no matter how hard he tries or how carefully he sketches, his drawings are never true renderings of the subject he sees in his head because they are never more than a reproduction of the models. For a while, the artist fears he is nothing more than a very skilled portraitist.

Finally, the artist leaves his mentor and begins working on his own. He researches the artists his mentor had cast aside as derivative or too political. He begins to experiment with different paints and painting techniques. The first piece he paints is a likeness of a beautiful old woman he saw sitting on a barrel one day. He recreates her face using tiny dots he makes with his brush over and over again. Her cheeks, lips, and eyes contain every color on his palette in different variations. He had never realized how much blue a face could have.

In the end he is very displeased by the painting because it still doesn’t feel like the perfect rendering he can see in his mind, but his friends think it is very beautiful and very moving. “Look at the way he uses color!” they say. “Look at the blue in her cheeks! The green in her lips! The way he makes the light play in her eyes.” The work sells for a great deal of money, and the demand for his paintings of people composed of thousands of very small dots grows. He makes paintings of many people and even some house cats in this style, and because of this, the artist becomes very famous and very depressed.

After a tour of the world to promote his work, the artist goes into hiding. He denounces the style he created and cuts ties with his friends because they are gauche and all riding his
coattails. He begins experimenting with different media as paint no longer excites him. He tries metal and marble and rubber and clay. He tries wax. He even tries found objects like paper clips from his desk and his own leg hair, but nowhere in this scrum can he see the essence of that ideal form. He grows even more depressed and begins drinking heavily. He stops checking his mail. A pile of newspapers gathers at the foot of his drive. They all ask what happened to the great artist.

What happens to the great artist is that he keeps drinking and brooding each night until he starts thinking that maybe he has been working with the wrong media. Maybe, he thinks, the right medium has been sitting there under his nose, rounding out his hips, his arms, his scalp, and covering his toes. Maybe the right medium is other people’s parts. If he could collect the best of humanity, then he could create the perfect form. He becomes convinced this creation would travel the world and grace the best museums. People would marvel at the person made of people because they would see the best of themselves. They would see his ideal, their ideal.

The artist feels invigorated. He spends months feverishly planning how he will execute the piece. He will put out a call for participants. He will only use willing volunteers, and he will screen them to be sure they are representative of the collective ideal. He buys an ad in the Sunday newspaper and waits for the requests to be part of his masterwork to roll in.

But two weeks later, all he’s received are a severed braid of hair, a Ziploc bag of toenails, and a letter to the editor of the Sunday newspaper commending the artist for his bitingly satirical social commentary. A highlight from the letter reads: “The artist rather brilliantly deconstructs society’s blind devotion to hollow masturbatory dreck masquerading as art and our willingness to go to callous extremes in the name of artistic greatness. His want ad is inspired performance art—satire in the Swiftian tradition but wholly unique and of our age. An eviscerating postmodern critique of a lesser artist’s consumerism, celebrity worship, and nihilism. The artist has given me new eyes. I feel I see the world clearly now.”

He cuts out the letter, throws it in his trashcan, and then sets it on fire.

The artist spirals into a debilitating depression again. His relationship with the drink reignites. As does his disdain for the unwashed masses. One particularly miserable evening as the artist laments the unrealized ideal form floating in his mind’s eye, he begins to feel quite ill. His head aches fiercely and his eyes begin to cross. Suddenly his house feels unbearably hot, so
he goes to his backyard to stand in the cool night breeze. But the breeze does not help. In fact, it seems that moving to the backyard only makes the pain worse, so much worse that the artist drops to all fours and begins to bang his head against the ground. The artist finds some relief doing this. He continues to bang his head on the ground until he realizes that he is dislodging something, and it feels as though whatever is in there is rattling around in his nasal cavity and the place just behind his eyes. He sticks his hand in his throat and begins to pull at the object jammed in his skull. He pulls and pulls until suddenly he sees a something, a hoof. Then he pulls some more and sees another hoof, then another and another. Then he pulls some more until there, on the ground before him, is a horse wobbling to its feet.

The artist struggles to get up off the ground and looks at the horse standing in his yard. It is dark and sleek in the light of the moon, and its mane is blowing in the cool night breeze. He feels indescribably moved by the animal’s magnificent body.

“Oh!” says the artist.

The horse whinnies and stomps.
Little Miss Bird-in-Hand

*Of a shade intermediate between black and white*

The girls of the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant instantly understood that Contestant Twelve was different, though they could not be certain why. To begin with, her parents were different from theirs. They were older. They did not preen their daughter like tropical birds. When they dropped her off at the dressing room, they lingered with stiff limbs in the doorway as if their coats were stuffed with newspaper and straw. The girl waved at them and smiled, gently shooing them off. After a moment they turned away, two hunks of stale putty shuffling down the hall, leaving their daughter alone with the other girls. Arabella Tornabene spoke first because Arabella Tornabene always spoke first.

“Girl, your parents are weird.” The girls eyed Contestant Twelve as she sat at her dressing mirror and arranged the contents of her toiletry bag on the table: a curling iron, pink lipstick, hairspray, needle nose pliers, a vial of glitter. She turned and smiled the same gentle smile she’d offered her parents.

“They’re engineers,” she said. Junie-Rae Wright scoffed, but the girls all knew Junie-Rae didn’t know what the word *engineer* meant.

“My dad is a salesman,” Arabella said proudly.

“What does he sell?” asked Contestant Twelve. Arabella considered her question, and a smirk bloomed on her face.

“Stuff your family probably can’t afford,” she said triumphantly. But Contestant Twelve’s congenial expression didn’t fade. The girls all leaned forward, expectant.

“That’s okay. My parents make everything we need anyway,” she said. Arabella’s mouth slackened like an old tire. The girl twisted the top off her tube of lipstick and turned back to the mirror. “My name is Gray,” she said to the reflections of the other girls in her mirror, “It’s nice to meet you all.”
Ms. Bondurant’s maternal instincts kick in

Glenna Bondurant, the pageant director, asked the girls to refer to her as Mama B. She told the girls she wanted them to think of her as a second mother during their time in the pageant (or only mother, since DeeDee Wessel-Fink had two fathers and Shira Whiteeagle’s mother had been killed in a car accident seven years back). To Mama B every girl was a winner, and she wanted them all to feel special despite the fact that only one girl could be crowned Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County, and the fact that this distinction might indicate that one girl was better than the rest and therefore more special; so special, in fact, that this particular girl was awarded a crown with real crystals and a $3,000 scholarship from Georgette Von George’s Tailored Fashions, the premiere fashion warehouse in all of Bird-in-Hand County.

No, in Mama B’s eyes, all the girls were equal, special.

The Tarkington Twins and the porousness of identity

Because they are identical twins, Charlene and Darlene Tarkington (contestants number Four and Five, respectively) have the luxury of an emotional and intellectual connection that most other adolescent girls cannot possess. They shared the same egg and the same placenta, which put them at a high risk for complications in utero, as well as during their mother’s twenty-six hour labor. But the danger they faced before they could even form memories created an indefatigable bond between them.

In line with popular perception, they can, in fact, predict what the other will say. They have and often do finish each other’s sentences. They menstruate at the same time. They suffer migraines simultaneously. They often fall into step when walking together. Their heart rate is frequently synchronized. They’re fairly certain they’ve involuntarily engaged in telepathy with one another. It’s a rather freaky business, but they are just that in tune.

The pranks started when they were very young. In order to tell her identical daughters apart, Mary-Margaret Tarkington would color code the twins: pink for Charlene and purple for Darlene. Every clothing article was coded from underwear to hair ties. The shenanigans started small. Charlene would wear Darlene’s lavender socks. Darlene would don Charlene’s fuchsia headband. But after a time the switching grew bolder, more sinister, and the girls would
completely switch places, purposefully deceiving their parents. They’d switch for weeks at a time, thrilled by the opportunity to play a different role. And their parents could never tell, which made it all the more exhilarating. For such a harmless, controllable pleasure, the high was indescribable. They continued to switch for years, learning to answer to either name, to play either part, to be either girl.

Years later when the twins are fifteen, their parents will divorce and mutually decide it will be good for the girls to function separately at times, so on alternating weekends the girls are split between the parents. It will be at this point that the twins come to a horrifying realization: they no longer actually know who is who. Charlene might be Darlene. Darlene could be Charlene. They will live their entire lives never truly knowing which twin they actually are.

*Under the glowing spotlights of the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge main stage*

The girls lined up and waved to the cheering crowd as music from the five-disc CD changer and stereo system swelled. The Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant had officially begun. Colored strobe lights flashed and a smoke machine wheezed wet fog onto the stage and into the first few rows of the audience. When the music and the fog died down, Griff Klinghorn Jr., the master of ceremonies, walked to the center of the main stage. The rubber soles of his patent leather brogues squeaked on the waxed wooden stage. When he reached the center, he paused, his body burnished and still as marble. Then, slowly, reverently, he brought a silver microphone to his smooth-shaven chin. A breath in. And.

“Welcome!” he intoned, “Welcome one and all to the 66th annual Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Pageant and Scholarship Competition!” The crowd roared. Griff Klinghorn Jr. outstretched his arms and leaned ever so slightly into their cheers. “This night is about celebrating the best and brightest our humble county has to offer. This night is about our girls, the future of Bird-in-Hand, the future of America!” The room erupted again. Parents, grandparents, generations of Bird-in-Hand county were packed into the Lodge assembly hall. Twelve thirteen-year-old girls stood before them bedecked in glittering gowns and kitten heels, radiant with youthful effervescence. The girl called Gray stood at the far left of the line beaming
happily. The lights of the spotlight shone bright and hot on her face, and the shutters of her eyes dilated till her irises were delicate copper rings. It was a lovely day to be a little miss.

A Little Miss engages in chromatic complexity

Here’s something. The voice, like any acoustic instrument, has its own special chambers for resonating the tone of a vocally produced sound. Once the tone is produced through the vibration of vocal cords, it moves in and through the open resonating chambers, activating the four primary resonances: the chest, the mouth, the nasal mask, and the head.

To aid in understanding this occurrence metaphorically, one might think of these various resonances as vocal colors that exist in a continuous spectrum, from dark or “chest resonance” to light or “head/nasal resonance.” The objective in singing is to have command of all the colors of this resonant spectrum. This command allows the singer a greater range of emotional phrasing and creates a tone that is pleasing to both singer and listener.

Imagine now, how a young girl formally diagnosed with sound to color synesthesia might have experienced this phenomenon as twelve female voices (ranging from contralto to coloratura soprano) vibrated in unison and filled the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge assembly hall with sound.

Sweetie Dillinger, Contestant Seven, watched the assembly hall explode with color as the contestants sang the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County pageant-opening anthem. Technicolor swirled from each girl’s mouth and pirouetted into the crowd. The room shifted and swayed as the hues changed gradient, pulsing like a kaleidoscope. Sweetie mutely mouthed the lyrics so she could focus on the lilts from indigo to chartreuse, orange to emerald.

At the other end of the stage, Sweetie noticed a brilliant red bubbling from Contestant Twelve, the newest girl, Gray. The sound rushed up like oxygen-rich blood rising from a wound and spilled onto the stage. It covered the floor like soft petals. At the end of the song, Sweetie leaned down and wiped her hand on the stage floor. Nothing there. She giggled blue and green.

“If I could change the world in one small way...”
ARABELLA TORNABENE: I would make sure Little Miss Bird-In-Hand County continues to provide Bird-In-Hand County youths with opportunities for scholarships, as well as social and moral advancement.

CLEM SALTHOUSE: I would rescue stray dogs and cats or any animal that needed to be rescued. Baby birds, wounded rabbits or squirrels, motherless deer babies. Any baby animal, really.

JUNIE-RAE WRIGHT: I would probably try to hold doors open for old people or, like, people in wheel chairs. You know, people with needs.

DARLENE TARKINGTON: I would recycle more.

CHARLENE TARKINGTON: I would recycle more.

REENA DAWKINS: I would teach little kids to play instruments. Any instrument they wanted.

Even the triangle.

SWEETIE DILLINGER: [Giggles]

ESTHER GLIN: I would encourage physical fitness among our county’s most sedentary citizens.

SHIRA WHITEEAGLE: I would help the poor by setting up a monthly food drive.

KATIE DUCKWORTH: I would set up a tutoring service for young girls.

DEEDEE WESSEL-FINK: I wouldn’t…because I’d change it in a big way.

GRAY LIGHTLY: I would build more people that could go out and help those who are lonely or sick or afraid.

GRIFF KLINGHORN JR.: …Build? Do you mean hire?

On branches of the Tornabene family tree

Arabella Tornabene’s great-great-grandmother, Clothilde Cloutier was a storied dancer. From burlesque to ballet, Clothilde could do it all. They called her the White Sylph, and she danced her way to America in 1924. She married three times, unhappily, the third time to Patricio Tornabene, the man who captured her for good. They had nine children, and her fourth son, Giancarlo, was Arabella’s great-grandfather. None of the Tornabene children knew of their mother’s past life. To them, Clothilde was the tired woman who cooked their food, drew their baths, and kissed their foreheads before bed. They never knew that their mother loved her
children less than she loved dancing. The morning of the day Clothilde died, she tried to put on her favorite pointe shoes but they no longer fit.

*The Little Miss Bird-in-Hand County Swimsuit Competition: a logistical record*

- 9 one-piece suits
- 3 bikinis
- 437 polka dots
- 91 stripes
- 120 painted toenails
- 1 undiagnosed heart murmur
- 1 pair of glasses
- 2 sets of contact lenses
- 4 sets of shaved legs
- 1 set of identical twins
- 3 mouths full of braces
- 2 cases of scoliosis
- 206 titanium die-cast bone replicants
- 804 screws
- 37 bolts
- 160 aluminum pulleys
- 1 autonomous kinetic energy cell
- 12 glistening, Vaseline-toothed smiles

*Reena Dawkins plays the trumpet for her Talent and the Glory of the Lord*

Reena Dawkins loved music in a way that made it impossible for her to accept her lack of natural musical talent. She was tone deaf but determined. Her mother was the kind of woman who loved her children so ruthlessly, she was willing to pay the local music teacher $75 dollars extra just so her dogged daughter could buzz air into that brass noisemaker in the company of someone who truly understood just how hopeless Reena really was.
The morning of the pageant Reena shined her trumpet with a care and attention that bordered on evangelic. In the moments just before she went on stage, the odd, quiet girl, Gray, tapped Reena’s shoulder and told her the instrument was some of the most beautiful metalwork she’d ever seen. Reena smiled in gratitude but held her trumpet tight against the sequined lapels of the jumpsuit her mother had sewn for this very day. This was a competition after all. Mama B strode over, clipboard pressed to her chest like a strange vestigial wing, and gently shooed Gray to the dressing room. She whispered hoarsely for Reena to take her mark. It was time.

When Reena walked on stage it all felt right. Her costume, her polished trumpet, her painted fingernails, her tightly curled hair, everything was ready. Her name was announced, and she stood at attention before the crowd. This was her moment to show the world what she’d been working for. She lifted the shining brass to her face and wet her lips. She squinted her eyes shut, inhaled. She blew her sweet breath into the mouthpiece, and for seven and a half minutes, God’s music was made.

_The pageant judges tell two truths and a lie_

Millard Needlebauer:
Is a linesman for the Asteroid Fire Illuminating Company
Is currently trying his hand at online dating for the first time
Is happiest off the ground, high above the earth and breathing the air that no one else breathes

Rita Rippleton:
Is a high school principal
Is a happily devoted wife
Is not DeeDee Wessel-Fink’s egg donor

Elmo Fleet:
Is a talented local artist
Is allergic to shellfish
Isn’t entirely sure why he is here
**Critical study of the pageant system by local scholar yields controversial results**

Monday, April 4th

By Phil Ungland

BIRD-IN-HAND - Dr. Sally Duckworth not only believes that the Bird-in-Hand County Little Miss Pageant and Scholarship Competition is harmful to its participants, she has proof. For the last decade, Dr. Duckworth, a sociologist at the nearby state research university, has been conducting a study, gathering data from pageant participants around the country. Three hundred former pageant winners were interviewed, as well as three hundred females who had never participated in a beauty pageant competition. They were evaluated and compared in categories such as body mass index, self-esteem, maternal relationships, hygienic routines, and overall body-perception and satisfaction.

In general, Dr. Duckworth’s study (conducted with the help of graduate students at the nearby state research university) found that those females who competed in beauty pageants had stunted corporal perception and satisfaction, greater impulse dysregulation, and higher incidences of trust issues with both humans and animals.

But not everyone is so sure Dr. Duckworth’s study reveals the truth.

“I participated in eleven pageants before I was 18 and I won four of them,” says Eureka Shepherd-St. Regis of Lionsrigdge. “I have an incredible life, incredible kids, an incredible husband. Even my nanny is incredible. Everything about Eureka Shepherd-St. Regis is incredible.” You can find out more about this incredible life at Ms. Shepherd-St. Regis’s blog, *Incredible Eureka!*

However, Dr. Duckworth is not so easily shaken. She insists that though the results to any study will have its outliers, the outlook for pageant girls is nearly always grim.

“It’s a real jungle out there,” says Duckworth, “These pageants show just how far we haven’t come as a society. Something needs to be done.”
When asked why she’ll allow her daughter, Katie, 13, to participate in the upcoming Little Miss Pageant, Dr. Duckworth responded before promptly ending the interview, “My daughter made a choice that we’ll both have to live with, but I love her. What can you do?”

Mr. and Mrs. Lightly build a family

When Gray Lightly took the stage to show the pageant audience her talents, her parents, Stan and Mabel Lightly, couldn’t help but think about how far their daughter had come. The pale girl on stage getting ready to reveal a science project she’d been working on was the product of years of tireless labor and research.

Mabel Lightly née Lipsheim was diagnosed with ovarian cancer when she was thirty, two years before she met and married Stan Lightly, a fellow graduate student of bioengineering at the state research university. Her appetite had disappeared and her pelvis began to feel tender and stone heavy. The doctor told her they had to move quickly. Like all things in her life, Mabel Lipsheim approached her diagnosis pragmatically. She looked at the statistics. She weighed her options. She had her reproductive organs removed. Her body was pumped with chemicals until she was well again.

Then she met Stan.

For years the subject of children simply did not come up. Stan and Mabel were deep into their research. Early in their marriage they designed robotic arms for factories around the country and had patents on several arm models. One robo-arm was specifically designed for writing inscriptions on candy conversation hearts. Another was created for the flicking lint off newly sewn cardigans. After six years designing these robotic arms, they decided to move onto legs. The Lightly Robotic Leg came together within three years. It was a resounding success among amputees. War veterans, car crash victims, thousands of amputees around the world found their footing again with Lightly Legs.

But the Lightlys soon grew bored of tinkering with mechanical appendages. Arms and legs could only carry out so many functions. That’s when Mabel had an idea. She and her
husband could build themselves a child. She was not a particularly motherly woman. She had never really entertained the idea of having a child, but if it meant precipitating her scientific inclinations, building a child might just be the kind of nurturing impulse she could endorse.

And so for nearly a decade, Stan and Mabel puzzled through the construction of a daughter.

Gray came about slowly. In her early stages, she was nothing more than a tangle of wire and cable, a simple wind-up automaton, but even then, Little Gray was a curious and affectionate child. She would follow her parents around their farmstead observing the chickens’ feeding patterns, measuring the frequency of the old lowing heifer, studying the barn cats skittering in the loft. She was always close behind Stan and Mabel, always cranking her little gears into a wide metal grin as she took in her world.

Over the years, a humanoid girl took shape. Brunette strands of synthetic fiber haloed a plasticine-swathed cranioshell. Scores of lint-free cardigans draped alumino-plasticine shoulders as she studied the musculoskeletal composition of the barn cats. The metal grin was replaced by a smiling mouthful of a porcelain veneers. Eventually she even began accompanying her parents on trips off the farmstead.

Of course, Gray was aware of what the world outside the farm would be like. Wireless Internet had afforded her countless glimpses into what lay beyond the Lightly Farm. But the opportunity to be among other humans was exhilarating. She took any chance to go along with her parents. Even the most mundane errand was a gift. The supermarket was a multicolored labyrinth of persons and products, a crowded maze of permutational possibility. Bird-in-Hand Square was a similarly vibrant jostle. Here humans could seek community and companionship. They could mail letters, buy cones of frozen custard, sip cappuccinos, walk with dogs, throw Frisbee discs, get in arguments, parallel park cars, read newspapers, or throw trash into properly labeled receptacles. They could laugh and gossip. They could hug.

Gray’s titanium bone replicants ached with longing to be among them. She loved her parents, the cats and the cows, but she grew lonely for the world at times. She grew lonely for the companionship of her peers.

That was how she found the Little Miss Pageant. An Internet search led her to a scholarly article by a local professor of sociology named Sally Duckworth. A pageant. The opportunity to be among other girls her age. The opportunity for companionship. She begged her parents to sign
her up. There was no rule that stated a participant couldn’t be made of metal alloys. Stan and Mabel consented through a loosely coiled knot of befuddlement. It was just one day, after all.

A dress was designed and sewn. A bathing suit was purchased. A talent act was planned. Soon, the day of the pageant arrived.

That morning, Gray had whirred with excitement, a low purring drone.

“Now remember, Gray,” Mabel had said outside the doors of the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge, “Other girls in the pageant may have done this before. It’s okay if you lose. And don’t be upset if the other girls aren’t quick to companionship.” Gray had nodded impatiently.

“Just being around them is a start, Mother. I can study them. I can find a point of entry.”

Now in the back row of the lodge auditorium, Mabel and her husband watched with pride as their mechanical daughter, the last contestant to perform, unveiled the first ingredient of her Talent act to the audience: A large black leather bag heavy with clanging metal.

**A Brief History of the Curling Iron**

The earliest patent for a curling iron design dates back to 1866 and belongs to Hiram Maxim, an inventor most known for having patented the Maxim Gun, the world’s first machine gun.

Maxim’s original design led to countless iterations of the curling iron from the *Depose* 11 ½ in. stove-heated hair iron all the way to the *TotalBrat* Heat Wave 2 in. barrel curling iron, a model most favored by teen girls like Junie-Rae Wright, whose own hair was at this moment in the curling iron’s reputable history beginning to catch fire in the dressing room of the Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge from the heat of prolonged exposure.

*Billy Glin’s first lesson in feline biomechanics*
“Dude, it was bizarre. My mom made me go to my sister’s pageant, and it turned into like this science fair shit. So the last girl gets up on the stage with this big black bag, and I think for sure she’s just going to pull out a dead body or something. The bag was huge, man, a serial killer bag for sure. So she lugs this bag out and starts talking to the crowd. She’s like, ‘According to some science journal blah blah blah bull shit,’ and she’s seriously like lecturing the crowd, saying all this crap I don’t understand. And this whole time, I’m like, what’s in the bag? What’s in this goddamn bag? And she’s just walking around the stage talking about these cats she’s studied. I guess they live in her barn out in the boonies? I don’t know. Anyway, she’s talking about these cats and their bones or something. And then she’s all like, ‘I built a cat robot,’ and I was like shit, I want to see this cat robot. But she just keeps on freaking talking. She won’t stop talking, and I’m like, why would you mention a cat robot and not show us a cat robot? I have to watch freaking twelve-year-olds prance around in their little dresses and feel like a total perv, and you mention this cat robot, and then you don’t show it to me?! What the hell, dude, right? Anyway, so finally, she walks over to this bag, and it’s like, yes. This is it. This is the cat robot. Holy freaking balls. Right? Wrong. The bag is full of like scraps of the metal. I know, man. It was messed up. But just wait. So she dumps all this metal onto the stage, and it sounds like a freaking garbage truck unloading a dumpster. All this shit is all over the stage. Then she walks to the front of the stage and says, ‘According to veterinary legend, it has been said that cats are able to reassemble their bones when placed in the same room with all their parts.’ No, seriously. That’s what she said. I remember that part because I was like: shit, bro. So, then she reaches into this pocket in her dress and pulls out a little gear or something and tells the crowd the metal is a disassembled cat. She drops the little gear on the floor and then it’s just like total insanity. All the little pieces and parts start shaking, and at this point, I’m kinda scared. Like I might piss myself—dude, I’m serious. You would have been freaked out, too. The pieces all start moving around and pushing across the stage. And this girl is just standing there like this is totally normal. They start coming together and finding each other and, dude, it was like some wizard shit. Bro, I’m serious. The thing just rebuilt itself. After like three minutes, there was a robot cat on the stage just like walking around and cleaning itself. It was so epic.

Yeah, then I left because I got a text from Steve saying he’d scored some choice bud from Dave because Kelsey dumped his ass again. Naw, man. It wasn’t that good.”
Clem Salthouse chooses her own adventure

You sit in the dressing room of The Munificent Order of the Sons of the Frontier Lodge. You can hear a voice down the hall. Mama B is telling another contestant about her pageant days. You hear the word “baton,” the word “dreams.” Whoever that poor girl is, she is trapped in a bubble of Mama B’s nostalgia, you think.

The room is empty save one other contestant, Junie-Rae. She is prepping herself one last time for the Judge’s Decision, while Contestant Twelve, the pleasant, shy girl, Gray, performs her talent onstage. You could be Gray’s friend if you didn’t feel so strangely interested in her. You know you would somehow betray your fascination, and she would find you off-putting. It’s happened before. You’re too eager, too tall.

Junie-Rae’s glittery eye shadow pots and her silver curling iron project shards of light from the illuminated dressing mirror onto the wall of the drab little room. You briefly wonder if you should re-curl your frizzing hair. You decide it doesn’t matter.

You are ready for this day to be over.

You aren’t going to win this pageant. You know this. There’s no option to turn to page 75 and claim your victory, but we don’t need to tell you that because the truth is, you’re okay with losing. You’re okay with blending in, and you’re okay with missing out on that big, fat check from Georgette Von George because you’ve got your own things. Your own secrets, well, secret.

Mama B pops her head into the room.

“It’s nearly time!” she chirrups then vanishes. Junie-Rae makes a throaty sound and mumbles to herself. She reaches for her curling iron with one hand, her eye shadow with the other. A gold tube of aerosol hairspray rests in her lap like sleeping infant.

You smile as Junie-Rae stupidly dabs glitter into the corners of her eyelids. You smile because Junie-Rae doesn’t know. Nobody knows your secret. And that’s what makes it special—him special.

You found him in the backwoods of your family’s property early this morning with a broken leg, a small, speckled fawn whose mother was, no doubt, shot and killed by your field sporting father. When you found the fawn, he barely struggled. He lay there and fixed his pained onyx eyes onto you and your humanness. You backed away slowly, until you were just out of sight, then you sprinted back to the house to collect items for a splint. Your body made a choice
before your mind did. Twenty minutes later you were back in the woods approaching the fawn slowly. You knew he wouldn’t try to struggle now because he was in too much pain. You set his leg up in the makeshift splint, and then you laid yourself down next to him and stroked his shivering little body. You hummed a song that your grandmother taught you, something about oranges and lemons, the bells of some old church far away.

You fell asleep.

The room smells strange. If we could tell you what has happening, we would. But now you can only look around the room, mildly confused, sniffing dumbly at the air like some preyed upon thing.

It all happens too fast.

Mama B appears in the door with Gray. Arabella, DeeDee, and a couple other girls are close behind. Gray’s nose twitches at the odor, and Mama B is about to speak when Junie-Rae’s crunchy, corkscrewed bouffant ignites.

The room is alive with reactions.

Junie-Rae is on her feet waving her hands around her head like two psychotic birds. Mama B is next to her fanning the flames with her clipboard. The flames grow and Junie-Rae shrieks. All the girls scream. You scream.

Gray moves.

She careens toward the blaze and tackles Junie-Rae to the ground. She throws her body over the inferno and her gossamer dress blossoms around her like a delicate rose. You watch the flames, suddenly choked by the weight of a girl, quickly dissipate. Gray rolls to her side, a mess of ash beneath her, the front of her dress burned away. Junie-Rae is quaking on the floor, nearly bald and crying.

Then the moment fills to the brim again.

Parents and other audience members pour into the room crazed with confusion and alarm. You watch Junie-Rae’s mother suddenly appear at her daughter’s side seemingly out of thin air as mothers often do. You watch the faces shift as they realize Gray is not burned. Her half naked body is shining intact, save for a place where a metal rib-like object pokes through, revealing the glow of titanium beneath her plasticine skin.

You watch the confused horror multiply like some kind of pestilence.
Gray smiles too calmly, tries to explain, “The curling iron must have gotten too hot. But I knew I could put out the fire.” But Junie-Rae’s mother is a wild animal now, a vengeful doe demented for her injured child.

You watch and begin to understand that this woman no longer sees a girl before her. She only sees this smiling, undamaged thing. The inhuman fraud that hurt her baby. And so there’s someone to blame. There’s something to punish.

Now you have a choice.

You can step forward, intervene. You can explain what you saw. Explain that you’ve been in the room the whole time.

You can act.

Or.

You can watch them descend, an ageless mob. You can watch them consume the girl, devastate her, smash and splinter her intricate body. You can stand next to seven other fear-frozen girls and listen to the noise it makes, the sound of a girl being unbuilt, the sound of your unmoving.

You can watch them do it.

You can watch them destroy this girl, tear her apart till she is nothing but shrapnel on the floor. Watch her smile kicked from her face, her chest torn open, her legs pulled from their metal sockets and smashed against the wall. You can watch her die.

You can do nothing but watch.

You can do nothing.

The lights nestled in the ceiling are buzzing bright and hot. Human sounds rumble in the distance like a summer storm approaching, and towering shapes draw near blocking out the light, darkening the room with the haste of a dense, black cumulonimbus.

I’ve located myself in pieces on the floor, and I can feel every part, every screw. It is an odd sensation to be apart, not unlike the dumb, dull ache of a loosed tooth. I’ve read about human children receiving visits from a small winged woman who slip quarters under pillows in exchange for baby teeth. I have pulled my own teeth, the final turn and pop of those synthetic
roots so blissfully satisfying. My sacrifice earned me two glinting silver dollars, stashed cold and safe under my pillow.

I am a thousand scattered bones waiting to be claimed and rejoiced.

Mother will find me soon and be pleased.

I pretended to be asleep when she took my teeth and replaced them with silver. I let her kiss my forehead and tug my earlobe. I let my heart whir and purr like a kitten. I kept my eyes closed and pretended to believe in unreal things.

My eyes are apart now, but I can pretend to shut them again and wait for a kiss and a tug.

Mother. Yes, mother. She will shower me with silver coins.

Put me alone in a room with all my parts. See what happens.

Shira Whiteeagle remembers

Dusty light leaks in through the front window and runs down the walls of Shira Whiteeagle’s sitting room. It is midafternoon on a hot July day. The chirr of cicadas competes with a nearby lawnmower. Ice pops in a glass on the coffee table. Shira leans against her walker.

“Ms. Whiteeagle, I think we’ll have the best light if you sit on your couch, here,” says the man setting up the camera in the center of the room. He offers Shira his hand and together they walk to her couch. She sits.

“All right, I think we’re ready to get started, Ms. Whiteeagle,” says the woman from the news network. She sits in the armchair next to the couch.

“Ready, Dan?” she says.

The cameraman nods and steps behind the camera. He raises his hand for a moment. The woman waits for his sign. Dan’s hand drops. She turns to the camera and smiles.

“Jessica Enlow here for WVIT News Channel 7. We’re here with you today for a very special occasion. We’re in the home of Shira Whiteeagle on the day that marks her 105th birthday, making her the oldest citizen in both Bird-In-Hand County and the greater tri-state area. But, of course, the youngest at heart!” Jessica places her hand on Shira’s thigh and squeezes. Her rings catch the daylight.
“Ms. Whiteeagle also happens to share her birthday with our fair county! And she has lived in Bird-in-Hand all her life. She attended Bird-in-Hand public schools, then went on to major in anthropology at the state research university right here in Bird-in-Hand. Right out of college she got a job with the Bird-in-Hand Historical Society, and she’s worked with them ever since. Ms. Whiteeagle, first of all, happy birthday!”

“Oh, thank you, thank you, Jessica. And happy birthday to Bird-in-Hand,” says Shira. Jessica chuckles briefly, then continues.

“So I’d like to start off by asking you: what do you love the most about Bird-in-Hand?” Shira sits back in her seat a moment.

“I suppose, the people. The people of Bird-in-Hand are some of the best.”

“I understand you’ve struck up some life-long friendships here.”

“Of course, of course. I’ve known many of my friends since I was a young girl. Many of them have passed on, but there are some of us still kicking around,” Shira laughs and wrings her trembling hands.

“So Ms. Whiteeagle, what are some of your fondest memories of Bird-in-Hand?”

“I suppose I’d consider my time at the historical society the most memorable. We preserve history there after all.” Jessica raises her thin eyebrows just slightly.

“Anything else?”

“I suppose this moment.”

“This moment?”

“This interview, this day.”

“How so?”

“Well, I’m here. I’m 105, and I’m still here.” Jessica laughs again.

“Well, you’re quite a role model, Ms. Whiteeagle. You really are, and on behalf of WVIT Channel 7 News, I wish you and Bird-in-Hand County a very happy birthday, and many more!”

Dan puts his hand up again.

“And, that’s a wrap!” he says, lowering his arm. Jessica gets up.

“How was that lighting on that one, Dan?” she asks.

“Looked good.”

“So we don’t need another take?” she says.

“No, I think that should do her.”
“All right, well, we need to get over to the studio. I need to get my change of clothes before we go to the Charter Day festival.”

“Just let me break this down, and we’re good to go.”

Jessica turns to Shira, still sitting on the couch.

“Bathroom?” she says.

“Down the hall there,” says Shira.

Dan kneels down and packs his camera into a case. He clips the case shut and pushes to his feet again.

“Ms. Whiteeagle?” he says.

“Yes?” says Shira.

“I did a little research for this interview, and I found some newspaper clippings from a while back. They said you won the Little Miss Bird-in-Hand Pageant the year of the, um, the accident.”

Shira looks out her window. It’s a cloudless day. There are kids running through a sprinkler across the street. The water sprays out like the strings of an aquatic harp. One of the girls steps daintily onto the sprinkler and stops up the flow with his toes. When she pulls his foot away, the water shoots heavenward. The kids all laugh and dodge the spray.

“Ms. Whiteeagle?”

“Yes. Yes, I won that year.”

“And?”

“And.”

“Is it true? I mean, is it real, what happened?”

Shira glances out the window again. The girl across the street has slipped on the slick grass and fallen on her back. She gets up and wipes soggy grass clippings from her legs, transferring the green mess from her thighs to her wet hands. She wriggles her grassy fingers at the other kids and throws her head back in laughter. Her mouth is open like she’s swallowing great gasps of air, like she’s experiencing glorious oxygen for the very first time.

The sprinkler tilts back in her direction. Ropey beams of water shoot up into the sky, then fall. The girl shakes her sopping head and stomps her foot on the ground like she’s a filly. She kicks up grass, readying herself. She runs through the spray again, sundrenched and arms akimbo like she’s fully alive, a perfectly human girl.