

ORNAMENT AND REWARD

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Abstract

Based on real events, this novel, *Ornament and Reward*, follows a conflict between the working-class residents of Hudson, New York and a gentrifying group from the City. The two factions clash when a corporation brings the promise of jobs with the possible construction of the second largest cement plant in North America. The plotlines trace the intimate connections between the main characters, while the framework addresses the large economic forces that have the potential to change a landscape for generations.

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Introduction: A Collision Between Social Realism and Experimentalism

Ornament and Reward is in conversation with two current forms of the novel in the US. One is intricately plotted and long for a contemporary novel. It overtly draws upon the tradition of Victorian realism. The other is highly stylized and strikingly short by today's standards. It employs the experimentation of modernist fiction. The former is put out by mainstream publishers, the latter by small presses. These two forms are rarely in conversation. The best-known practitioner of the Victorian-influenced realist novel in the US, Jonathan Franzen, has famously denigrated experimental fiction. Another such writer, Francine Prose, seldom refers to such work.¹ Practitioners of the short experimental novel, meanwhile, tend not to refer publicly to mainstream authors, choosing instead to discuss their own creative processes and formal considerations.² Recently, however, these two camps in contemporary literature enjoyed a brief relationship made possible by a literary friendship between Franzen and the experimental novelist, Nell Zink.

This friendship revealed contrasts between mainstream realism and small-press experimentalism and their approaches to plot, style, and tone. Zink's 2014 novel, *The Wallcreeper*, put out by the small press, Dorothy, depicts a marriage between environmentalists in graphic physical detail. The novel opens with a car accident that causes the wife to miscarry. The husband driving the car is less concerned with the injury than with the bird, a wallcreeper, that flies in front of the vehicle, prompting him to stop. This injured animal, like a bird in a Woolf novel, has

¹ In her list of over one hundred "Books to Be Read Immediately," Prose names only one experimental novel by a living author, Thomas Pynchon's classic *Gravity's Rainbow* (Reading 269-273).

² For examples, see Joanna Ruocco in *The Paris Review*, Selah Saterstrom in *Tarpaulin Sky*, Danielle Dutton in *The Rumpus*, and Amina Cain and Renee Gladman in *Bomb*.

an easy-to-transcribe vocabulary: “The bird from the passenger seat said, ‘Twee.’” A mere two pages later comes the scene of the couple’s first encounter in a pharmaceutical company next to a vault of corpses. “It was one of those moments,” the narrating woman remarks, “where you think: We will definitely fuck” (4). Zink’s snarky tone, stark style, and manic pacing makes events absurd. The plausibility of the opening accident, however, is underscored by its resemblance to a plot in an earlier realist work. In Franzen’s 2010 *Freedom*, the protagonist, an environmentalist, Walter Berglund, seems more interested in birds than in his wife. The tone in *Freedom*, however, is not so snarky, the plot not so quick, and the style more prosaic, making the husband’s attitude seem like the passion of an invigorating activism intersecting with the slow progression of a rather dull marriage.

Ornament and Reward addresses *Freedom* and *The Wallcreeper*, but from outside the heterosexual relations central to both. This position does not solely arise from the fact that primary characters in *Ornament and Reward* are not heterosexual. Zink in her follow-up to *The Wallcreeper*, *Mislaid*, employs the same bold style and snarky tone with a lesbian protagonist who inexplicably, absurdly perhaps, decides to pass as African American. Francine Prose in her 2014 realist novel, *Lovers at the Chameleon Club, Paris 1932*, likewise, treats a lesbian character using strategies from previous works. This character moves through 436 pages of factual prose to become a Nazi. These heterosexual authors show that lesbianism can be treated with strategies already established in experimental and realist literature. But as I will show, Prose’s and Zink’s strategies are based on a vision of the past, including the recent past, that overlooks literature’s inclusions of extremely marginalized perspectives and emerging ideas. This oversight could contribute to the general hollowness of Zink’s and Prose’s fictional lesbians whose actions do not come out of preceding choices, events,

personal flaws, ideas, or strengths. These novels' inability to recognize a more inclusive literary history may, in part, lead to the narratives' failures to show these characters in more depth. Or to put it another way, while the accident in *Wallcreeper* comes out of Franzen's *Freedom* and the preoccupations it depicts, the lesbians' choices in *Mislaid* and *Lovers at the Chameleon Club* seem like accidents caused by an odd bird coming out of nowhere.

Ornament and Reward affords its lesbian characters a deeper narrative history and more complete literary one while addressing a topic central to both *Freedom* and *The Wallcreeper*: the environmental movement. It, however, views this movement from outside a middle-class perspective and therefore as less potentially sentimental or "Twee" and more obviously self-serving on the part of its wealthier advocates protecting their private resources. The novel, as a result, does not have to temper its treatment of environmentalism with Zink's snarky tone or Franzen's realistic details about personal hypocrisy.

But while not at risk for sentimentality on this topic, *Ornament and Reward* does have to avoid this potential downfall with two others: poverty and its effects on the family. To deal with this problem, the novel borrows strategies from Victorian authors, specifically from Dickens. It takes up his most sophisticated use of the pastoral mode to create a formal and distant perspective on a stratified society. According to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, Dickens used the pastoral for evolving rhetorical purposes near the beginning of his career as a novelist, eventually coming to employ it in his depiction of city life (452-3). Rae Greiner, looking at the later *Bleak House*, asserts that the novel uses the mode to show an urban landscape populated with numerous figures who seem to come out of the setting itself. One of the essential traits of the pastoral landscape is that it has at its center human figures

who live within the rural setting, traditionally shepherds (Alpers 28). The figures that come out of the famous “[f]og everywhere” (Dickens 11) in the opening of *Bleak House* are an orphan whose mother is actually alive, a battered mother, lawyers, an old woman with too many birds, and a titled Lady. The characters that come out of the rot and renewal moving towards the river at the opening of *Ornament and Reward* are lesbian waitresses, a limping restaurateur and the wife he beats, an ex-1980s pop star, a gay dairy farmer, and an environmental activist. My employment of the pastoral mode not only provides some formal distance on a painfully divided society, it compliments this particular novel’s plot. *Ornament and Reward*’s partially rural landscape is, in the end, saved from ruin by its relation to the pastoral. The state steps in to protect the town where the novel is set, Hudson, New York, from ecodamage, ruling that the area’s “pastoral” nature deserves governmental conservation.

While the plot of *Ornament and Reward*, which is based on real-life events, is rendered within the constraints of social realism, the spirit of the novel is experimental. It is an experiment in participating in a literary conversation that may not allow for its inclusion because of the lesbian characters at its center. In *Ornament and Reward*, people stare into the windows that line the main street of Hudson but do not enter, a position that reflects that of the novel itself in this particular literary conversation. This position is not the result of a lack of active current participation by both lesbian authors and editors. The novel written by Zink, an expatriate, is a form developed in America through presses where lesbians have played a hidden, influential role. Dorothy, A Publishing Project, initially began so that its founder Danielle Dutton could publish the short novel of Renee Gladman, an African-American lesbian (Dutton, Personal Interview). Elena Georgiou, a lesbian author, has been a long-time editor at Tarpaulin Sky, a press known for this form, which is

sometimes referred to as the lyric novel when the voice and tone of the prose are more intimate. Lesbian author, Selah Saterstrom, whose lyric novels have come out with Coffee House Press, has influenced a new generation of novelists at University of Denver where she is a professor. Her episodic, fragmentary novel, *The Meat and Spirit Plan*, for instance, informs the structure of a new book, *Potted Meat*, by Steven Dunn, who did his undergraduate study at Denver.

Significantly, these women's novels do not have much overt lesbian content. In fact, the most open treatment of lesbianism comes from Zink in *Mislaid*, which was published by mainstream HarperCollins in 2015 after the surprising success of *The Wallcreeper*. In a strange accident, Zink, who came into print with a press founded for an African-American lesbian, used a form significantly influenced by lesbians to depict a white lesbian impersonating an African American. In this conversation, participants appear to be talking to each other, but they also sometimes seem separated by glass, like the bird in *The Wallcreeper* from the couple in the car.

Ornament and Reward brings a more overt treatment of lesbianism into the contemporary short experimental novel while also drawing upon currently socially relevant strategies from the Victorians. It recreates two factors from nineteenth-century plotlines that put into motion dramatic, compelling action: economic inequality and cutting-edge scientific and philosophic ideas. *Ornament and Reward's* plot thereby offers both the action and the social commentary of nineteenth-century fiction, while its language works to give the intimacy and interest of current lyric experimentalism.

Reimagining the Economies and Ideas of Victorian Plots

The social structure within *Ornament and Reward* realistically renders the current gap between the rich and poor in the US to make possible the dramatic rises and falls found in Victorian fiction. One character in *Ornament and Reward* is on government disability and grows even sicker through an Oxycodone addiction after surgery; another is rich and made even richer after suing over an injury sustained in a rundown building. Most contemporary realist novels borrow from Victorian plots, which offer dramatic rises and falls, but many of these narratives with some notable exceptions, such as Min Jin Lee's 2007 novel, *Free Food for Millionaires*, do not fully reimagine the conditions that cause this movement, namely severe economic inequality. This reluctance by most to draw upon this disparity in Victorian novels is striking, given its relevance to our historical moment, which Lee explores through her allusions to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray's riches and Dickens's poverty are a striking part of present-day America with the gap between the rich and the poor having widened. The resulting economic structure allows for severe social falls with more lifetimes spent entirely in poverty.

Navigating the gap between the parlor and the debtor's prison in nineteenth-century fiction can create either great sympathy or antipathy for a character, a fact that Franzen and Prose utilize through their allusions to the Victorians. These authors draw upon the emotional resonance of these older narratives and the famous characters that move through these plots. Franzen names his female protagonist in his most recent novel, *Purity*, after Dickens's indefatigable orphan, Pip, who rallies back from poverty in *Great Expectations*. Franzen uses the allusion to suggest his Pip, who has been raised by a single mother, is emotionally orphaned; and indeed his heroine must soon leave behind the one parent whom she knows. Francine Prose also uses the

name of a Victorian character for emotional effect. In her 2006 novel, *A Changed Man*, Prose names a philanthropist after a Dickens's character, Mrs. Jellyby, who deals with her implicit shame over England's imperialism by engaging in constant charity. In Dickens's novel, Mrs. Jellyby's work for Africa causes her to neglect her own home. Prose wholly takes from Dickens' humorously scornful judgment of his female philanthropist. Prose's Mrs. Jellyby is every bit as ridiculous as his.

The drama of Victorian narratives that make Mrs. Jellyby and Pip so memorable come not only from social inequality but from scientific ideas, which influences *Ornament and Reward*'s relationship to emerging concepts in our present moment. *Bleak House* with its numerous characters, which Gillian Beer totals at fifty-six named individuals with many more anonymous ones (47), is clearly influenced by the then-new conception of biology offered by Darwin. As Beer explains, the novel's characters affect each other in ways that Darwin specifically describes in *On the Origin of the Species* (47). Beer completes her analysis of Dickens's web of connections with a reference to *Bleak House*'s apparent orphan, Esther, and her lost mother, Lady Deadlock, saying that the novel's characters "all turn out to be related either by way of concealed descent (Esther and Lady Dedlock) or of economic dependency" (47). To explain this final point about economics, Beer parenthetically quotes from Darwin's *Origin*: "(The dependency of one organic being on another, as of a parasite on its prey, lies generally between beings remote in the scale of nature)" (47). Esther, navigating these treacherous connections, coincidentally ends up moving next to the biological mother she does not know, Lady Dedlock. This chance happening cannot be separated from the Darwinian world of unseen biological relationships that Esther maneuvers as she tries to survive among an abusive female guardian and parasitical lawyers who make their living through lawsuits that drain a

contested inheritance. Franzen's emotional orphan, Pip, likewise, ends up moving to another country to live near her unknown parent, a father, with whom she almost has sex. The narrative movement appears to allude to Dickens' Esther and also Oedipus and Freud, although the Oedipus myth in psychoanalysis is associated with male, not female, sexuality. Freud's theories on sexuality are not new, unlike Darwin's at the time Dickens wrote *Bleak House*. (Dickens's exploration of evolutionary theory was, in fact, prescient, with *Bleak House* coming out six years prior to *Origin*.) The coincidental movement of Pip towards her father in *Purity*, in the end, draws upon a muddled collection of relatively old texts.

When Victorian novels depict characters who, unlike Esther, fail in their quest to survive, these narratives can complicate evolutionary theory by adding an emotional depth to Darwin's scientific views. In Thomas Hardy's 1895 novel, *Jude the Obscure*, for instance, the title character's journey is as Darwinian as Esther's movement through London but less successful. Hardy uses language that evokes *On the Origin of the Species* to show the death of Jude's children. When Jude's adopted son, "Little Father Time," kills himself and his siblings, he leaves behind a note that evokes a passage from *On the Origin of the Species* about reproductive numbers. The note, which reads, "*Done because we are too meny*" (325), points to Darwin's theory about reproductive abundance being offset by the death arising from competition for resources. Jude's family is struggling to meet their requirements for survival at this point, including, most pressingly, their need for housing. Little Father Time's note recalls Darwin's observation that organic creatures strive to "increase at a geometric ratio" (78), thereby becoming "*too meny*." Darwin adds that the competition for resources corrects these ever-increasing numbers, a process he describes as generally painless, writing: "When we reflect on this struggle we may console ourselves with

the full belief, that the war of nature is not incessant, that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, and that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply” (79). Jude and his wife Sue are certainly not happy in this narrative moment, and neither are their children. The deaths within this family, however, are not fearless and prompt but painfully slow, especially for Jude. Hardy does not contradict Darwin’s concept of the vigorously happy but instead shows the pain of losing to fight to survive amidst nature’s riches. Of the season when Jude dies, Hardy writes: “leafy summer came round again” (301). Gillian Beer speaks of how Hardy’s novels convey the abundance of earthly existence through visceral detail that makes the reader experience the vibrant richness of the world. Perceptive sensory details, she writes, “throng his writing” (248); and in this novel, they throng around a death that, as experienced by the reader, do not seem natural but, according to Darwin’s emerging theories, are absolutely so.

Ornament and Reward depicts both failure and success using contemporary philosophical and scientific ideas, including thing theory and chaos theory. The former, which comes out of philosophy and literary criticism, examines the valuation of objects outside of their intended use, analyzing specifically how things, or commodities, mediate social relationships. Elaine Freedgood uses this theoretical system to trace the meaning of the character of Jane Eyre’s mahogany furniture, which the heroine buys as a sign of her ultimate independence and which the English at the time were harvesting in the Caribbean using slave labor (50). Freedgood traces Jane’s narrative from the heroine’s initial masochistic stifling of her own bitterness to her final sadistic display of her hard-won—and brutally harvested—furniture. In *Ornament and Reward*, material things play a central role in the relationships between the gay antique dealers in town, who find value in objects that, like queers

themselves, may have been discarded, overlooked, and undervalued. These men's business depend upon their continued creation of value from things whose worth only the dealers can discern. Chaos theory, originating in physics and mathematics, examines the effects of initial conditions on outcomes, studying how variations in these conditions significantly alter subsequent events. In *Ornament and Reward*, one of the central characters, Nick, struggles to find the beginning of his narrative in Hudson where he has returned for some reason he cannot examine until the novel's end. The beginning of Nick's story, as he comes to see it, turns out to be an extremely minor event: his mother staring through a car window at passing black-eyed Susans while pregnant with him. This beginning, while seemingly insignificant, culminates in a catastrophic end.

The centrality of things in the novel is shown by the title, *Ornament and Reward*. These words are stamped on a coin minted in 1935 that has been hoarded by someone whose identity is unknown among the antique dealers. The coin was originally made to commemorate Hudson, New York on the town's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. In the real world, the coin is worth a great deal not only for its rarity on the market but for its mistakes. It offers a representation of Neptune sitting backwards on a whale with the blowhole beneath the god's posterior. Another mistake lies with the coin's moon, which is at the wrong phase given that the ship depicted nearby is named The Half Moon. Within the novel, the coin is valued for its intended use in that it truly commemorates Hudson as the town exists in the narrative. Its reversed Neptune operates as a dirty joke among the gay antique dealers. The Latin motto printed on the coin also works to commemorate the ultimate victory of the environmentalists against corporate polluters. One dealer translates the motto, "ET DECUS ET PRETIUM RECTI," as: "Both Ornament and Reward for the Righteous

Man.” The “Righteous Man” wins in the end, although his righteousness is turned around when it comes to his relationship to his poorer neighbors. The classism of the antique dealers is laid bare throughout the novel.

While thing theory is central to *Ornament and Reward*, chaos is peripheral, pressing against the edges of characters’ lives. Nick and Fiona, in particular, must push against the idea that events arise from pure chance. In a Victorian novel, failure is to perish amidst nature’s abundance, whereas in this contemporary work, it is to succumb to chaos and formlessness, thereby losing any sense of cause and effect and, with it, any vision of one’s own possible power to affect outcomes. Chaos is not new to fiction. Ralph Ellison speaks of its influence on his work in his essays, referring to the chaos that precedes creation and that African Americans have overcome through rituals and complex artist forms (838). Ellison views chaos as arising when social structures need to be changed, emerging, for instance, in riots (223). It can emerge, suggests Ellison, because of America’s formlessness with its lack of a solid past and clear class lines (223). But even in Britain with its much longer past and rigid class system, chaos can emerge. Nancy Henry suggests it underlies the class system in George Eliot’s novel, *Felix Holt*. Henry addresses how, in this political novel, legal technicalities such as an obscured patrimony can completely overturn property rights, which, during the time period depicted in the novel, determines not only social standing but voting rights (81). In *Ornament and Reward*, the queer characters know the chaos that lies beneath the American family and military structure with the technicality of sexual orientation causing members to be thrown out. Many of the queer characters must create structured interactions through their objects, which provide the reward of social meaning. This value is made by gays out of the chaos into which they have been thrown by both their families and the state.

The lesbians at the novel's center also create value in material things, namely in a home. Margot and Fiona buy the cheapest house in town with a garden tended over so many seasons that its beauty endures even when dying. The cheapness of the home arises from its location across from the Mental Hygiene Facility, a fact that feeds much humor at first but soon turns ominous. While the house seems like a sign of stability, Margot and Fiona are grounded within the narrative in momentary scenes: a drive on a gusty night, an exchange at the bottom of a widow's walk, a party in which they dance as a spider king and queen. The tension between these fleeting moments and material stability is rooted in literary precedent. In the short lyric novel, Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*, the lovers, Nora and Robin, turn into a "museum of their encounter" (56) with whimsical objects collected throughout Europe. Barnes's phrase emphasizes the tension in the lovers' union. While a museum offers stability and meaning to a dissipating past, an encounter pertains to chance and brevity. The contradiction makes Robin and Nora's home both blessed and unstable. This place whose objects speak of many locations at once including Munich, Vienna, Rome, and England, soon falls apart, causing Robin and Nora to scatter into the night streets and then from Europe. Fiona and Margot meet a similar fate, being sent out from their home into a final moment of remembering across a large landscape, with Fiona moving to America's northern edge.

Coincidence and Luck at the Edges of the Victorian Novel

Ornament and Reward's serious treatment of a sexual minority routinely excluded from contemporary fiction—and a lower class frequently derided in it—places this novel within a nineteenth-century tradition that evades easy allusion. Mrs. Jellyby may be ridiculous, and Pip scrappy, but what about more seriously odd

characters whose names do not have enough cultural currency to turn up as simple allusions in a novel now? What, for instance, is Mordecai, the impoverished Jewish mystic in George Eliot's 1876 novel, *Daniel Deronda*, who wants to pass his soul on to the eponymous hero through a kiss before perishing from tuberculosis? He is a fringe character among an already severely marginalized group in English literature, Jews. In bringing him to the center of her narrative, Eliot changed how plots about Christians traditionally operate. With Christians no longer maintaining their usual isolated importance, the choices determining their lives shift in nature. These choices begin to look less like willful decisions contributing to a meaningful, overarching plan and more like desperate bets made in the impending disorder of a world enlarging to include those much more familiar with chaos. K.M. Newton argues that luck plays a fundamental role in George Eliot's 1876 *Daniel Deronda*, a novel that he calls proto-modernist and that is, by far, Eliot's most experimental. Newton sees *Daniel Deronda*'s opening scene, which takes place at a betting table, as introducing the theme of luck and not simply gambling, which, he notes, is where critics usually focus their attention in this novel and in Victorian fiction generally (288-9). Luck in *Daniel Deronda* strings together a series of coincidences so that the hero can come to learn that he is, in fact, Jewish. This knowledge lends Deronda's life much-needed direction. Eliot clearly is playing on what constitutes luck for the Christian part of her readership. Luck can be a plot twist in which a Christian English gentleman learns that he belongs to a scapegoated minority. In *Ornament and Reward*, I too play with luck by showing how it can exist in the backwards mistake or perverse turning-around that adds to a coin's value.

Hudson's ultimate victory over a corporation that wants to build an enormous cement plant on the edge of town looks like luck to the protagonist, Margot, but to

Hudson's environmental leader, Aaron, the win is inevitable. Once victory over the corporation is secured, Aaron states that the defeat was certain the moment the townspeople took up the battle. Margot questions this post-hoc version of events, which reveals an optimism on Aaron's part that cannot be separated from the privilege he enjoys as a white and wealthy straight man. Aaron is more likely to see personal effort as paying off, being unfamiliar with the societal discrimination that thwarts such efforts for minorities as a matter of course. Believing in the efficacy of individual labor, Aaron logically views failure as the result of not working hard enough. His narrative goes against Margot's experience of the cement corporation's defeat. Margot, a lesbian, is initially convinced the increasingly gay town will lose, seeing Hudson as damned. This vision comes out of a midwestern childhood spent primarily with a Christian grandmother, who saved her from parental abandonment. The perception allows her to conceive of Hudson as an appropriate home since she views herself as damned. The town is a place she happens to need, having recently lost her grandmother and the sense of home the older woman provided. Margot calls Aaron's narrative about inevitable victory "the official story" and watches in silence as the men in town start to repeat it. *Ornament and Reward* ends with Margot leaving behind this narrative of inevitable victory to confront her own version of the fated: her belief in her own damnation.

The plot follows other characters' ideas of the inevitable, which provides structure to these marginalized lives. It examines the beliefs of Margot's lover, Fiona, who thinks that the corporation, which spends over fifty-five million dollars to promote the plant's construction, will win because the rich always are victorious. After purchasing a home with Margot, Fiona loses her cynicism but regains an old delusion she had as a child when she did not see her hand as her own. Her parents had

just divorced and neither wanted custody of her, and she, in turn, could not take custody of an extremity. The dissociation that she suffers from her body part has gained a name since the temporal end of this novel's narrative in April 2005, Xenomelia. The afflicted, paradoxically, pay too much attention to the disavowed body part, according to a study conducted by Atsushi Aoyama, et al, which asserts that rejected part "captur[es] the individual's attention in a pathologically exaggerated way" (96). The distress caused by the disassociation is so extreme that, when amputation does occur, patients do not regret the loss. As neuroscientist at Emory University, Dr. Paul McGeoch, notes of such amputees, "They are universally happy" (Ananthaswamy 84). Fiona treats this dissociation, which reemerges under the stress she experiences trying to buy a home, by moving to a new part of New York State. She goes to where the lost hand makes sense as a coping mechanism: in a city where the constant attention that the extremity demands can help her through the loss of her cousin, Nick, and her lover while also distracting her from the hellish vista of a Niagara Falls damned and crossed with countless wires. The ideas that return from Fiona's and Margot's past are depicted as alternatively nightmarish and comforting. By nature, they torture, being created from old preoccupations, but in function, they provide structure, being repetitive and enduring. The solid structure they create in the novel pushes up against a life of chaos. These rigid thought-forms ultimately lend a sense of cause and effect. Characters believe they can guess where these obsessions will lead, having experienced them previously.

Another much less potentially tragic structure that provides form to the characters' lives and also to the novel is gay celebration. *Ornament and Reward* is organized around gay festivities, such as the Academy Awards, New Years, and, most importantly, Halloween. (Hudson did not celebrate Pride until 2010 when further

gentrification provided gays with governmental support and a minimum of safety.) *Ornament and Reward* pits celebration, luck, and obsession against the chaos of pure chance. The plots cohere to win this battle on a narrative level with events never devolving into chaos. The narratives end up telling stories of tragic loss. While the central characters lack the status of classic dramatic heroes, they manage to fall far.

The Narratives of Antinarrative Experimental Novels

In conversing with not only the Victorian-influenced novel but the short experimental one, *Ornament and Reward* faces challenges with narrative and audience. The short experimental novel is antinarrative largely because of its close connection to poetry, which has gone against narrative in recent decades. Many authors of these novels, such as Joyelle McSweeney, write poetry as well as prose and utilize their understanding of one genre when writing in the other. A lack of narrative within the more sizeable form of the novel, however, poses significantly more problems than it does in even a long poem. One reason for the shortness of this particular manifestation of the novel is its lack of larger narrative arcs. A novel can only go on for so long when the existence of a major plotline is in doubt. Many experimental fiction writers, therefore, have developed strategies to carry readers through a longer work. One major strategy involves bringing in narrative familiarity and action through literary allusion, while another entails creating an unbroken lyric intimacy with the reader.

The use of allusion to make narratives compelling involves grounding wildly unfamiliar and seemingly plotless tales in well-known literary traditions and is employed in *Ornament and Reward* but only in an extremely limited way. Joanna Ruocco uses this strategy with her 2014 novel, *Dan*, in which she clearly refers to the

slapstick play of Thomas Pynchon. The reference lends a sense of familiarity to *Dan's* narrative, which is so unanchored in major action its storyline evades description. Together with Ruocco's unique language, this familiarity compels the reader through the length of a short book. Some experimentalists use the conventions of heavily plotted genres, such as the detective novel, to provide conflict that does not actually rest within a fully realized plot arc. Joyelle McSweeney's 2007 novel, *Nylund, the Sarcographer*, for instance, seems like a noir, but the main emphasis is not on the crimes that come to capture Nylund's attention but on the investigative methods he uses involving language. *Ornament and Reward*, having more plot than most experimental novels, does not employ strategies to overcome a lack of action, but it does refer to a well-known literary tradition to ground the reader in the possibly unfamiliar setting which gives rise to much of the action: an impoverished neighborhood in its earliest stages of gentrification. To give the reader an idea of the historic poverty of Hudson, which determines a great deal of the plot, the novel refers to the cinematic version of two works set in upstate New York that center on, respectively, the homeless and the working class: William Kennedy's *Ironweed* and Richard Russo's *Nobody's Fool*. Both of the film versions of these books were, in part, shot in Hudson. These references to Kennedy and Russo give a sense of Hudson's poverty, which has in the past decade has largely been pushed out.

The experimental lyric novel sometimes appears to have a great deal of action, but its plot, in fact, rests in its language. When coupled with its close connection to the reader, its use of language can make for a compelling read. Such novels can function as extended prose poems, an example being John Keene's novel, *Annotations*, which offers lines about experiencing Saint Louis as a gay black child. These lines turn sound into poems without line breaks: "Occasionally we heard

shooting, but most often it was shouting, which a battle of fists or blade would readily resolve. Our ears hammer impressions into audible jewels” (12-13). The narrative itself is not about the gunshots as much as the jewel they yielded and continue to yield in memory, the hammering being in the present tense. Selah Saterstrom writes of war in *The Pink Institution* and, pressingly, the silence secured by military victory:

While living on St. Clare Avenue
Azelea and Willie had two more children bringing the
number up to four. Faryn, Aza, Ginger, and Trulie.
This did not include the son Willie had
with a French woman during the war
he said he saved her life and the only way
she could repay him was with sex
she was a lesbian before he saved her life he said
but not after. (33)

The plot is not about the war or even Willie’s repayment as much as it is about his account of the French woman in a foreign land. (*The Pink Institution* is set in Mississippi.) Willie’s account breaks apart his native English with its silencing. He saved the woman’s life before but not after, the line break, forced by justified margins, informs us. This break, foreign in prose, undercuts Willie’s narrative that it was only the woman’s lesbianism that ended with her repayment. The passage makes the reader examine the true meaning of salvation and a woman’s life.

The plots as revealed through the language in both *The Pink Institution* and *Annotation* show how the characters are trapped within a region, a problem that the people in *Ornament and Reward* eventually share. These characters in Hudson become trapped by the state and the financial systems it sustains. Fiona’s chronically ill cousin, Michelle, for instance, cannot move out of New York where she benefits from social programs that do not exist outside of the state. Other characters, such as

Fiona, get trapped by their own thoughts, which come to find expression in external constraints. Fiona can leave Hudson and has already done so. She lived in Manhattan for years, but she cannot let go of the returning delusional system about her hand, which sends her to the western edge of New York State where she lacks few resources to continue to live, let alone to leave. Fiona's cousin, Nick, begins the novel with the intent of not staying long but, by the end, comes to see that this intent marks the beginning of a narrative about being unable to escape the policing stare of a small town. Nick comes to recognize the beginning of his own story and, in doing so, comes to a tragic end. Before reaching this termination, he delivers an internal dramatic monologue to a "you" that has become intimate. This novel, while drawing upon social realism, has a lyric awareness of a single, close listener.

The short experimental novel, even when not as intimate as *The Pink Institution* and *Annotations*, does not address a marketable known audience as much as it speaks to a single reader. Zink appears to have participated in this literary form as it currently exists in America unwittingly, an accident made possible by the method she used to write *The Wallcreeper*, which caused her to direct her narrative to a single listener. Zink originally wrote the novel for Jonathan Franzen alone and then sent it to Dorothy, A Publishing Project, unaware of the movement out of which this press arose. Zink sent it, she said, because the book she had been trying to sell was from the point of view of a half woman, half seal and Dorothy publishes books mostly by and about women, so she submitted this work she had privately written to Franzen about female homo sapiens. At the time of this submission, Zink considered *The Wallcreeper* to be "unpublishable trash" (Shultz 38). Before composing it, she had written many works aimed at an individual male reader, including the Israeli writer, Avner Shats. Her later friendship with Franzen was formed through the individualized

genre of the letter when she wrote him on a shared subject of interest, birds. For Zink, this method of writing to and for one man, while causing her to focus on a single reader, has not inspired intimacy, a fact she herself addresses when speaking of how she tends to write for a man who is not her lover. This approach, she says, has allowed her to keep a distance from her own efforts that has helped her through longstanding insecurities as a writer. “‘It’s nice to have the excuse of heteronormativity,’ she says. ‘You can explain it away, you can say, “Well, she has a crush on him.” It lowers the risks for me’” (Shultz 40). Zink, in writing *The Wallcreeper* for Franzen, created a work that has the focused direction of short experimental novel but not the intimacy of a lyric one.

Ornament and Reward aims for closer connection to the individual reader to say what cannot be stated literally. Most characters in the novel struggle to speak the truth even in their internal monologues—and for good reason. To speak honestly would, in most cases, threaten their immediate daily functioning. It would, for instance, jeopardize Fiona’s and Margot’s insecure jobs and Nick’s ability to maintain a functional forgetfulness about the past. Nick’s living conditions and also his sister’s were unstable in the extreme. They cannot speak the truth to each other even when alone and so have a private language they invented as children. The vocabulary they have constructed, however, does not include words for their current material needs; rather, it communicates the most basic yearnings and childish fantasies. And so it comes to constrain them. The closeness that this novel tries to achieve with its reader relates to its psychic proximity to its characters. The novel speaks from a place where no one can hide secrets. Everything is known, and everyone is estranged from the social world of a small town with its prying curiosity.

Conclusion: A Social and Experimental Moment

In the wake of the accident of *The Wallcreeper*'s success, Nell Zink herself has had the platform to dismiss, if not the mainstream social-realist novel, then Franzen's attempts at it. She has called *Freedom* "the very stodgy, square conservative work of a guy who is not really stodgy, square and conservative" (Cocozza). She also characterizes the U.S. publishing industry as "shallow, profit-driven, and parochial" (Schulz 44) and has dismissed the work of major contemporary authors, both experimental and traditional, including Pynchon, David Foster Wallace, and Jennifer Egan, as either jejune or forgettable (Cocozza). She is no longer part of the small-press movement, if she ever was, but the collision she caused between two contemporary versions of the novel is a valuable one to *Ornament and Reward*. This work that follows finds value in single moments including this one of collision and, within its narrative, of celebration and encounters.

Neptune's Eye

The part of Hudson, New York that did not want to fall down stayed close to a single street, Warren. And even this street moved towards rot as it went down to the river where Margot stood before a statue of a saint. It was October. The sky was almost as deep blue as the bronze figure of Winifred, the patron saint of payrolls. Winifred stood on a pile of large rocks in a park and looked down on Margot, who was thirty-two and blandly pretty. She had lived in eight Midwestern states and often appeared cheerful, although not in her eyes. Her gaze was sharp. She stared above the saint's crown and thought the blue of the sky was mad.

The train running by the river came in, pushing up heat. Margot tried to remember why she had come to this park, which had, on one side, housing projects and, on the other, a train station. She told herself she had not come to know the danger of being hidden in what had been daylight. The sun pressed down on mountains. The train's metal hissed, but its screech stopped. Margot had the wrong idea she was late when she started up Warren Street. At the top of the hill, Nick picked up his bicycle, tipped onto the sidewalk. Stop the Plant, said a red sign. The sun almost blinded. Stop the Plant, read another.

Nick pedaled through the red light, rushing downward. The cement plant, if built, would be larger than Hudson. It would push up from Greenport, a town that surrounded this one on every side except for the river's edge. His hands burned from the air coming up the hill as he passed signs, sculptures, paintings, photos. It was Arts Walk on this afternoon in 2002, so the shops were displaying art with the usual antiques. Old flags were everywhere and new ones too, the stars and stripes displayed as napkins, a table cloth, pillows. People said the shops would save the town. But Nick remembered when the movies would save everything—and the stars showed up,

Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep. They came dressed as bums. The town learned that it looked like the Great Depression.

Orange burned across the street, the color coming out of objects. Nick had to cross—but a luxury SUV drove towards him on the other side of the street. It drove so slowly as if in a parade and about to throw candy out at children scrambling for sweetness under a sun that had turned desperate. Nick had to look away from it. The SUV, when it went by, gave only a reflection of him thinking, Fuck yourself, in shut glass.

He biked to red and orange coming out of framed landscapes and second-hand objects. The old things in the thrift-store window matched the color of the paintings so closely. The red corduroys seemed to be running out of a fall forest. Nick would make a sculpture while in Hudson, he decided. The sculpture would be the color of the plastic black-eyed Susan wrapped beneath his bike seat. It would be of an eye that saw through an SUV without care. Its center would be as yellow as a black-eyed Susan's petals and the edge, as black as her eye.

Fiona had a serious face—broad like her cousin Nick's, with strong cheekbones—but her hair was whimsical, being large and red. It was now held down with pins and strained elastics. The car she drove smelled blindingly of sandalwood. Her massage table blocked the rear view in the hatchback that she and Margot had bought before moving down from Albany where Hudson was a joke. But Fiona knew it wasn't funny that Hudson had no jobs after the old cement plant closed and the governor shut the whorehouses.

She saw a silhouette, Nick's, blotting out the sun. She thought when she saw the plastic flower, He's not in Portland anymore. A flower's fine, maybe, on Warren,

but not below Fourth. She parked and walked over to see the sketched nude that Nick was studying. The figure looked like Neptune with its trident but was too sleek.

“Nick.”

He turned. “Hey, Lona Fiona.” They hugged and headed across Warren after Nick held out his cigarettes. Fiona thought, exhaling smoke upwards: That’s evidence there, that dark breath above, we—

The thought, like the sun, ended in shadow. Margot was with the man who owned the theater at the top of the street, Kenneth, who moved with angular drama. His neck and shoulders were drawn up, his eyes—he’d been an eighties pop star!—flattened and divided by biofocals. Margot’s gaze was as clouded as sea glass that showed scratches from its past and whatever light was near. She said to Fiona. “I walked around after you dropped me off. Kenneth’s getting a cake pan!”

Where did you go? Fiona wondered but did not ask. Their boss, Diane, was in the restaurant’s window, which exposed the end of the bar and a sign that read:

Real Eyes
Realize
Real Lies

Their boss had silver hair and moved quickly. Fiona bent down as if to tie her shoe, which was a clog. She put out her cigarette on a planter.

“What are you bitches up to?” asked Diane at the door. Her voice was rough but came out, clear, when she sang to Kenneth, who had gotten what she called “some fruity fucking dog statues” from the Arts Council:

How much are those doggies in your window?
The ones with the pink and purple fur?

Kenneth smiled when Diane was done and said: “Those dogs are the only things that haven’t given me trouble all day. I’ve grown fond.”

Diane rolled her eyes. Before she could speak more of bitches, Fiona said to Nick, “You always want to bring your bike to the back. You’ll lock it up there.” Margot watched Diane with a suspicion so cheerful it was hidden like a star near a high sun. Fiona told her to go in before turning back to say, “Follow me, to the back.”

Inside the restaurant were paintings of ships. The rooms were red and black. There were two, a bar with tables and a dining area, the two parts meeting at an entrance with a ramp on one side. The ramp sloped down to the dining room, which had a low floor and high ceiling and small service bar. A cast-iron chandelier hung high in the huge room. The tables around the edges seemed to search for warmth from the dark red walls.

Fiona walked down the ramp with clean rags. She passed Diane and Kenneth, who were discussing the plant. The corporation was saying that its old factory had been around for so long that the new one should be exempt from certain rules. It, for instance, should not have public hearings about possible environmental impacts. “We’ll force the issue,” Diane said as Fiona passed with salt and pepper shakers. “They’ll get hearings even if we have to buy our own goddamn expert.”

Fiona did not care about the plant while placing salt and peppers on the tables. Nick would need more direction—he was almost done setting tables in the bar—and the sugar packets were low. She didn’t have thoughts about the plant this afternoon. She only had tasks and suspicions.

The plant, she felt, would come in. The corporation was rich, and the rich always won. Years ago the family’s attempt at communal living just north in Chatham failed because of the cost of oil. Even when pooling their money, the family—aunts, cousins, a great aunt, a grandmother—only made it through two winters. While

putting a salt shaker beneath a painting of a flyboat, Fiona remembered her teacher saying soon after the farmhouse was sold: "If I could have one person with me on a sinking ship, it would be you, Fiona." Fiona, seven then, said nothing.

Half Moon

Few fought against the plant as hard as Diane did. The restaurateur petitioned and went to meetings and threw accusations at the enemy. Her insults were vicious, but she hurled them in a celebratory spirit like a wedding-goer trying to blind the wedded couple with rice. Some accused her of being loud and confrontational. Fiona referred to her as a “blowhard,” which meant something from Fiona, who spoke beneath her breath even when telling others what to do. But most in Hudson were in no position to fault others for loud or excessive speech. The town gossiped and got into fights. Disputes moved out onto the street where everyone fought for the last word in arguments that could change but not end.

On Nick’s first night at the Blackbird Restaurant and Bar, he heard pieces of conversation when dusk came. Men in the front spoke of houses. “No. *Original* detail. I watched him tear it down and thought, There goes a hundred thousand.” Nick trained his gaze on Fiona’s and Margot’s. The three of them had eyes full of words, but for Nick the words were heard alone. He did not repeat the table numbers told to him or the requests he got. His own voice moved beyond him as the hours passed. It became like the mesh in the window into the kitchen—barely perceptible and always ahead. He would have to wait until after work to say how his voice burned, separate yet stuck, in his throat. It burned like the mesh in the glass, which glowed and grew as he rubbed against the denim and flannel of those standing at the bar. He gathered electricity and shocks. Back at the kitchen, he did not touch the knob’s metal but kicked.

He kicked the door for hours. When the crowds had thinned enough for him to pause, he was in the dining room. Before him was a painting of a flyboat titled, “The Half Moon.” He imagined that no one had bought it and no one ever would. The

painting halved the world into west and east, past and future, the river and the top of the street. The night was wide. Below was quiet, the lines of conversation, gone. The only line that remained was one he could see in his mind, an edge of light, Warren with its streetlamps.

Nick had stopped breathing. A pint glass pressed a fragile C into his palm. A man at a table had a tuneful voice. Nick moved towards it. Growing brighter, it exclaimed: "I never said I was for low-income housing!"

Nick's foot came down hard. Laughter broke out. "Well, if you know the distinction! It is subtle." Inside the glass in Nick's hand, a fork moved like the needle of a compass in a slow turn. *A subtle turn*, a voice in his head said. He walked faster to lose the voice in the bar's throb. The metal in the door's window made the glass strong. He kicked and found the kitchen empty by the stoves. A woman, the dishwasher, stood a few feet away. Her face was dark enough to hide decades of age. She could have been thirty or fifty until she said of Nick's glass: "That's for the bar." A mature patience tempered her annoyance. She was rinsing utensils in a tray with a sprayer. The water shut off with a clunk in the wall. "Put your silver in the tray," she said and walked out.

Nick followed her. The backyard had more concrete than grass. The alley lay behind the fence. Nick's bicycle waited like old friend, watchful of new alliances. The woman introduced herself as Reeny, extending her hand, which was firm but soft with soap and heat. Nick remembered his voice when he said his own name. It had the trust of a bright window threaded with wire. His laugh remained tense until he and Reeny began to smoke. She told a story about a waitress, now gone, who had asked her for a glass to be rewashed not once but twice. Reeny had asked if she needed to wash her

upper lip. Did she do it? Nick asked. No, said Reeny. When she stormed out, she still had “that sour smell” (for that had been the complaint) stuck to her face.

“She had a face like a foot,” Reeny said and then narrowed her gaze. “You know the kind I mean?”

Nick exhaled smoke fast to the side. “The chin is...a heel?”

“Yes.” The s at the end was perfect. “But the likeness is deeper. You wonder if they’re walking round, feet in the sky, when they dream. *That* deep.”

A cat jumped up onto the fence. It was so calm Nick assumed it had a home. He asked Reeny if she liked cats. She said she liked them “fine.” He told her of a woman in Portland who, only a day after they met, spoke in front of him using the voice she had invented to say her cat’s thoughts. Nick mixed his words with a *meow* to imitate the woman saying: *Outside now*. “I wanted to say: Cat voice? Already?”

Reeny looked down at the weedy stone. She let out a silent laugh that ended with a soft wave of the hand holding the cigarette. She looked up to study Nick. “That happens sometimes.”

The cat jumped from the fence. The bicycle seemed to say: This can’t happen. Reeny added a precise “Yes.” Her face was well-lit. So was Nick’s even though the sky had no moon. The kitchen’s light fell on concrete. A sodium-vapor lamp burned high in the alley.

After dinner, Diane was speaking of the upcoming mayor’s race at the service bar when Margot wandered off. Diane’s candidate, Ruth, was challenging the current mayor, who had taken money from Champlain Cement. Diane would not have minded someone speaking of Ruth’s odds, which were poor. Diane embraced baseless hope. A former Catholic, the woman had replaced the Trinity with one of her own making,

one aspect being Hope, another, Visualizing What You Want, another, Self-Esteem, which was why Margot left. Diane's candidate was a lesbian, and Margot suspected that if she said Ruth had the charisma of a turnip, the response would be a long sermon on self-esteem, a subject that Margot saw as uglier and less valuable than turnips.

Margot also had to say some truth that remained hidden even from her when she went behind the bar in the next room. It took Fiona, coming up the ramp, to see how Margot was talking of a past that, in public, usually remained severed from the present—but here how it jumped! Margot described her grandma's stare of horror as the old woman asked: "Are you a daughter of Sappho?"

"Oh, Grandmother!" Margot exclaimed backlit by bottles. "I'm the daughter of Sandra, your eldest?"

The men roared.

Margot said that her mother's "first last words" were: Have a nice life. "But that line was so tacky." Margot cocked her dimpled face. "I had to call back. So then she said her last last words, 'I have to go now.' And she did, pour soul. She's dead!"

Everyone from Frank T. down to Andor laughed—but not Larry. He said, "Don't let the door hit you on your way out," as if he opened this door for a living and, for reasons known only to him and his superiors, could not be fired.

Fiona fetched her coat and Margot's. She planned on saying, "Tragedy's not entertainment," as soon as Margot came over but waited until they got in the car.

"It's comedy," Margot said, looking ahead at bumper stickers that came together to form a wide quilt of opinions. She and Fiona drove not to the cabin they rented out of town but to the top of the hill where their friend, Kara, was caring for a house that had a widow's walk and two pugs. "We need new jobs," Fiona said as she

drove. “And I have to stop smoking. I need a public image that says ‘health’ if I ever want to succeed as a massage therapist.”

“I think you just need to keep giving your massages. People will talk about the wonderful job you do, and your business will grow.”

“No,” Fiona said, slowing before a house with two perfect rocking chairs angled at each other on its porch. “That’s not how it works. People have images in this world. Massage therapists are supposed to project health. A whole way of life. I smoke and work at the Blackbird. I’m never going to make it doing that. That’s just reality.”

“Fiona, who in this town projects health?”

Diane’s yoga teacher was offered as an example, a woman from suburban Connecticut, who sometimes came to the Blackbird with her young teenage son. He would go behind the service bar and Margot would admire him for some antic involving the soda gun or maraschino cherries. One time Margot asked him to move, and the yoga teacher asked with prim outrage: “I guess it wouldn’t matter if Diane said he could go there?” Margot answered in a voice as evenly sweet as a church sheet cake, its icing roses smashed: “Oh, I’m sure she did!” Fiona remarked of the yoga teacher while turning off the car: “She gives the impression of health.”

Margot laughed. “To whom?”

“You don’t understand people.”

“Please—” Margot opened her door. “I wish I understood them less!”

Kara was a tattoo-artist-in-training who had lived in Hudson all her life. Still, like Margot, she had an air of transience, which came, in part, from her love of motorcycles. She would go around town with a helmet under her arm. With her darkly pretty looks and small size, she looked as though, in an earlier era, she could have found employment being shot from a cannon. The way she made her living in 2002 was cleaning and caring for the restored properties of the newcomers and catering to their tastes. As soon as Fiona and Margot walked in the house, she spoke of her newest business plan aimed at people from the City.

“I’m making these beaded penises made out of champagne corks.” She was shredding sweet potatoes. “I have a name, ‘pornaments.’ I’ll have a solid stock by Christmas. The labor with beading—it’s a lot—but I can do it while watching T.V. I got a list of potential distributors. Brandon, the Franks. But I’m going to need the two of you to get me the corks from the Blackbird.”

“Of course,” Fiona said, settling into the kitchen. She and Kara began brainstorming about possible businesses, unencumbered by the usual presence of Kara’s boyfriend, Steve, a communist, who objected to bourgeois materialism and, in theory, profits. Margot drifted into the living room where the walls were decorated in pictures shot by one of the owners of the house, a well-known photographer. They were in black and white and led from the living and dining rooms up a bent stairway. They shone, silvery and large. Margot drifted in her mind as slowly as what the photos showed: icebergs.

Each block of ice was different. One had diagonal layers and a hole. The next was block-shouldered, another shark-nosed and pointing. The last one in the living room had a man-shaped hole in between two long chambers. What a variety of heights looked down from the walls: icebergs as tall as city buildings, as a carriage

home, a capsizing ship. Fiona and Kara were talking, but Margot heard the sounds of the pictures: the roar of exhausted ice coming down, the cry of birds circling where they had landed over and over. Every photo surprised with a curious thumb of sky stuck into the ice, a line of melt that swayed on its way down, archways in white that led from gray to black.

“Get out!” Kara cried—and laughed. Some unbelievable tale was unfolding in the kitchen. Margot moved from one banister to the other, climbing the stairs, navigating warm and cold. One moment was frozen with some fear too large to name, the next, warm with a breeze that seemed wrong. Margot had reached the second floor where she remembered her dread from this afternoon. While walking by boarded-up houses, she had been full of fear and scorn too—fear of the condemned homes and scorn for the renovated ones. How corrupt these grand redone houses had appeared from outside, but inside! Silver icebergs led to a second-floor hall with more photos.

An overhang ice came and then an empty patch of ocean. Archways broke through white; they could collapse. Margot tried to move between points that seemed stable, a path from the smallest iceberg to a clearing around an unanchored jut of white. Walking down the hall, Margot looked at the photos while following a hidden path through what was sunken, hidden, and frozen.

Kara’s and Fiona’s voices were below her feet. A full-length mirror was ahead. One of the pugs stared into it. The animal looked satisfied. Its vanity made sense in this house. The place was large enough to hold this art, but as a home, it overwhelmed, and so the dog focused on its eyes.

Margot’s own gaze was alert. She did not know how long her looks would last. Her savings would cover no more than four months’ utilities and rent. Had her

grandma, who had cared for her longer than her parents, gleaned this moment when staring at Margot years ago? Had she seen this moment with this unmoored person in a mirror? Yes, Margot thought, climbing further, leaving behind icebergs for the widow's walk's night. Her grandma could always see the future in things. The old woman, upon taking Margot into her home, had scrubbed her with a washcloth hard. And so Margot emerged, a durable thing, now staring down at the river and roofs. Her grandma had seen this moment in Margot years ago, like a widow seeing ruin in a line of water.

Perhaps, Margot thought, she had seen even further into death. Her grandma's pastor in Wisconsin once said that, for Lutherans, damnation did not mean fire and brimstone; it meant being dead forever. The saved would rise, and the damned would not. Margot had thought when hearing his words: I'll be dead forever, and Grandma will rise. And she had been right: the woman, dead for a month, had risen. In this blackness beyond the glass came a stare that damned the whole town. Hudson would have another fall, Margot was sure of it. It would collapse, she knew, running past icebergs. The man-shaped gap in the ice would become a building and that thumb of sky, a limb. The stare would spread into a white-edged archway and everything would roar down.

In the kitchen, Kara was mixing sweet potato into raw meat for the pugs, who stared up with their bred look of beggary.

"Where will we go, Fiona?" Margot asked.

Fiona almost spoke but was interrupted by Kara crying: "Margot's flipped!"

"But isn't this our home?" Margot asked Fiona, who had never lived outside New York State.

"Yes."

“A home we won’t leave? Can’t?”

Front and Back

The house with the for-sale sign on Rip Van Winkle had been sold by December. Inside Nick slipped pantyhose over a dryer's venting pipe. Some animal had gone down into the hookup for the outdoor vent, said Nick's father, Ed, from the couch. Ed had white hair and rounded, handsome features. He seemed aware of his good looks, even as he rolled a joint and watched TV with the volume almost off. "I'm not going up on that roof again," Ed declared before sealing the joint with a lick. "We're gone, right, Bibi?" Bibi was Ed's third and, he found, sanest wife. She sat at a nearby computer with a sweatshirt decorated with a penguin and the caption, "Oh, Snow You Didn't!" She discarded in online poker and gained a seven of hearts, a trade that made her shake and answer to her husband brightly: "Yup, that's right, Ed! We're gone!"

Nick's sister, Michelle, who was thin and striking, went to the fridge in the kitchen off the living room. She moved with an uprightness and slowness that sometimes looked like the height of grace and, other times, the sum of many internal considerations, all of them terrifying. It seemed like the latter when Ed with his eyes on TV called Martha Stewart a greedy cunt. Michelle appeared to calculate the distance between the barbequed chicken she had just baked and the door. The house was small. The couch was not distant from the dryer and the chicken close to the computer nook where Bibi took a sharp breath of surprise that had little pleasure in it. Bibi and Ed would have more space in their home in New Hampshire.

"We have a Great Room in the new house, don't we, Bibi?" Ed asked, his eyes still on Martha.

Nick turned on the dryer to test it. Bibi said quietly, "Shit."

“I took out two walls,” said Ed, who was a contractor. It was unclear to whom he was speaking or if it mattered.

“You’re leaving at the right time, Ed,” Nick remarked. He went over to a chair in the living room.

“We got a good enough price,” Ed answered, his eyes distant from watching images that quickened. The show had gone to commercial. He glanced at his son.

“You mean the plant?”

“Yeah.” A cat jumped onto Nick’s lap.

“You hanging out with those faggots on Warren?”

“Aw, Ed, now,” Nick answered in an old joking voice that had lost all its humor.

“Tell me they’re not faggots,” said Ed.

Nick tapped the cat by the bottom of its tail with a flat palm, which caused it to move its head from side to side in hypnotized enjoyment. “Some aren’t. The people I work for are straight.”

“They don’t give a shit who has a job, that’s for sure,” Ed said.

“I work for them, Ed.”

“A job with a decent paycheck. Like factory work.”

Nick had worked in a factory once, putting a tube onto a metal insert until the tube and insert got stamped inside his vision. His ears filled with the sound of the assembly snaking through the room. The sound pushed out thoughts, leaving only his knowledge of part of the path’s progression, the part that passed through hands until his fingers grew unfamiliar. They fanned in front of him on the company parking lot when he crouched down to vomit on the last day, too real to be his own. “I can’t do factory work.”

“Well you better watch it with those dealers.” Ed took a toke and said with breathless strain, holding the smoke in his lungs, “You’re already—” He leaned forward to offer the joint to Nick, who did not take it. Ed leaned back and blew out his smoke. “Your choice. Michelle!”

Michelle did not speak when she brought in a plate of chicken for Ed. She took a small portion for herself. She had Crohn’s. Ed talked of his plans for his new workshop with its electric generator and his longstanding dreams of having a large home and his admiration for the Grateful Dead. Bibi, joining him on the couch, said, “That’s right, Ed.” She soon solved with a silent sounding-out (she wished she had money on it) “Snow Day Trip” on a TV puzzle. She said, “Yes,” when she solved it, which Ed took as an affirmation for a statement he had just made about his truck’s enduring sturdiness.

Michelle recalled going to the demolition derby with Ed when she was little. He put her into the front seat of his car behind a dash covered in magazine pictures of huge bare tits and thrust-out asses. Michelle needed to forget that car, ramming up into others, and get a fresh pack of cigarettes from the carton Ed had given her this afternoon.

“I’ll take some more, Princess,” said Ed.

“Ok...” Her voice trailed off.

The ache in her gut faded when she thought of the animal that had crawled down the pipe. It had escaped December. The animal had died, crawling into warmth, Michelle thought, walking.

That night Nick came to work at seven-thirty. Fiona renegotiated his pay with Diane at the service bar at the shift's end. Fiona reminded Diane that Nick was a hard worker. Diane answered yes, she had seen how he "had the hustle." Fiona said he needed four shifts, not three, which meant he would have to work even when business could be slow and the waitresses have little to tip. Diane said she wanted Nick happy enough to keep him showing up. ("On feast-or-famine Sundays, I want him on the floor.") She said eight an hour in cash—a good deal, she added, putting her scotch down, hard, on the bar.

Fiona, agreeing, got the cash from the drawer. After adding the waitresses' tip-out, she went over to Nick, who was at a table with Reeny. He pocketed the money without looking at it. Then he leaned back to laugh. His gaze went up towards the iron chandelier, which hung as whimsical as a prop in a pirate's tale and as threatening as what it was: enormously heavy and high.

When Fiona got back to the bar where Margot was sitting too, Diane asked how much the waitresses had made, the same question she asked every night. Upon receiving her answer, 180 each, she said the same thing she always did: "Better than a kick in the head."

Pouring herself another scotch, she stood behind the bar and talked to Fiona and Margot about how Ruth was going door to door about the plant. Even though Ruth had lost the election, she had not stopped speaking out about the mayor's political ties. Margot did not think of politics much, her father's family in Chicago having taught her to "punch the top of the party line," which did not work in the church where she and Fiona now voted. The "ballot" was a panel of levers without one for voting for every candidate in a single party. Margot went for the chowder that the church women made on election night. More than once, she had to leave the booth

before finishing, a new pot being served before she could flip her switches down to Senator.

Margot finished her wine and wandered up the ramp to the next room. Diane leaned over to Fiona on her stool and said: “You got a way of speaking. You know that?”

Fiona took compliments to examine them at their seams. This one was well-sealed. “Yes.”

“When you speak that is. You could help Ruth go door to door. Margot’s got potential. You could throw shit at her head and she’d tell you to have a nice day. But that bluntness! You think you’re good and then—” she exhaled hard through a lax mouth “—there comes the razorblade in the candy apple. She’ll go too far someday, especially if she says something to those boys that gets them talking, and it hits my totals. You, though, you’re different. You could go door to door, talking about the plant. You just keep that hair under control and out of Bozo territory. Whatever you’re doing now is working.”

“Thanks.”

“You got extra pins in there?”

Laughter came from the bar. “I guess they’re not extra.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got potential and an obligation too. This town’s where you make your money. You can talk about how you work here. This plant won’t do shit for jobs. It’s going to be so efficient, it’ll practically run itself. Not only that, they’re bringing up workers from Cementon.”

The town of Cementon was ten miles south and had a concrete factory and a dock for barges and a cloud of dust always above. “I’ll think about it,” Fiona said. Laughter came, hard and distant, from the top of the ramp.

Fiona excused herself and went up to the dining room's entrance to see Margot before the lit bottles. Margot was midway through a monologue about Yankee Doodle Dandy as gleaned through one eye, then the other, "that bored kid trick." This figure seemed to leap—"with flag in hand!" Sam was mad, said Margot lightly and sharply among the men growing silent. Margot cried, "Before or after!"

Fiona took a step forward in the uproar of new laughs and stopped. Someone was behind her. Turning, Fiona found a thin shoulder, Diane's, passing and then pressing into her own. Beyond the rough hug was the entrance to the dining room, which Diane's husband, Neil, had cut with a chainsaw while dressed as a pirate. It had been Halloween when he had raised the chainsaw to the wall at the party for the restaurant's expansion. When the Blackbird took over the building next to it. Diane said, "Goodnight," into Fiona's ear. What was Margot saying? *She'll go too far someday.*

Diane, pulling away, stared at the bar, her eyes close to vacant. The emptiness that almost filled the woman's vision seemed to excite her. "Look at Margot," Diane said. Fiona could only look at Diane. What did the woman see? "Off entertaining the boys again." Diane saw a profit.

Turning, Diane said, Goodbye, and slipped through the exit her husband had cut.

Fiona slowed at the edge of a town on the way home. The speed limit went down to thirty. Houses, most of them small and set back from the road, flashed with Christmas lights. Beyond the houses were two gas stations at the four corners and a

feed store. The town, after telling the price of gas, revealed a school, closed for winter break, and was over.

Margot said, “I think we could get a house if we saved. I talked to Erica tonight about it.” Erica was a mortgage broker and regular who always sat at table thirteen not far from the waitstation.

“How much would we have to save?”

“A total of 4,000.”

The road climbed and traced hills. On one side was a tall wood. Fiona, who loved to sing but was not good at it, started in with “Scarborough Fair” in an unsure but insistent voice. She would say, Now, when she wanted the harmony to come in. She had to focus on her notes and name the impossible tasks that the old true love would have to perform to regain the singer's affection:

Tell her to make me a cambric shirt
Parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme
Without no seams nor needlework.
Then she'll be a true love of mine

“Now”—Fiona thought she could resist the harmony, which was written around when she and Margot were born. Margot sang of blankets and bedclothes and a clarion call. She sang of graves and guns. The harmony had force—but Fiona would not be swayed. She would not be swayed. She would not lose her part, which was a folk song that had been around much longer than the harmony. Fiona kept going, only losing her way when Margot sang of battalions.

Tails

Margot talked of house hunting while on an estate, Olana, which stood at the top of a hill about four miles south of Warren Street. Olana had been owned and landscaped by painter Frederick Church in the nineteenth century and was now a landmark with public trails. Margot walked with Fiona and Nick and Michelle through the woods. The group's boots and shoes cracked through the hard melt. The ground was all ice and mud on this warm day in March. The sound of water falling through the earth lay under leaf mold. The group walked with two dogs owned by Nick and Michelle's mother, one young and eager, the other old and prim. The two dogs scratched down in the direction of the underground water. At times, they stood straight up and, with ears pricked, listened to the water in the damp air.

Michelle set the slow pace. She was so thin, she looked like a child in her big coat. Then again, they all looked like children, Fiona thought, remembering that her own coat was stretched at the neck from hanging on a hook by the door. It looked like something pulled down by a child running out to catch a new snow. And Margot could have grabbed her coat from the moth-balled dark of a grandma's closet. Its silver buttons winked. And Nick's overcoat spoke of dress-up. As dark as a shovel of dirt, it belonged on the undertaker, not on the man with a moon face and camera. He took a picture of the path ahead.

"We can't afford anything too close to Hudson," Margot said. "The bank won't let us buy something in too-bad shape, but we can get a place out past 'The Shed Man.' Or maybe something from The Shed Man! They can be pricey, those sheds. Some lawnmowers are so big. You start to wonder what people are mowing."

“Our stepmom,” Michelle said with a cigarette. “She multitasks on her rider mower in her new home. Acrostics, circulars... There’s a lot to do up there... up in bustling New Hampshire.” The strain in Michelle’s voice sounded of nostalgia, irony, and a lifetime spent around marijuana.

We will have no lawn, Fiona decided. The house, as she imagined it, would be in the woods. The walls would be bold, as if drawn with a pressed crayon. Nick and Michelle were in this picture in Fiona’s mind. They were represented with the kind of zeal known to children with a crayon and an instinct to make sure everyone is accounted for: Nick, Michelle, and the dogs. (Margot was hidden in the background of this picture, huge and smiling, like a child’s sun.)

I will turn the dogs upside down, Nick thought, taking a picture. The older dog began to eat something ahead. The eager one loped over to watch. Nick’s photo of the animals would get turned upside down—or half of the final image would. Nick would get two prints made and arrange the photos so that they met at a corner. He would duplicate the dog that was eating what turned out to be (“Oh, Jesus,” Fiona said) a carcass. The eager dog was watching its usually upstanding friend with great respect. It had known this older dog since puppyhood. It idolized its friend.

This idolization was not baseless, Nick thought, but there was no obvious choice in it. He pressed a gentle hand against the side of the eating dog. The animal left the carcass, which the younger one then peed on. The younger’s admiration for its friend was like Nick’s for Michelle: it could seem baseless because its base was buried.

It was buried down near birth. Nick remembered Michelle was a fighter, a great one—but against what? She made a sign last October, “No Blood for Oil,” and

went down with Nick to Washington. The two of them had a private language, but here they shouted words everyone knew: “No Blood for Oil.” Michelle wrote the phrase on a bumper sticker that someone later scraped with a key. Someone had keyed her whole car when it was parked in a mammoth lot—but Nick had primed and painted over the mark for his sister, a fighter.

A ninety-eight-pound giant, Michelle could walk through a lot at Walmart and stand tall over American car-flags everywhere. She towered over the country whose red, white, and blue was waving in pieces. The country may be shattered, but Michelle loomed large and whole.

So why, when Nick admired her this much, did she have to bring up Bibi, a name that should have been attached not to a person but to a loose-bowelled bird? His stepmother seemed so far away in New Hampshire where she was probably painting her nails while exiting the interstate behind the wheel of a school bus. (Her attempts at employment usually ended in accidents of one kind or another, with her brakes failing right before a head-on insult.) Nick took another photo of the trees, which were hiding the colors of winter. Pink was roughly tucked into the bark.

A lake emerged from the woods. The dogs headed for its muddy banks. The land rose to hold Church’s estate, or so it seemed. The earth appeared to bow down to the water, but the effect was not natural. The lake was manmade. The dogs waded in. Everyone stopped. Fiona said: “Even some house out by the Shed Man will be in the plume.” “The plume” was the town’s term for the smoke that would come from the plant’s forty-story stack.

Michelle crouched to put out her cigarette under her shoe. “If that plant gets built...it’ll be on us here, but everywhere else will be just as done.” She slipped the filter of her cigarette under the cellophane on her pack to throw out later.

“Did you hear about the license?” Margot asked. “The plant might not get grandfathered in. They might have hearings.”

“I don’t believe much I hear, I guess...” Michelle’s voice faded. Soon she would have surgery on her gut. The lake near her and the others and the wading dogs remained calm but roughened farther out. Those rough patches looked like a memory formed in irritation. To Nick, they seemed more substantial, larger and deep.

He remembered telling Reeny, short for “Serene,” that her name suited her. They were in a bar. It was two-ten in the morning, according to a clock with a mirror face and beer-logo tiara. A pool table was near. The clicks of the softest shot were loud. Reeny’s gaze was calm and fierce, searching and settled. At least one eye at all times was studying Nick and one ear listening to the room’s edges if Nick were to believe her when she said that every Black person in America could hear a rat piss in a wall. Reflected in her eyes, Nick was both broken and looking for what she saw in him. It was a lie, telling her that the name fit. A beautiful lie, like this manmade lake. Nick could see both the lie and his reflection in it.

Then everyone started walking again. Through the forest came a wave of sound, a ticking of twig and creaking of trunk. Nick decided that, for his picture’s frame, he would use a soft wood, maybe pine. He would carve the wood in the shape of the photos. The frame would slope around both sides, the right-side-up and the upside-down. On one end, the dogs would follow a path and, on the other, walk across the sky.

When night came, Diane’s husband, Neil, walked down from their apartment above the dining room. He sat at the bar for his dinner. When Fiona passed him, he turned in his stool with a jarring rearrangement of limb. His mouth arched into the

widest of smiles. “Good evening to you, Fiona!” His English accent was broad and warm. He touched Fiona’s arm. By the time she passed him again, his smile had collapsed into a frown. He sipped from his pint and continued eating fish and chips but seemed to take nothing in. His body was bony and curled. He looked cold but comfortable, as if the blanket of familiarity protecting him was worn to his likeness and was threadbare.

Fiona told Nick to watch out for Neil. Her face said: Listen.

In the last minutes of service, Margot greeted a man by the door. He was tall and wide. He stared at the wall by the bar. Margot followed his gaze to read:

Real Eyes
Realize
Real Lies

Diane had received the sign from a dreadlocked man, Roger, in the fall. The sign had been from his sandwich board. He had walked alone, protesting what had been a possibility then: the invasion of Iraq. Diane had invited him in and given him a pint and asked him for his sign. The history of the hand-painted board raced through Margot’s thoughts slowly as if underwater. With shocking speed, the memory lost its race. Margot’s mind went blank.

She turned back to the man. The back of her neck ached as she looked up at the muscles in his wide jaw jumping. His skin was rough yet shaved. He peered into her. She asked him, “Would you like a table? Or would you prefer to sit at the bar?” Her cheer was unflinching. It was so perfected it was finished. She thought, I’m done. His stare narrowed. As if to prove her wrong in a way that damned more than her judgment, he turned.

The door slammed. No music played. The voices in the room hardened. A string holding words together broke, sending sounds into the room’s edges. A song

with a drum and horns started. Louis Prima in his hoarse voice came over the speakers, singing about his baby going on a trip to the moon. The taps on the cymbal were deadpan. The beeps—the words coming down from the moon—moved inside the lines, breaking them:

I wonder if—
—means I miss you
Oh Baby—
—means I want to kiss you

Margot walked back to the waitstation. She said to Fiona: “I think we are finished here.”

Fiona paused in her calculations. Turning to the bartender, Sean, she ordered two wines. He poured them before lifting the hinged end of the bar. Slipping past on his way to the kitchen, he looked down, smiling. He was tall but stooped from standing, locked-elbowed, with his hands on the ledge before him. He was stooped too from liquor at his back, waiting for him always. Margot asked Fiona, “Shall we go dancing?”

Fiona circled a check’s total. “Let’s make a night of it.”

Triton

The River Theater had a glass facade. All winter, dog statues had stared through it from the second floor where Fiona and Margot stood. They stared at tiered seats rolled onto the floor where they had planned on dancing. Men in dress jackets lined the back row. Beyond these men was a screen on which an enormous woman walked. Her arms were bent and rigid as she balanced gravity's demands with those of her heels and large head. It was Oscar night. Someone in the seats stood and put his hair on the woman's large chin and lower lip. The man was illuminated by the lobby behind him with its lit bottles at the bar. The standing man gave Fiona and Margot a sidelong glance before leaning over to whisper to the man beside him. He then walked out of his row with a forked attitude—acutely aware of his flesh but seemingly preoccupied with some distant matter. He wore a tuxedo.

“Do you want to stay?” Fiona whispered.

“Yes.” Margot headed to the empty bar. The bartender's voice was as fragile as his smile. The cracks that emerged in his youthful looks made him seem well-preserved. Fiona ordered two wines and whispered to Margot, “It looks like everyone's dressed for the show.”

“Yes, it does,” Margot said.

The man on the screen in a stiff metallic tie looked out at the audience and the bartender setting down the drinks. Fiona raised her glass and said: “To you.”

Margot raised hers. “To you.”

The bartender stood at the end of the bar to watch the show. Margot and Fiona faced the bottles, occasionally glancing sidelong at each other or at the screen and audience. Kenneth went up a side aisle in a ruffled tuxedo shirt. The white shirt

looked like a handkerchief that had been bunched up and then thrust in the deep pocket when Kenneth went into a row. Margot exclaimed, “Everyone here’s certainly celebrating.”

“I don’t know if people are celebrating,” Fiona said. “I do know this place is filled with customers.”

“I’m feeling like a customer myself.” Margot laughed. “I’m feeling—”

“You’re feeling like a live wire. I can feel you from here.”

“Oh good. I can feel you too.”

“Tell me later how I feel.” Fiona held the stem of her wine glass with a tense press of fingertips. “Just remember this town is small and your electricity is not.”

“Well, everyone else is far away and can’t feel. The two of us—”

“Alls I’m saying—” Fiona looked at her hand that held the wine with terrible control, as if she held the stem of a flower that, if plucked, would break a glass earth. “We need to keep in mind that if we’re going to buy a house, we need our jobs, and this room is full of customers. So say what you want, but keep your eye on the bar.”

“I’ll be good. I used to think—” Margot looked towards the screen before adding in a voice almost as vacant as her TV stare “—I could have been a great good woman.”

Applause sounded from the speakers and the crowd in the theater. The audience in Hudson clapped with the same reverence as the Hollywood one but without a close orchestra to buoy it. The clapping sounded compulsory and flat. Margot did not know the movies nominated for awards. “I don’t know who to root for,” she said.

“I don’t care about these films,” Fiona said, her glass lifted. She kept centering her cocktail napkin as if it were a picture of white that would not hang straight.

“You’ve never cared either.”

“I cared at some point.”

Fiona looked at her. “I don’t know when that was.”

The crowd in the theater laughed. “Oh, I guess I’m lying!” Margot’s laughter was more tuneful and louder than the rest. “These boys, I think, seem convinced that the plant’s not coming in. And they seem just as convinced that they got invites out in Hollywood.”

“I know we weren’t invited,” said Fiona.

“How?”

“We’re not dressed.”

Margot laughed and looked down at her black clothes and decided that their shade hid her in dark rooms before it did anything else.

A man came to the bar. His tuxedo was perfect. His name was James. While a regular at the Blackbird, he was not the sort who wanted to know those on the staff except, superficially, when thirsty, the bartender. Beyond him, Steve Martin lifted his chin on the screen, his lids lowered into a squint. Margot began to speak of her dead father, who had become an actuary in Chicago after manic years of studying math.

“He used to repeat these Steve-Martin jokes. He’d sing: ‘Grandpa bought a rubber.’ I never got why that joke was funny. But my father wasn’t funny most of the time, so I guess it was a good fit. He wasn’t funny unless he was imitating certain people.”

“What people?” asked Fiona.

“Oh, I don’t know. Self-important?” Her wine was a useless puddle. She felt sober. “He made fun of this man in church. This was back when he was with my

mom. The guy in the pew behind us would say ‘Pontius Pilate’ pretentiously during the Creed. I’m not sure if my dad’s imitation was a joke, but it made me laugh. *Pon-tee-us* Pilot. You could really tell that guy hated Pontius, and my dad hated that man.”

“Why?”

“The man’s sincerity?” Margot laughed. “My father never had much investment in any story, even Christ’s. You can’t care about tragic twists when you calculate their odds for some corporation’s profit.”

When Fiona finally spoke, her tone evoked distance, while her low volume drew Margot closer. She talked about when she was twenty-two and living on Third Street in the Village next to a mother and son. “It was just before I met you.” The mother and son would argue late. “His voice was an imitation of hers. His whine was the same. He said, ‘No,’ just like she did. Quick and final. He was mocking her.”

“Maybe she was mocking him,” Margot said.

“No. She was sincere. She’d say something about him, and he would say something back. He’d reflect her tone, but the meaning would get turned round. She said hot, and he’d say cold. He’d reflect back what she said with the same tone—that whine—but her meaning—” Fiona put a hand by her head and clutched her fingers with a wince “—the meaning got turned around in this mirror made of flesh, the left, right.” Fiona looked down with intensity at the back of her hands as if reading her future backwards down through the skin and bone to the palms. “That was back when I was waiting tables on the boat that went around Manhattan. There was something I was supposed to learn from it, that mirror.”

“I’m sure you learned it, sweetness,” Margot said before looking at James. He was receiving his drinks. What was Margot supposed to learn from him? She could imagine her dead father in a tux, imitating James reaching for the two drinks. The

gesture said: My grace is more valuable than any monetary tip I could supply. James, Margot could see, was the sort of man her father would mock. She imagined her father lifting the drinks with James's impervious grace. Her father was turning away with the object of his imitation, not looking at her.

“I—”

This word came from Margot. It turned the room flat. There were people and a screen. There was no ambiguity as there had been the previous fall when the cold felt like many quick things at once and she and Fiona drove to the home with the icebergs. Margot recalled her conversation with Fiona about projecting an image of health. Applause sounded from the crowd followed by a few gasps; someone surprising had won. Margot said, “I think it’s hard to project an image of yourself when you are where we are in this town.”

Fiona put her hand on Margot’s knee. “Are you OK?”

“A while back, remember? You were telling me about projecting an image of health? I realize now: I think it’s next to impossible to project an image of health when you’re sitting where we are.”

“By the bar?”

“Well, yes, that too. But I mean when you’re the audience of the audience.”

Margot and Fiona had seen two films nominated for Best Documentary: *Spellbound* and *Bowling for Columbine*. The latter won. The film’s director, Michael Moore, took the stage with his own producers and the other filmmakers in the category. The woman beside him on stage looked upward, waving her statuette around as if saluting birds passing in a migratory pattern. She was, in fact, acknowledging people in her theater, the real theater, with its balconies.

Michael Moore thanked the Academy. The crowd in Hollywood cheered. He said he had invited the other nominees on stage, and the cheering continued, interrupting him. He was trying to say the people on stage were “in solidarity” with him. The group, he said, liked nonfiction. “We live in fictitious times.” The theater in Hollywood was silent. So was the one in Hudson. “We live in the time where we have fictitious election results that elects a fictitious president. We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons.” A shout came from Margot’s mouth as she rose to her feet. The back edge of the audience sharpened with glances. The Hollywood crowd had turned to booing, while the one in Hudson, or the back of it, had turned towards Margot.

“We are against this war, Mr. President!” Moore exclaimed. On the screen, a line of stars stared from their seats in silence. Boos as insistent as cows objecting to being moved across a road could not drown out Moore. “Shame on you, Mr. Bush! Shame on you!” Fiona applauded with sure steadiness. The program’s theme music—a puffed-up show of horns and strings—almost overwhelmed Moore’s final line about the shared anti-war stance of the Pope and Dixie Chicks. Margot clapped even more loudly, seemingly impervious to the bright backward stares of the crowd.

The show went to a commercial.

“Let’s go,” Fiona said.

They headed for the stairwell. On one of its walls were photos of an middle-aged woman with a sad smile, another of a man with a misty stare of vague indictment. A blonde boy stared with blank-eyed innocence, while a dark-haired girl raised a fist to a cocked smile. The photos moved as fast as pages spit out by a copier, offering a known vision of who should judge, who should try, who should be seen and how. All of the photos had been shot before with different faces but similar types, all

except the last one. It was of an old woman, a local, who had taken to wearing a pink feather boa. The woman wore it in celebration—of what, she never said. Maybe it was her home town having a chance now that it had money and could fight money. But Margot thought, running outside with Fiona, that it was too rich, how the town, now that it could fight, was not worth fighting for.

“Those people were awful!” she cried. “I don’t even know what that was!”

“They’re off.” Fiona looked over her shoulder as if the street had snuck up on her. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t. I’m too belligerent!”

“The whole world’s belligerent. I’m cold.”

“This town’s so small, there’s nowhere to go. It just judges you!”

Fiona walked over to face Margot. The humidity of the night had made her red curls large. Margot stared at the halo of red and immense cold dream of her eyes. Fiona’s gaze and touch traced Margot’s face by the edge of the cheek and ear. “It will cool your head to walk,” she said. “We have to go to the car anyways. It’s three blocks down remember.” The line was matter-of-fact. It soothed, just as news of the earth’s roundness must have once soothed the banished and others who had gone too far.

The buildings around them as they walked could not have been more handsome. Margot, however, imagined their facades were gone. Their fussed-over details—the cornices, shutters, and planters—had all crumbled, leaving water pipes that reached through what had been floors and walls. Sinks trickled across this net of metal. Toilets did too. Margot tried to erase the vision out of respect for that old woman in that cloying pink boa. Why imagine such destruction when the town might

stop the smoke from settling on children, chasing children? The night was clear. Margot said she was off like everyone in the theater; she was so angry. Fiona said there was nothing off about being angry.

Margot thought: You do not know how angry I am.

Their hatchback was one of the few cars on the next block. People had finished their dinners and drinks and had left Warren Street. In Margot's mind, the water had shut off in the bathrooms and kitchens and the rubble. The air felt dry even though it could not be. The mountains across the river were all melt. Even so, the night felt dry to Margot when she got in the car. The air pulsed with a need like that of thirst. She wondered if homes in Iraq had running water before the bombing.

It was dawn. Nick biked up from the river. He went up Warren towards his mother's rented house on Spring Street at the edge of town. The only sound was the wind, gentle and at his back. The sky was less black than blue. Home, he thought, is blue and dawn, hearts, clubs, spades. No diamonds came up in this deck made of the mind's singsong, and diamonds had been the suit that had let Nick win. His luck had changed in a town he had written off. Everything seemed easier, even as he went up the hill. He clutched the handles with the same force that ached in his legs. His will to keep going had become as deep as the spring beneath his street, Spring Street. Home was blue and dawn and above water.

He won three hands on account of diamonds. Reeny had enough after the third, and it was the same with the others, one white man, one black. Neither of them could figure out how the hands were played. The white one said that Nick was a sharp, while the black one said something in a voice that, while not quiet, was pitched

too low for Nick to make out. Reeny said to Nick more than asked, “Why don’t we go.”

But Nick wanted to stay. He had not cheated and needed someone to see his innocence. When he looked past Reeny, though, the only other person he knew was the Blackbird’s bartender, Sean, and he looked as if one real expression of hate or love could topple him. Nick was thankful that his own emotion would not take him down. Happiness would never pull him over, he thought, reaching North Third. He would continue (the light was red but no one coming) pedalling to the song of the springs. Home was hearts, clubs, spades, diamonds.

The deck was complete. Home contained diamonds and the photos of the dogs in the forest. Nick would start a new version of the eye he had imagined last fall. He wanted to use a craft from school, the God’s Eye, by looping yarn around crossed sticks. When he was a boy, he had thought a God’s Eye could see through the turkeys on the walls in November, the ones whose feathers were made of hands traced on construction paper of orange and brown. They were giving thanks, said the banner above. They were waving. They were hungry for attention. The Eye saw through their gratitude, which was insane. They were dinner.

The Eye stayed as dry as yarn. When Nick had left Reeny, he thought he would not cry. He didn’t. He said, “I feel lucky. I’ll buy the drinks.” “Somewhere else,” Reeny said. And so they walked somewhere else. Nick talked of how he would soon wait tables and get an apartment. Even if the plant got built, he would never move up near Bibi with her forty-story plumes for feathers. “You’re going crazy,” Reeny said. He admitted it but brought up crazy things Renny had mentioned: people with the kind of voice that was just another sort of crying and a magic oil that, when spread across your skin and touched by breath, would turn hot and make your toes

curl. Reeny said: “That oil’s real, and what you’re talking about is not. It’s pain, too much.”

“But what about the people with those crying voices?” Nick asked. “Those voices are pain.”

“Those voices are real,” Reeny said. “You know that shaky voice as well as I do. But this Bibi—I don’t know her or her feathers.”

He and Reeny had no privacy at home. Nick slept on a couch, while Reeny lived with her parents. Their families lived where homes gave way to strip malls and businesses set up in small houses: the teacher’s-supply store and the anti-abortion center. Nick and Reeny were by the river and projects when they had parted ways. Nick’s new version of his eye would see farther with pupil woven into the color of the iris. It would see where others could only be seen. His first hanging was blind and on fire with no black and too much red. This new eye would look through the demands of SUVs and turkeys and dark reflections in closed glass. It would see past the edge of town all the way to strip malls and, farther, fields with billboards.

Two Flags

The Elks Lodge dominated the antique stores on Flag Day—but those stores did not settle into the background peacefully. The shop owners' strenuous attempts at patriotism had to be strenuously ignored. The lodge members noted numerous violations of Flag Code in the windows, the most common one pertaining to the stars and stripes not being used as drapery. This rule applied not only to Andor's drapes but to Brandon's shower curtains. Other violations had to do with the code's Section Eight, which prohibits the flag from being used in such a way "as to permit it to be easily torn, soiled, or damaged." This rule cast a shadow on Scott's flag upholstery and Frank T.'s flag napkins. Even those displays that did not strictly violate code raised questions as to whether new clauses, the necessity of which had not been foreseen, should be drafted. So perhaps the rule, "The flag should not be displayed as covering for a ceiling," should introduce: "The flag should not be displayed behind a bronze man-fawn prancing naked through a doomed Pompeii."

The division between the Elks Lodge and the antique shops gave Diane an opportunity to work with forces that fuelled her rhetorical skills, such as tension and combustion. She spoke in front of the Blackbird to Aaron, a leader in the fight against the plant, as the parade roared by.

Aaron pored over documents and composed summaries of the corporation's arguments. He did much work without pay, a sacrifice made possible by his dedication and independent wealth. Displays of patriotism made him awkward, and so he kept his back to the parade. If called unpatriotic, he might say that dissent was the greatest act of patriotism. Then his face would crumple like a bad draft, and his eyes, downcast and flitting, would light on that utopia where perfect comebacks grow on trees fertilized with imperfect ones turned over in the mind.

Nick stood near. He knew Aaron not as a civic leader but as a regular with a fondness for hot sauce and half and half. Nick had stayed out late and come in early to work on renovations in Diane and Neil's apartment. Having carried a porcelain sink up two flights, he appreciated a parade that hoisted its own tubas. A block up, a marching band played "What a Feeling" with feeling that had a slow leak.

Aaron was talking about town council. Nick listened while lifting his hand to inhale his cigarette but did not move much otherwise. He did not see Aaron say: "We need you there at the meetings, Diane. You and Neil both. We need your input. Johnson, McKay, Fulsom—they're going to vote yes if the plant comes back with what looks like a good deal for the town. You know what's going to happen if the compensation the plant offers goes over—I don't know—even one hundred thousand, annual. Those guys will be all over it."

"Good deal," Diane said. "What those guys say is a good deal. We'll all be dead, and it'll be good for them. Dumb fucks."

"You know how it is, Diane." The band stopped playing. Flags flapped. "These small-town boys don't like to be told what to do. It's all about who did what for whom back in the day. They're just—" the flutes took up a quiet tune "—inbred. Reason doesn't work with them. You say a million times that the total number of jobs created won't exceed one, and they just think you're lying."

"They want a goddamn job is the problem. Who doesn't? So here's what you do. You look around, you see what's here. You got Martin with that new gift shop he tacked on. He needs people in the afternoons. He's getting more people with Niela's down the street. She's got that new deal with the punch cards. Her place is taking off—so, there you go. Another example. I'm sure she needs counter people. I talked to her at the Opera House last—"

The melody to “Don’t Stop Believin’” blared from trumpets. The band had reached the Blackbird, its hats held on with thick straps of vinyl. Nick imagined extending his hand to Aaron and saying, I’m a small-town boy and against the plant. But the idea of “small-town boy” and speaking to Aaron irritated him worse than vinyl on a damp chin. Nick could see this man, who looked like a large underbelly, recoiling into a soft-seeming shell that would camouflage and protect him, making him seem as if he fit in with the locals. *You won’t get a chance—*

“Nicky!”

—to pretend—

“Nicky! Over here!”

Margot was waving in the distance next to Fiona, who looked like a piece of broken-off flag with hair the color of a stripe. Nick remembered how their family would walk into town from the outskirts, their bell bottoms brighter than the café curtains, their hair wilder than the lilac’s violent bobbing before a storm that takes out the power. People would say from porches and under awnings: “The circus is coming to town.” Nick would never forget that comment. Would Fiona? Her hand drifted above her head. She pressed down on her curls when she came close. “What’s wrong, Nick?” she asked. “Not feeling it?”

“You feelin’ it, Lona Fiona?”

Margot laughed. “Fiona? She’s feeling it for everyone. She wants a bomb pop! Don’t be shy, Fiona! Everyone wants some of that frozen red-white-and-blue about now. If the Good-Humor truck drove down Warren, even Steve the communist would get a quarter from his mother. Me, I’m an orange-pushup-type! What about you, Nicky? I bet you’re all for those bomb pops!”

“King cones.” The words surprised him. Rage had made his voice sound, in his own ears, plush.

“It was everyone for himself when the truck came!” Fiona remarked with what was force for her but seemed pathetic next to the puffed faces of the trombone players. “We’re getting a house, Nick! In New Lebanon! We put in an offer!”

Nick knew that Diane had stopped paying the two of them. Margot and Fiona suspected the loss had to do with the Academy Awards, especially after Diane chastised Margot, saying, “I heard you were inappropriate.” Nick had tried to join their conversation about the lost paychecks, but Fiona had said, “You’re paid in cash,” and dropped the subject. Nick did not know how they had enough money for a house but gave his congratulations. His voice was sincere and sweet and, he sensed, inaudible. He held out his cigarettes.

“Thanks!” Fiona shouted, taking one. “I have to go round back—the horns—if anyone wants to come with!”

Nick said he had to go home to shower. Michelle would be in her room upstairs these days. She had made no sound except for the clicks of her doorknob that came when she slipped into the hall. Nick could hear those clicks from the bottom of the steps. Yesterday he had called her name after one of them, and she had come to the landing and said: “There has been a change, *Saniva*.” Nick did not know what *Saniva* meant. The shorter *Sanva* was a sleep so long that, when you woke, you did not know if the light was dawn’s or dusk’s, but *Saniva* pulled everything down into slumber.

The last pieces of the parade came: a police car, a scooter, a broom pushed by a man made ashen by age. Nick thought of how he needed twenty dollars to give to Reeny. He had lost eighty in a game to a man with no personality but more luck,

which went against his thoughts on fortune. To win, a man needed charm and grace, not post-nasal drip and a habit of saying, “All right now,” every time he got a hand. Nick had borrowed money from Reeny to cover his bets. She had told him to stop playing.

“You don’t think in cards,” she said. “You need to think in what you do.”

“So you and I should think in dishes?” he asked.

She studied him. “That’s not what we do, and you know it. Our real job—” She tapped two fingers to her heart and pointed up.

He had refused to look in that direction. Instead, he had studied Reeny’s expression, which had not been hard, like Fiona’s, or piercing, like Margot’s. It had not forced him to hear what it had to say or sliced into him to see where he would betray her. Her eyes were matter-of-fact and full of a love so huge it was larger than their flesh. This love, which they shared, should have helped them. It should have made them leaders in a world teeming with too many people and parts, but instead it stuck them outside and together, her, a black woman who would not stick to one part of town, and him, a white man who was neither straight nor gay with a too-large love and a job in a place that looked down on him. Hate had surged up into his throat. He had tried to make it hate for Reeny but couldn’t.

“I’ll think...” But he could think of nothing.

Here on this sidewalk, he thought of the living room where he slept on the couch. He and Michelle had hung pictures on the deep blue walls. The walls over the building with the vacuum-cleaner store where they used to live at the top of Warren had been dark. Fixed Eyes had swirled through fake wood that needed one bright eye. Nick’s God’s Eye, he decided, would have a frame made from wood panelling.

That night the police came to the restaurant twice, the first time after Diane shoved a customer off the front stoop. The man had called her a bitch, but she was more like a thick-skinned animal, large and often seen captive, a rhinoceros perhaps. She backed the man through the crowd. He wore casuals that were anything but. His clothes draped his frame softly. His fabrics breathed when he fell backwards off the front stoop. A third waitress who had come for the shift, Kelly, remarked: "I didn't know shoving was against the law. Except for presidents and Popes." She smacked her bright lips. "Can't shove them."

Kelly was from the Irish Alps across the river and had started working in restaurants washing dishes at twelve, substituting for her father scraping plates caked with bangers and mashed.

"I guess every boy's a pope these days," Fiona said.

"If every boy's a pope these days, I'm out," Kelly said, writing on a check, Thanks!

The cops came with their guns at the same height as most diners' noses. Their walkie-talkies were too loud for the dinner theater, so Diane brought them out back. The waitresses continued to greet customers. Kelly, who believed in Positive Thinking, hugged the Englishman who owned a spiritual center and tipped atrociously, while Margot and Fiona hugged the doctor who tipped wonderfully and worked in a prison. Kelly, set to become a nurse in a year, talked to an accountant at the hospital with an eye on getting a job. Margot, on the other hand, whose concept of the future was not unlike that of her vegetable garden's, spoke to someone who shared her love of the outdoors, a farmer known as The Dairy Queen. He always hugged Margot as hard as the doctor from prison did, which is to say so hard she could not breathe.

Fiona wanted Nick out of the restaurant when Neil limped through the dining room with an arthritic hip and an armload of fireworks. Nick carried bowls of mussel shells and arms of plates by Neil's sharp elbow and tensed jaw. Nick's eyes were far away, Fiona thought. She pulled cash from the tip jar and took him by the arm.

"You're paid up," she said. "Go."

Nick's eyes were watery and choked with rage. He seemed to be pulling out of a dream of hoarse screaming. Fiona said, "It's Michelle." She had meant these words to be a made-up reason to go, but, once said, they became a description of his dream as Fiona saw it.

Nick left.

The night exploded when Neil set off fireworks. He had no permit. In his English accent, he shouted at the cops who came back, calling them un-American. Diane said her husband had a problem with his blood sugar. The cops said the problem was with the fireworks before giving Neil a citation to appear in court, the second one for the household in a month. Diane had gotten the first one for third-degree menacing with a hammer. Margot, who had seen the incident from the supply closet, called the charge unfair, saying, "She was just gesturing." Fiona told her to keep this opinion private, lest Diane have her testify.

Margot and Fiona followed the police out. The sky could not stop muttering with light and heat about bombs bursting and proof-giving. Fiona and Margot spoke of their home in New Lebanon with its forest in the back and outbuilding that could be a guest home.

"Our home feels far away," Fiona said as they walked through the sulphurous night. A colorless boom came from up ahead where, all night, the river had been

catching colors coming down as ash. “The house seems far away because it’s perfect,” Fiona added. “It’s no trouble at all.”

“Its ‘excellent as the cedars,’” Margot said. “That’s from the Bible.”

The police car drove towards the river and dark.

Ornament

Fiona and Margot thought more of the back of their New Lebanon home than the front. In the front was a small strip of grass and, beyond, a road called Lover's Lane. The road could not be seen from the second floor where Fiona declared, "We should buy this place, no matter what, we should," her voice rising and falling like the roof's steep pitch. The house was a small cape. The two of them could see only green and more green from the small windows on the second floor. They could not see across the road to a field that turned out to be toxic. Not that it would not have helped, Margot thought in December. No one could see the PCBs the state was monitoring. Margot now stared at trees and shrubs dug up for a move that had never happened. Lilac, firethorn, weigelia, all potted and dying inside. No, Margot thought, I could not have seen the chemical in the field. But Fiona was right when she said we should have seen something in that name, Lover's Lane—

"Let's go."

Fiona appeared close. She had washed but still smelled of myrrh and frankincense. The two of them went to a party that had a tree. It was a holly tree of two stories set inside a courtyard in a home on Warren. The party's host, Raphael, had a face so asymmetrically scarred; he appeared to have clawed his way half out his own skin before reconsidering. He sounded entirely reasonable when he told the women that an holly, when full grown, bears the crown.

"And this one, as you can see, is full grown," he added.

Margot and Fiona, who had come at the Dairy Queen's invitation, never spoke to Raphael except when serving him at work. Margot was surprised upon speaking to him that her voice sounded something like his reasonable one: "What's this tree's crown?"

“What or where?”

“I don’t know.” Margot paused where she would have laughed before.

“Where?”

“Go to the second landing.” Raphael’s voice had hardened, becoming part of a silent, habitual command not to ask about the cuts.

Margot and Fiona began climbing the steps, rising above a courtyard that gathered together the voices of men but remained quieter than the Blackbird. The house was not wholly private, Fiona and Margot learned from a woman coming down the steps. She said the floors offered showrooms for antiques. It turned out to be a place of commerce, this glowing sanctuary from the world’s thoughtlessness about things.

The rooms beyond the arched windows had an armoire whose wood held the memory of centuries of fabrics and a sectional that lay perfectly parallel to a pale floor. The objects from room to room did not temporally match, one being Queen Anne, the next modern. The objects moved around Fiona and Margot. The two of them did not talk. They did not have to think of the story of Lover’s Lane with its mandatory cleanups. They climbed around ornaments of clear glass, some of which resembled coins from a country no guest could name. No one could touch the tree from the stairs. How the ornaments and white lights had reached the topmost branches was not obvious. The decorations seemed to have been caught by the branches in a near-invisible fall from the sky.

Fiona and Margot said nothing on their way up to the third landing. Upon reaching their destination, they spoke of befuddlement.

“I don’t understand how this was done,” Fiona said.

“It’s strange, this home, it just being here,” Margot added.

The two of them were warm. The heat did not come from the air shared with nearby Warren and, to the north, Prison Alley. It came from fires that winked from inside metal cylinders patterned with holes. The holly's crown was light and glass. It was lunar too, the moon appearing. The month before, the moon had hung in the sky, deep red and wrong. Margot had only just learned of the toxic field across from their house when the moon had looked like a dark object more than a bright face. She had come down the ramp at work with two plates of food. The big-band dinner music had been too loud. No customers had been there to absorb and overwhelm the blaring horns except for two people. Nick had come down the ramp to stand beside her.

"How funny," Margot said to him, her eyes on the dining room. "They're all gone." She laughed. "One time these tomatoes I grew, they just hung there, green, perfectly formed. They didn't ripen. I asked my grandma about it, and she had never seen or heard of such a thing. She was eighty-nine. She's dead now."

Nick reached for the plates and asked gently, "May I take these?"

Margot smiled. "Oh, thank you! Table eighteen. The steak goes by the wall."

As Nick headed across the room, footsteps sounded from the stairs above that came down from Diane and Neil's apartment, each step loud with straining old wood. Diane appeared across the large dining room. She did not acknowledge the empty tables or remaining customers when she walked towards Margot. She ignored the diner who turned towards her in search for, if not exactly sympathy, then some acknowledgement of his situation's oddness. Diane's eyes, however, seemed to be fixed on some vast scene beyond the dining room with her too-wide eyes. Reaching Margot, she hoarsely whispered: "This is not good."

Margot said nothing, and did not have to, for Fiona came into the dining room just then to say: "Everyone is out watching the moon."

Everyone had gone out to watch the eclipsed moon hang like a bead on the other side of Warren. And now the moon in the courtyard rose bright once more. The Diary Queen whose real name was Luke came over to slip his arms around Margot and Fiona, moving between the two of them. He was tired and heavy from dawn work, muscle, and liquor. This home was his lover's, Raphael's, but the tree had come from Luke's farm.

"This tree was my mother's favorite," he said. "I cut it down in her memory."

"I didn't know she had died," Margot said.

"Yes. She taught me everything about good taste."

"When did she die?" Margot asked.

Luke took a deep breath through his nose. "When I was a boy."

Margot let out a sound as fragile as those glass coins, drops, and globes. From the street beyond the brick came a man's shout and another man's comeback and the furious barking of a dog that did not pause until it stopped altogether. Luke kissed Margot and Fiona pulled them close.

People see me more when I am gone, Nick calmly thought.

He was biking beneath lights woven through bare branches. He had a gift for Fiona and Margot beneath his arm. The lights were pale but golden. Shoppers peered into lit windows. They seemed to be slowing always as if they were moving closer to, without ever reaching, stillness. For Nick, the scene should have been familiar, but it was nothing like when he was young and Warren Street, dark. He wanted to see himself as part of that light but was in shadow as he moved through the center of the scene.

He had come back to the restaurant to get waitshifts. Soon he would serve dinner. “We missed you,” Fiona had said. She had not lied. She did not lie. When she had said, “It’s Michelle,” on Flag Day, Michelle had needed help. Nick had needed it too. He still did, being unable to connect himself to the stores and shoppers’ gazes. When he tried, he found a familiarity slow and cold like goldfish.

He and Fiona used to compete for goldfish at the fair, aiming squirt guns at bull’s-eyes that moved tiny cars across a track. Nick once knocked Fiona down after one race she had won according to the bell. Near her head in the grass were bags of fish. Fiona had moved beneath him, more vulnerable, with breasts. She had been twelve, and he, nine, but his will was annihilating. It was hard to hate Fiona. But when he pinned her, he saw how she had changed, having gone down to the City to live with her rich father. She had gained a smooth, careless face of money, staring up with narrowing eyes.

His bike wobbled; he had to go faster. He suspected that to this day Fiona remembered being knocked down but had forgotten the look she would give that said, “Not you,” and then, narrowing, “You.” It had been hard to hate her. Her mother had not wanted her, and her father had not either but had taken her in. It had been hard to hate her but also unavoidable. She had gone on to study art history in college, whereas Nick had to find his knowledge in things he could see. His vision, furthermore, was constricted. Fiona could see straight ahead, while he had to look sideways and sense the world through his skin. Fiona could see what lay before her, but he had to take in the periphery with its shoppers and glow.

Christmas lights of scarlet appeared in the Blackbird’s planters. The dark half of Warren lay before a red light. Nick thought, looking ahead: I grew up there. The thought was clear like a plastic bag but was wrong, he knew. The vacuum store that

he had lived above was behind him at the top of the street. Its feeling was the only thing that stretched on ahead. The feeling remained separate but had a familiarity that made sense like goldfish. Nick imagined himself at a glass edge of a world of water, staring into dryness.

The light turned green. Nick took a left onto South Third, which was loud, being a truck route.

Margot was smiling and pathetic as she descended the brick stairs. She wore the story of Lover's Lane like a crown. She imagined that if she told Martin or Craig, who passed with a raised hand and a nod, respectively, that the two men would want to hear of how she and Fiona had learned about the PCBs in the field. Margot imagined that Big Frank, who gave what, for him, was a smile, would listen with eyes that did not glaze over. Everyone had a story no one wanted to hear, Margot knew. Most people had many. The trick she used for hers was to push the worst ache of what she had to say out other people's throats in laughs. But if she could not accomplish this trick, perhaps she could wear her story upon the head like a crown and imagine the sympathetic ear everywhere. Yes, people could hear the meaning of her regal bearing and of her silence! This listening ear was not uncertain, as she herself had been with the story of Luke's mother. Margot had thought the woman's death was more recent, like the tree's cut.

Fiona's fingers slipped around hers on the final turn around the steps. She said, "We have to get to Kara's. I told Nick we'd be there by ten."

Margot said, "Yes," but was not listening. She was too preoccupied with the idea of being listened to. "Instead of a house," she said, "we got a story."

Fiona laughed once. "That's one way of looking at it. It's not quite accurate."

“You don’t think so?”

Fiona slipped her hand over Margot’s back, guiding them both through a darker room of candlelight. “Not everything can be turned into something better. Think of that chemical. It’ll never break down.”

The front door opened onto light turning scarlet.

Heads

In the home Kara was watching, the furniture was covered in pictures, pillows, knickknacks, throws made into neat rectangles, a reading lamp shining down on a plate, wooden bowls and boxes, statues including a fish of bronze with a sharp nose and flamboyant dorsal fin. “Those scales are hell to dust,” Kara said of the fish while dusting a bowl that had both the thick glass and ridged lip of an ashtray—but no one smoked, not the homeowners gone off to Cuba, not Kara and Fiona on the couch, not Nick with his gift in its simple wrapping. It had a red ribbon that Fiona untied and slipped into her pocket. Inside the box was a sconce.

“We need one!” cried Margot with an enthusiasm that puzzled Fiona. The sconce only appeared necessary because of its simple material. Nick had carved it from pine. Its sanded curves were painted red, green, black, and purple, the colors pooling in patterns over the otherwise bare wood. The arm that held the candle had tinfoil along the bottom. The foil resembled a flame on a broiler in an oven, the jets shooting downward, flickering, the fire bending its way back up to the sky.

“It’s beautiful, Nick,” Fiona said, and it was, she felt. The foil was an assertion of its own awful beauty, the tin pressed like a flame, like a saw, against the wood.

“We must light it now!” Margot cried. She took the sconce and went over to a wall covered in photographs. “A match please, Nick.” She took a picture down.

Kara only stopped dusting after Margot turned off the lamp closest to her. “No way, guys,” she said. “Not happening.”

“Don’t be a ninny!” Margot cried. “You don’t want to see the dust anymore, do you?”

“More than I want to watch you burn the house down, yeah!”

“But can’t you see—?” Margot asked.

“No, because you turned out the lights. No, I can’t see. Where’s the bag for this cloth? It’s a special fabric for this wax, and if it doesn’t—”

“You’ll never stop cleaning if you don’t stop seeing things,” Margot said.

“Dust, dust. It’s done now.” She lit the candle and turned off the final lamp.

The flame burned by a window that Kara had cleaned outside and in. It would appear as if the glass did not exist were it not for the reflection of the flame. Margot sat with Nick and Fiona. Everyone had wine. Kara walked over to the sconce. Her features reflected the silenced trees beyond the glass. Her face remained hard even as it grew bright outside and in. “Yup,” she said. “Those black squares on the sconce’s cheeks and that purple head—it’s a tattooed face alright, done on a trip into the Atlantic, back when Hudson was full of whales and whores, and this guy—he was going to the South Seas to get inked. You can tell—” she laughed “—that long, pale face tells the whole story. He wants to belong to a tribe that won’t have him.” Kara’s face was neither kind nor cruel. “Yup. You sure told a story with this face, Nick.”

Nick’s own expression was inscrutable until he looked beyond Kara. “There’s a prison behind you,” he said.

“I know,” said Kara.

“You can’t really see it,” Margot remarked.

“Of course you can,” said Kara.

“No you can’t,” Margot said. She took a sip of wine. “You—”

“You can feel it once you remember it’s there,” Fiona interjected.

The prison was past thickets. The trees hid the building, even though the branches were bare and the prison bright. Barbed wire turned the flood lights piercing; Nick could see in his mind that sharp stare fixed on stopping freedom, on catching

fleeing prisoners. He remembered Michelle getting locked up there for being in a car that had cocaine in the glove compartment. She had been eighteen.

“I love your sconce, Nick!” Margot cried. “See what it did? People no longer see just dust and things. They see the South Seas and whales!”

“They see the prison is what they see,” Kara said. “Now come on. Turn on the lights. You’re close, Margot. And I got about a million knick-knacks between me and that switch.”

“No, don’t turn on the lights,” Nick said.

“Why not?” asked Kara.

Nick did not know what his answer would be until he said: “Let’s play hide and seek.”

Fiona rose from the couch and left. To Nick, she looked like a ghost with blood-red hair. She stepped slowly and then too fast in the direction of some violent act that she could not forgive and only half-remembered. That was how her exit looked to Nick. To Margot, it looked like a failed attempt to leave unnoticed. Fiona could not escape, for everyone had turned her way. Margot would have expected Kara to protest the game, but instead Kara watched Fiona with an open-lipped smile. Fiona’s exit was mesmerizing. Its stealth looked perverse even though its motive was reasonable: Fiona had left out of fear of Nick. The rage was obvious to everyone, although not to him. His gaze showed none of the furious resolve found below in his jaw. Margot said: “You’re ‘it,’ Nick.”

His eyes searched hers. “No. You are.”

They stared at each other. Margot’s eyes were so open, so adjusted to the dark, that she could see her it-ness reflected in Nick’s gaze. It was an inversion of stardom. Most people publicly shunned it while wanting it to watch them. They wanted it to

find their hiding places, but when it did, the rules of the game would change on account of moral outrage; for this it-ness, which was horrifying (Nick's eyes frightened in their fear), was often referred to as soullessness. Margot thought of the term and of how wrong it was: she and Nick were kindred souls.

"Yes," she said. "I'm 'it.'"

The rage was gone from Nick's face. He did not look calm, though. He looked broken.

Fiona returned with wine, which she poured for everyone in the candlelight that began to pulse too hard. Kara moved in front of the scone. Her face looked calm in its smoothness, but her eyes were quick enough to reflect the pulse of the flame. "The one problem I see with this thing," she said, "is the tin foil Nick's using here. He's got it as a flame retardant, but it's just not going to stop a flame from one of your bigger candles from getting down at the wood." She blew out the candle.

In the total darkness, objects crowded in, the armoire with drawers not only long but deep, the vanities with highboys beside them, the mahogany breakfront pushing out its plates and cups. "For Christsakes, Kara!" cried Margot. "Turn on a lamp on your way out!"

"Way out? What are you talking about! I can't see enough to move!"

Nick felt Fiona close. He sensed the hairs of her arm and, then, of her body through her pants and his jeans. The two of them were all charged hair, their skin prickled, as if they too were becoming objects, their hair as tiny and as sharp as fish bones. They were fish in fossils. Yes, that was it. With their hairs stuck out from their skulls and spines, Nick could see them both in a charcoal rub, the black stick moving over the patterned stone. He would make a charcoal drawing to show how he and Fiona were searching for flesh in their bones to hold onto and to keep as their own. He

would recreate the hard dark that surrounded him. But no. He had to finish the God's Eye first.

A bump sounded. He felt a hard jab in his side.

"Sorry."

It was Fiona, her voice not sorry at all.

"What was that?" Nick asked.

"An accident," Fiona answered.

"I tried to turn it on!" Kara cried about the lamp to Margot, who was calling for light. The house was dark. Margot cried, "But what's the problem?" She was close.

"Here's your game of hide and seek, Nick," Fiona said, her voice low.

"But you're not hidden," he said. He grabbed her arm. His side hurt still. What had she jabbed him with?

The lights, several lamps worth, turned on. Fiona stood but fell, held back by Nick's grasp. Margot, surprised, jerked backward toward a chair. Nick, letting go, cried, "Jesus!" Fiona said nothing. Kara came over and walked around Margot to examine the edge of the breakfront where the falling chair had hit. "I'm friends with a bunch of goofballs." She studied a plate behind the glass. "I thought I could trust you, Fiona, to control the clown element, but they took you down. Look at you. You're done."

Kara spied a cut on Fiona's wrist and hand. Fiona herself could not perceive it outside of its wetness, until she looked at it. Then she felt a pain, bright and thin, like the blood that ran from it. The wound curved with grace. It came from the metal handle on a table, which was curled upward with a screw raised. "Fuck that table!" Kara cried. Fiona stood to take hold of Kara's shoulder. She looked down at where

she had fallen. Her bleeding hand had landed on the wooden floor. She felt lucky not to have stained the rug, a feeling that worsened her nausea.

She went to the bathroom. Margot brought her wine; Kara dressed her wound. The cut did not look deep, according to Kara, who knew about skin, pain, and bleeding. Kara argued that Fiona should not drink. It would speed the flow of blood. But Fiona finished her wine, saying: “I need to have fun tonight. I just want to have some fun. This man I massaged before we left, he was so sad—”

Fiona stepped out under a sky that had moved and was moving, like the man she had massaged. He was going north to cheaper rents. He would lose his home city, for Hudson was officially a city. Many would call Hudson a town, but this man would say city. Back when he had been a child, the streets and stoops had been alive with people and the place had been dangerous—a trait tied to cities when he and also Fiona were young and New York City was close to bankrupt.

The sky had a graceful curve of manmade light. Fiona walked down the steps. Nick was with his bicycle.

Fiona said: “Why—”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why’d you do it? *This* wrist—”

“You jabbed me, Fiona.” The moistness in his eyes grew glassy.

“Goddammit, Nick!”

He said, “I’m sorry,” and left.

“What happened?” Margot asked.

“He grabbed my hand. That’s—”

“Grabbed your hand? Why would he do that?”

“I jabbed him accidentally. I can’t even think about it. Talk about something else.”

Margot took the keys to the car. Her voice sounded close when she said, pointing, “That planet up there is Mars. Mars with Pegasus. In parts. Parts of the horse are erased by our light.”

Backwards God

In the beginning of March 2004, when everyone was as blank-eyed and as ashen as the sky with its clouds and chimney smoke, the town council met in an elementary school. Anyone in town could come to say whether the common council should vote for a new “host agreement.” For Fiona, the phrase evoked parasites; for Margot, it recalled Jesus’s body. The major division in opinions in the room followed along these lines with part of the crowd seeing the agreement as a chance at redemption and another viewing it as a plan by a foreign body (the cement corporation was Canadian and Swiss) to feast upon Hudson, New York.

Fiona and Margot sat at the edge of the cold room. Behind them, a group of older white men stood with their backs to a wall. They wore washed-out jackets and had ghostly faces as if they belonged to a team with an off-season that had gone on so long that memory of the game itself had faded.

Most townspeople, including Margot and Fiona, sat in plastic chairs made for school kids. The council sat in front of the room in grown-up chairs on an elevated platform. There were twelve of them, including the mayor, a middle-aged man whose hair was both conservative and flamboyant to the same degree, his bangs voluminous, layered, and long. He did not have to worry about quieting the few people who talked. Not only did he have a sign accented with starfish behind him that read, “Be Respectful. Speak Quietly,” he had an authority in his bearing. He possessed the stately slouch of a man who had been kicked around and knew exactly how far his right to kick others extended, a boundary he resented and cherished.

“I call this meeting to order.”

He surveyed the room over his reading glasses before saying: “For over two years, the council has been working with Champlain Cement on a host agreement for

the city of Hudson. We have hammered out one that has the votes it needs to pass. This host agreement is fair.” He looked at the crowd again to see if it understood “fair.” “It provides compensation for any inconvenience caused by the plant’s construction—but it goes above and beyond that. Under the agreement, Champlain Cement will pay Hudson 200,000, annual, for twenty years. After that, the compensation goes to 125,000, annual, for as long as the plant remains open. So—” He removed his reading glasses “—we need to vote to approve this agreement. It is the last offer Champlain will bring to the table.”

The men behind Margot and Fiona clapped with cupped hands. The mayor quieted them with a practiced move of his glasses. “We will now hear from the council members. Gus.”

Gus was as a small man with a slender face who reminded his listeners of the existence of even smaller things by fixing his gaze downward. The imperious look made it difficult for him to give even a hint of eye contact without manoeuvring his body by, in this instance, leaning far back in his raised seat. “I have been on the council for the entire negotiation of the host-agreement,” he said. “I know first-hand that CC has worked to give Hudson what it wants. So it’s time now to seal the deal for the future of the city.”

Gus’s words were calm. So were the other comments from the council. Everyone at the table was in agreement. Their arguments were similar: the proposition would be withdrawn were it not accepted “this time around,” a phrase that usually came with some mention of the 26 months taken to write the agreement. This contract would be the final one, the council argued.

Neither Fiona nor Margot had paid any attention to such legalities in the past 26 months. They had paid attention to Michelle, who had withdrawn from Oxycodone

in the hospital. They had watched Nick clean and paint her room and, when she had come home, stay with her. He could not wait tables. On his first night on the job, a large party left after failing to get him to come over with furious stares. Nick's tickets, furthermore, were close to illegible, his handwriting nervously cramped. He had gone back to busing, although not regularly. Fiona and Margot had paid attention less to him than to the house they were buying. Both of their declared income had increased significantly, Diane having raised it without telling them or giving them pay stubs. It turned out the money from their paychecks had been going towards taxes they had to pay on their new on-the-books income.

The house that Margot and Fiona were buying this afternoon had a price that equalled CC's lowest compensation for the plant, 125,000. Fiona considered using this number to transition from one point to the next. But how? Her eyes happened to settle on another sign: "Listen to your neighbor." A woman a few seats down stood. She had on layers of knits that failed to add convincing bulk to her lanky frame. "This deal is unacceptable given what Hudson is now," she said. "The price they're offering per year—it's not even enough to buy a house here anymore!"

This comment did away with Fiona's plan. How could she say she made a good living in town while admitting that her home was impossibly cheap?

Another woman stood. She was older and appalled. "How can you turn down this offer in this town? No one had shown any interest in this place or anywhere around for decades!" Boos arose. Diane's voice cut through the crowd: "Yea or Nay! Up or down!" The men behind Fiona and Margot clapped. The older woman went on, "You need jobs and you need the money!"

A man at the edge of the room was yielded the floor. “No deal offered is ever good enough for the people who are not from this town. For those people who don’t care about real jobs for the people who live here. Who have always lived here!”

While Fiona had moved to Manhattan at the age of ten, she had more claim to being a local than many people at the meeting. That is what she told herself, looking down at her notes: changing economy, environmental damage. She was planning on how to tailor her message for the men behind her when Diane stood and remarked in her loudest hushed voice: “I would like to know what the rush is. This everything-is-final, take-it-or-leave-it stuff. I’m sorry if you guys are sick of hammering this out. But it’s your job.” The way Diane said “job” made the word sound sacred.

The mayor, speaking with a Slow-Down sign near his left shoulder, reiterated that the deal was a take-it-or-leave-it proposition.

Neil stood and asked in a spoken shout, “How can you trust any corporation in America?” He looked around as if interrogating the town and not the council. Diane was one of the few to applaud, which appeared to surprise Neil as if he had confused Americans trapped in plastic children’s chairs with the loud gentleman of English parliament.

“Are you even from this country?” another woman asked.

Diane stood. “Do you want him deported?” She pointed her finger, madly. “Is that what you want?” Diane’s pointing could not manage to indict a specific person in the crowd. The woman who had asked the question was well camouflaged among the sweated crowd with her knit cap.

Ruth took the floor. Fiona noted that the former mayoral candidate was in the position of seeming jealous if she criticized her victorious former opponent. Ruth, though, was not deterred. She remarked on how the mayor had taken contributions

from the cement corporation. She spoke in a nasal midwestern accent of the corporation's record of burning hazardous waste at its other plants without a permit. She thereby hit upon what Fiona saw as the most important points: that Champlain Cement could not be trusted and that the leader of the town could not either, having taken the corporation's money.

Fiona raised her hand to speak about a third point: that Champlain would not create jobs. Upon standing, she felt the rush of blood up her neck. Her words, meanwhile, proceeded slowly. "We have jobs here. Or could. But they don't look—" The race between her blush and words reached an uncomfortable tie. She cleared her throat. "The new jobs don't look like the old jobs men used to have. These jobs depend on service." Fiona searched the crowd for a sense of her audience but only saw eyes and damp knit. "We need to focus on new jobs. I have one. These jobs are not damaging. To the environment. Thank you." She sat.

A few more people commented. One person remarked on the plant's proposed long conveyer belt that would shut down travel from the quarry to the river. Another reiterated the need for revenue. Fiona needed air. The mayor proclaimed that the meeting would come to an end. The vote on the host agreement would be postponed. Margot smiled at Fiona when they reached outside and said, "And you give me grief about how I speak in public." Fiona, acknowledging her hypocrisy, called herself an asshole. Margot said not to be so mean.

The house Fiona and Margot were buying was a steal. It was a good move. It was thinking of the future. But most importantly, said Margot and Fiona's real-estate agent, Thomas, it was their last chance to buy into Hudson. "You're about to get priced out," Thomas said as the three of them walked from the elementary school to

the closing for the house. Thomas looked around at a warehouse and a ranch with a basketball hoop tipped over in the yard. His wandering gaze, sharp with calculations of interest and down payments, stopped when he got to Fiona and Margot's block. Across from their home was a long brick building that showed no possibility of going on the market anytime soon, the Mental Hygiene Facility.

Inside Margot and Fiona's home across the street was its owner, Willie. He did not look up from the floorboards to say, "Hi." He had never met the women, a notable fact not only because they worked in the popular bar for gay men but also because Willie had been in his house with them twice before. He had stayed one room ahead or behind or in the hallway or, upon getting caught, stood as still as the two ficuses that flanked the house's unparalleled view of the Facility. Margot signed the papers for the two-story house, which had in the back a long backyard and a garage that Nick, if he wanted to fix up, could use as an apartment.

The mortgage broker, Erica, was there. She was a handsome woman who usually wore a smile from the assortment she kept ready. This one was magnanimous. Fiona had bowed out of the mortgage on account of an emergency-room tetanus shot for her wrist after her fall. She had paid the bill right away, but it had gone to collection. A credit check uncovered the error, and Fiona had gotten the hospital to recognize the problem. But it had yet to come off her record. In the meantime, Erica got a good-enough rate in Margot's name, and Thomas brought the house down to a price that he said would not last. So Margot alone signed the papers, saying when she reached the last forms, "We should sign across the street, shouldn't we?"

"Convenient for us," said Fiona. "A minute's walk if that."

"I've never known what *mental hygiene* meant," said Thomas.

"It's one of those things," said Erica with a dry smile. "If you have to ask—"

“Then you have a dirty mind?” asked Thomas. “That makes no sense, Erica. There’s nothing dirty about questioning why taxpayers are holding onto some 3000-square-feet of well-maintained Neo-Georgian.”

Erica folded her hands before her. “You didn’t have to ask.”

Willie exclaimed with force strong enough to break through his self-restraint, “It’s better than normal neighbors!” He continued less loudly but with enough enthusiasm to make his next statement seemed like a command: “There’s no barbequing ever.”

“Let’s hope not!” said Thomas. “What a scene. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* fires up the grill with the Rock Solid Church and the VFW.”

“Good description of the whole town,” Fiona murmured.

“We should pitch it,” Erica said. “Sounds like a hit.”

“Pitch what? To whom?” Thomas asked.

Erica frowned for a moment. Then one edge of her mouth turned upward. “Is there a reason for your mood, Thomas? This can’t be all for me.”

Thomas pulled out his phone to scroll through missed calls. “None of it’s for you, Erica.” The final form was signed. “So you can stop smiling.” Willie said that the building across the street was calming. *That* was what he had meant before. Fiona said, yes, she could see how people would find it calming to know that their neighbors were getting all the help they needed.

The house gave Margot and Fiona with a two-block walk to work. Nick came that evening, and so did the scarred Raphael. He sat near the bar and waitstation with seven other antique dealers. At the end of their entrees, Raphael spoke at the long

table of a coin minted in 1935. It was commemorative, being made in honor of Hudson's one hundred and fiftieth anniversary. The coin was rare not because of a small minting but because it had been hoarded. Raphael did not know who the hoarders were. On one side of the coin was printed, "Et Decus Et Pretium Recti," which Raphael translated as: "Both Ornament and Reward of the Righteous Man." The story of the coin inspired a rare silence at the table. Nick slipped his hand into this silence slowly, lingering, as he picked up a plate.

Raphael talked of the disagreement about the coin's two sides: "No one can agree which side is the front and which side is the back. The mayor in 1935 said that the city seal was on the front, but the artist, Beech, who did the coin put it on the back. On the front is Henry Hudson's ship, the Half Moon. Of course, it's just a matter of words, calling the front back and back front. But Beach's habit of turning things round with words cannot be overlooked."

"Why?" asked Craig, who did not interrupt as a rule and who knew Raphael was accustomed to captive audiences and, therefore, inclined to pause. Raphael went on without acknowledging the interruption: "Beech stamped his habit of turning things around into the coin. He engraved the wrong moon next to Hudson's ship. The ship was called the Half Moon, but Beech put the moon at the quarter phase."

Raphael's plate was scraped clean of everything except for a forkful of potatoes which waited like bait. Nick stopped before reaching for it. "Beech changed Hudson's seal too," Raphael continued. "The usual whale on the water was, let's say, embellished. Beach added the god Neptune to the scene. Neptune was straddling the whale, but not in the correct way. He's facing an angel, his boy, Triton. The boy's blowing his horn. But Triton's on the whale's tail, which means Neptune is backwards."

Raphael smiled. A few men joined in. Nick slipped his hand down toward the plate. “And to appreciate this particular ‘backwards,’ you have to know where the whale’s eye is. And its blowhole too. Its blowhole is up on the whale’s nose. And its eye—well, that’s Beach’s best switch. The eye is back where the blowhole should be. Up under the god’s ass.”

The table roared. Nick turned with his plates.

The room dizzied with its bar of emerald, brown, and blue bottles. A postcard was taped to the mirror behind the register. The postcard was of a sea that had too much blue to have ever met the dark Hudson. And then came that sign saying Real, Real, Real. It would not say No, thought Nick. It would not say Unreal. Beyond the front window, the town stared, its eye blurred, half-frozen, freezing, going towards quarter-unfrozen. Nick stared back, thinking: I have no more than what I have found since coming back. I have found you, Unreal Eye, and the yarn that pulls me forward.

This yarn is bluer than a postcard sea. It pulls me to bins of plates scraped with forks licked and crusted with cooked juice and blood and wet from the water down in the plastic ruts from Reeny’s sprayer and fries and spit and flesh and bread. My hands are slick, Unreal Eye, but my yarn is truer than the sea that sent you a postcard. Turn it around in that mirror:

Unreal Eye,
You are a mean rumor.
This postcard is going nowhere.
Signed,
Too Blue Sea

Those words are taped to a mirror behind a bar. The message is hidden in front of a line of staring people. I do not brush their backs as I pass. I’m good at my job. I do not have to write. I just have to read messages. The words on the postcard are a lie.

That card came to Hudson by a river, the Hudson, that runs into the ocean. The Hudson is a shiver in the bluest sea.

And what am I? I am what you try to ignore as you stare with your quarter-frozen eye. I am to you as you are to Too Blue Sea. Watch me pick up a couple of coffee cups and say excuse me when I mean fuck you. Watch me be a busboy to faggots and houseboy to dykes. I may be an asshole, Unreal Eye, putting my dishes in the bin, but I'm god's and you must look at me.

Half Dollar

The garage that Nick renovated in June was relatively spacious. It had no closet or bathroom, but it had no one else living in it except for his cat, Grace. Michelle was just visiting. She lay across the couch Nick slept on. She could say the unsayable in this garage, although she had to use their private language. She, therefore, could not say needed details. She and Nick did not have a phrase for “social services,” and Michelle had to speak about how she required such services as they existed in New York State alone.

“*Ya lanka mo*,” she said. (You can leave me.)

Nick could not leave. He needed family and hated Ed and feared Bibi. She accidentally caused damage, just as Nick himself had done with Fiona’s wrist. Bibi, though, seemed not to know about so much as the existence of remorse. The chance of Bibi and Ed experiencing such a feeling was foolish to imagine. Nick could not watch his father’s self-satisfaction every day. He would have to make it on his own even though his reading skills could fail him. He could read. On top of an opened box near the couch lay Jonathan Lethem’s *Motherless Brooklyn*. Nick also read while working as a parking-lot attendant for a bookstore in Portland *The Sun Also Rises*. But he got nervous with words and spoke better through color. If he were to become independent, he would have to make deep connections to others outside his family, and he could best achieve this through his art. He had to hang his God’s Eye.

“I need to finish this wall,” he said.

He began to spackle sheetrock. He felt guilty about Fiona’s wrist but not about staying on her property. He would increase the value of her home by making the garage liveable. And he had been kind to her in addition to being rough when they were young. He had stayed with her after she had slid down a long flat rock that

would not give her searching hands something: a root, an edge. He had been there when she had shattered her wrist in a ravine, and he had run to get help and later had combed her hair, which had knotted from a creek running through it. She had waited for help with her head in a creek. And he had listened when, coming off pain killers, she had asked him to turn down the creek.

He wondered if Michelle was trying to release him from his duties when she repeated her assertion that he could leave.

“No, I can’t.” He added in his mind, Not yet, not knowing what the words meant exactly.

Michelle watched him spackle with the care he brought to his art and even to bussing. She told him she was worried. He seemed not to care that their mother had put her own name on a waitlist for the state’s senior housing where the residents were prohibited from hosting family members. Michelle could not blame Nick for his lack of care, but she resented him for thinking more of spackle. She told him it was too warm in the garage. “You need an air conditioner,” she added.

Nick thought, I need walls first. But it was warm, he knew. The garage’s few windows were small and high. They revealed rain and leaves.

Margot finished telling the story of Lover’s Lane on the day Reeny objected to the odor of white women’s hair. Margot came from her car to hear Reeny say, “I hate the smell of white-girl hair in the rain.” Margot took it as a compliment. She never complained about straight people in front of them. She did want to hurt their feelings, and, ultimately, it wasn’t worth it. They did not want to hear her perspective. For

Reeny to speak about white women's hair causing revulsion made it seem as if she thought Margot was worth the bother.

Margot took off her coat in the waitstation and said to Reeny at the bar, "I can't smell my own hair unless I lift it to my nose, which I sometimes do. Only in private."

"It smells nasty when wet."

"How does it smell?"

"Nasty."

"But that doesn't tell me how it smells! Is it sour?"

Reeny moved her head back and studied Margot. She left.

Later that afternoon, when Margot was at the waitstation, she told a man named Sam at the bar the story of the poisoned house on Lover's Lane. Sam, a kind restaurateur who never made a profit, sat in between two men. One was a white-haired, silent gentleman, and the other was Thomas, the real-estate agent. Behind the bar, Sean sat on the steel edge of the reach-in cooler, reading the paper. Thomas spoke loudly and looked into his flip-phone. He casually remarked to Sam, "Margot knows all about PCBs. She and Fiona almost bought a house by a superfund site. Tell him, Margot."

So she told Sam about how she and Fiona investigated a field on Lover's Lane in New Lebanon after their mortgage broker was puzzled by a form that came from the seller. On this form was a handwritten line about a junkyard that had once been across the street. Erica found it odd and told Margot and Fiona to investigate about this junkyard. Fiona soon learned its name from the owner of the hardware store; and Margot went on to use this name in a call to the New York Department of

Environmental Conservation. The junkyard from the 1960s was a superfund site and would soon undergo cleanup by the state.

Sam kept his affable face while showing some surprise. “Aren’t you lucky?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

That moral, though, seemed wrong, not because she lacked luck, but because the lesson did not have enough to do with the story she never got to tell in public. On this early evening in June, however, she saw her chance when Sam added, “They just didn’t know how toxic those PCBs were back then.”

“But they did,” Margot interjected. “And they had to figure out how to get rid of them. So they put the PCBs in products. As furniture polish, for instance, sold at the company store. The man who owned the junkyard bought a spray to keep down the dust in the field. It worked, I guess. He used it for years.”

Margot expected Sam to say the moral, but he remained as quiet as the man on the other side of Thomas. His good nature could find nothing to hold onto in this story of bald greed. “So I guess the moral is,” Margot said, “not to buy from the company store. But I’m not sure how the junkyard man got his spray. I also don’t know if they even have company stores anymore.”

Sean interjected without looking up from his paper, “I’m sitting in it.”

Margot smiled. “But I never pay for that.”

Sean kept reading.

In the kitchen, Fiona filled ramekins with tartar sauce. Over by the sink, Reeny peeled potatoes. When Nick came for silverware. Reeny said to him: “That man out there at the bar—the one with white hair—he never moves. He could be an old piece

of furniture, that face, a broken spring, poking at you. But when he gets up, he'll move. He'll fall down and make a million dollars. That's what happened on the very day he got to town. Fell down a hole in the old Pork Store and sued."

Nick nervously laughed. The chef was behind the line. The man would yell at almost anyone including Diane, although never at her husband. Chef's face was flushed and bloated from the heat behind the line and failing kidneys.

"The pork store?" Nick asked tentatively. "It had a hole?"

"Yes," Reeny answered. "Place was a wreck. Took a turn."

If someone in the room were to ask what the Pork Store was, people would ignore him for lacking common sense. Everyone knew the Pork Store sold meat. Reeny continued: "That man not only got the store, he got money for his pain. Now you tell me that man's in pain."

Fiona said, "We could operate on that man at the bar. He'd just ask us to turn up the music. The man can't hear."

"Fell on his ear," Reeny said. "Killed a pig. That's what you need to do, Nick. Go find yourself a pork store and fall down a hole. That'll fix it."

Fiona glanced over at Nick, who appeared scared. Was it of Reeny's words or of Fiona overhearing them? When Reeny stepped out for a cigarette, Fiona followed and found that the rain had thinned. The clouds were bright and thick. The green stayed wet. The weeds in the concrete and growing up electric poles were vivid. "Does Nick owe you money?" Fiona asked Reeny, who appeared pained. The expression was not one she often made at work.

"He can tell you," she said.

Fiona's face turned rigid. She walked inside.

Reeny, alone in the yard, wondered, What do I want? She did not need the money Nick owed her, not enough to get from Fiona. She remembered when people owed her so much, and she had to get it to keep from being killed. She got it with a knife. She had worked at the hospital, washing the hair of the bedridden. White women would complain that her hands were dirty and call her filthy names. Then they would beg for enemas. Won't you give me an enema, Reeny?

She laughed until nothing was funny. Other people would laugh at what she was saying, but she herself could not see the humor. Then her father, who had taught her to say, "Yes," as though she meant it, said, "Don't let anyone force you to step out of your character." She left her job at the hospital and began working in restaurants where she made more. She moved in with her parents.

She sighed out smoke. Her neck hurt from looking down into stainless steel basins and pots. She wanted to use the luxury of not needing the money. She wanted Nick to give it to her. Fiona was always saving him, just as Reeny saved her younger brother, who had just been arrested for looking in a white family's bright, curtain-less windows. White people always wanted you to look at them, but in such a way that made them not have to see you.

Fiona and Margot drove the two blocks home at the end of the shift. The river ran through the left edge of Fiona's vision along with the Empire Service Line. Fiona could take that train south and see a blur of the places where, as a teenager, she could stay on the weekends when her father and his second wife wanted privacy: at a great aunt's or a stepmother's aunt's or a cousin's on her father's side. Fiona thought: Rootless makes you a good servant. It allows you to glide with your eyes on the next task and the next one—but I have roots now.

She recalled when she went to live with her father. She had a good hand and a bad one. What she used to be the good one, the right, shifted the car. What was the bad one, the left, steered. The bad one was bad because it was not hers. When she was young, she had gotten rid of this idea by leaving the country. Her father had paid for a bicycle trip in Canada. It got her away from him. Next to the ocean of Nova Scotia, she could forget that her hand was not her own long enough for it to become a hand, hers, at the end of her arm.

Fiona began singing, “Now I Walk in Beauty,” a round Margot taught her. Margot thought: The past is being turned, always, like rocks ground down for cement.

“Now.”

Margot sang.

The Righteous Man

On Halloween, Hannah of Diamond Street Thrift Store dressed as Saint Winifred with each ripple in the bronze airbrushed into stiffened fabric. It was certain she would win the contest up at the theater. After dinner at the Blackbird, everyone would walk up the street in an impromptu parade—or so Diane, who would soon be a witch, envisioned. Margot, dressed as a spider queen in three-inch heels, would not walk any farther than the shift demanded, which was not much. The dining room and bar were near empty. She drifted through them so slowly she could have excreted thread from her ass, Sean the bartender said. He was a mad scientist.

Fiona was a spider king with subjects glued to her bow tie and tuxedo shirt. She worried the spiders would become unglued in the steam of Winifred's soup, but their bodies were securely attached. The night was young when Fiona turned and saw Reeny run out of the kitchen. Neil was coming up close behind. He was fast, even with his limp, which made his body rock at higher speeds. Upon reaching the dining-room ramp, he cried, "Di!"

Saint Winifred looked as blue as weathered bronze. Neil rushed across the dining room to the door to his apartment. Reeny ran to the end of the bar, leaning forward into her own laughter. She told the mad scientist and king: "Something went wrong in the basement. You must have heard him banging on that pipe. Well, that pipe banged back." Renny picked up a whole lemon from the bowl of bar citrus beside her elbow and let it drop. "I lost a cigarette getting away from that man."

The scientist's wide shoulders began to shake with laughter. Backing away from the bar, he broke into a smoker's hack. Upon recovering, he asked Reeny, "That was it?"

"With some people, that's all it takes," Reeny said.

The pipe that Neil could not fix would have caused problems if the restaurant had boasted more than eight customers. Diane was devastated when she came down at seven in her witch's hat and gown. The scientist asked, "Why don't you cast a spell to bring people in?" to which she answered, "Why don't you pour me some motherfucking formula, guy?" And so the scientist served her a scotch, while above the thump of a footstep sounded from the apartment. Diane said to Fiona in her throaty voice, "I don't know what's holding Neil up. I dressed him."

"Did you dress him up as someone who can walk?"

"He can walk enough!" Diane shouted.

Nick came back from a cigarette run in his own clothes and counted change in the empty dining room. Halloween was a holiday for confusing spirits; that was what his aunt Regina told him one Halloween. He remembered her talking in a corduroy muumuu from the seventies. It was 1981. She was smiling as usual, her kindness buoyed by a lack of practical care. Her sink was piled high with dirty dishes. Her face was beatific above her coral-colored mummu.

"If your ghost came for you tonight," she said, brushing Nick's bangs from his eyes, "you'd be safe. He would see your costume and say, 'That is not my Nick. That is a cave child.'"

Nick had been dressed as Spiderman. He had smiled. Behind him now came a thump, thump, thump. Neil passed him and went up the ramp, saying, "Alright."

"Alright," Nick said.

On his first night at the Blackbird, Fiona told him to respond when Neil said "Alright" with an "Alright." Fiona had explained that the word in England meant "I'm alright, are you?" So Nick imagined this greeting would go on and on. *I'm alright, are*

you? I'm alright, are you? It would be like pounding on two sides of the same wall. It took a month for him to see that the second *Alright* meant *I'm alright too*.

He approached the bar with footsteps that seemed silent and gave the scientist cigarettes and change. He went back to the kitchen to give Reeny a pack he had bought.

"You owe me more than this," she said.

"I know. Are you going to the theater?"

"No."

He told her to meet him at North Fifth and Warren at midnight.

Steve, the communist, pushed through the front door of the Blackbird, snapping branches that stuck out from his hunter's jacket. Fake money fluttered at the ends of the branches coming out of camouflage. One bill fell by the entrance when Steve was explaining his costume, saying, "I'm a money tree."

Kara was dressed as Edward Scissorhands. "Yeah, yeah," she said to Fiona and Margot. "I didn't get it either. A tree with money coming out of it."

Fiona was more interested in the knives duct-taped to Kara's wrists. "Those are unacceptable," she said.

And the hands did go on to cut a customer—but the threat of Kara's digits is not what made the night take a turn when she and Steve came in. The night turned to look at the money tree and to stare through to the underlying camouflage. Beneath the communist's ideas about money was a local boy wearing hunting clothes. This local boy could have been aiming a gun at the deer that, in October, hissed and stomped and dipped their heads down into the mist. What the communist could have been, he was on this Halloween night: a hunter, a local man, Steve.

The night saw that, in the crosshairs of the hunter, was Steve, the communist. The night saw this man, first and foremost, as conflicted. The man spoke of money and sharing but had no money to share and wanted money and power. The communist was looking at Margot and Fiona as products, their breasts, a brand from which they made a pathetically small profit. The hunter, meanwhile, was moving his sights from the communist to the rest of the herd. It saw green too—but it was not the green of money. It was the green of heat as seen through night-vision goggles. The heat moved from Margot to Fiona to Kara, whom the hunter wanted as a wife. He wanted to possess the slope of her neck and the tendons going down her back into the bones under the shoulders.

The night, studying the hunter, saw how the hunter could kill what Steve had chosen to become when, at the age of sixteen, the nascent communist cleared a small rectangle in his infantilizing jungle-book wallpaper with a poster of Karl Marx. How correct Marx had seemed, staring out from the encroaching horror of the childish print! The hunter could kill the Steve who admired Marx, just as the night planned on killing twelve o' clock before the world moved up to a dawn that, for night, would prove fatal.

But it was only ten. The night had time to find questions in the communist's branches, such as: What was this costume? A reference to the saying about money growing on trees? An allusion to the 55 million dollars that the cement corporation had spent fighting the opposition to the plant? Fifty-five million? The figure made no sense to the herd in the bar. Money Tree and its Scissorhands drank whiskey in silence, trying not to poke out an eye with their branching, bladed extremities. The king and queen, meanwhile, said "Thank you" and "Good evening" until their shift ended.

The customer who got cut by Kara's fingers failed to sense the extent of his injury, being drunk when he came in. When he left, he was enraged and harmed but had no sense of the law or medicine. Fiona took Kara into the kitchen to switch out her knives for a slotted spoon, spatula, and other utensils. Diane was untroubled by the accident. She was more concerned with the parade she had imagined for tonight.

"I just saw all of us together!" she cried with fat tears rolling down her cheeks. "Going up the street! Laughing and smiling! Tonight!"

She shook her lifted head with mesmerized self-pity. She continued to look upward, as if she had spied in a magic mirror a throng of witches and saints ascending the street to the theater where a costume contest would soon begin. Fiona thought Diane was on drugs, which she was. Neil had to take a car to the theater. Fiona thought Diane wanted to maim her husband with that plan of a procession. As she remarked to Margot on the way to their car: "She's a clever one. Mixing visualizations with narcotics and that costume of his."

The damp air was edged in ice. A coldness had entered Margot's laugh. It terrified her. Had she not possessed certain royal powers, she would have felt the tremble of the remaining leaves on Warren Street. But as Queen, Margot could spin a slender thread to everything around her, one that could keep her attached to Fiona and Diane and her job at the Blackbird.

"It must have been hard for her to plan her revenge," Margot said. "It's hard to plan when you're so far outside yourself—" Out came another laugh "—far enough to take another beating."

Up at the theater, Margot and Fiona remained regal as they passed witches, priests, smoke stacks, and choir boys. The spider couple remained in a web of their

own, apart from Saint Winifred with her enduring bronze. They moved beyond the lobby onto the dance floor. The tiered seats were gone, leaving a space that had been filled by Aurora with a skirt made of colored blades and the Devil whose tail, shaped like a treble clef, damned all the higher scales with its bending grace. Margot could see that she and her king could never win against such gorgeous competition. Still, she remained tall. Her posture gained some support from the flat wood sticks—the sort made for stirring cans of paint—that pressed into her back. The sticks rose up over her neck to support the large, webbed collar of her cape. But the hidden sticks were not the only reason for her proud posture. The other was her hope, held within her body, that she had found a home between Aurora and the Devil.

“Move!” Diane cried in the crowd.

Neil hobbled behind her.

“He’s Jonathan Small!” Diane exclaimed.

Feathered and crowned heads turned.

“Small! Small!”

It was not clear to whom Diane was shouting when she cried the name of a peg-legged Sherlock-Holmes character. She was looking upward in what looked like an eye roll that had gotten caught on metal theater lamps. For a moment, it seemed as if she were sharing some understanding with a derisive god who dwelled in the heavens of painkillers. Diane spent more time communing with this god, the two of them dismissing all of Hudson for not knowing their Sherlock Holmes. Not until Neil cried, “Di! Move!” did she look back down to find that she was blocking her husband’s hobbled swagger.

The sound system let out the electronic thumps of microphones being tested with taps. A few turned. The stage was lit. It was empty except for two microphones.

Two men in black dresses walked from the audience to the stage. While moving among the crowd, their dresses had been nothing more than requisite costumes that resembled funeral outfits. But set upon the stage, the dresses came to life, becoming costumes for a cocktail hour in the 1960s ruled over by dead movie star, Tallulah Bankhead. The men sang with Tallulah's locked jaws and long vowels. Laughter came out of both Fiona and Margot in bursts as they watched the two Tallulahs. The men's pearls swung, the fake beads rubbing against dresses as black as carbon copies. The Tallulahs consonants were as slow and as hammering as a manual typewriter's. Their act was called the Dueling Bankheads, their song, "Dyke Wedding":

Hey, little sister, who's the one you want?

Neil rocked through the crowd, shouting, "Di, keep quiet!" The line gave the general impression to anyone unfamiliar with his wife's name that the dead had woken and were too loud. Neil swayed as he shouted. Inside, he was stuck. Margot could see he could provide a stable anchor for the thread that spun out of her. Her attachments went out toward Neil and Diane and the scientist stuck down the street at the bar.

Margot threw a home out of her body, dancing with her king. The two of them, she told herself, would not get stuck on anything as fixed as the points that secured their web. Margot threw a thread down to their home on North Third. Margot alone owned it, technically, if one looked at the mortgage. But what did a mortgage, a paper with names, mean? She and Fiona had been together for ten years without any license to make them reconsider leaving each other. If anything, the two of them would have been socially rewarded for parting.

But they were bound by rich atoms being thrown out of flesh that understood being thrown out.

We belong, Margot thought, shaking her body and sticks.

Nick was two blocks up the street. He looked as if he should have been wearing the most popular disguise for boys on Halloween in 2004. He should have been dressed as Spiderman seeing as how he was climbing a building. He was on the fire escape to the vacuum-cleaner store. Below him was the alleyway. In his hand was the rail to the stairs. His gloves had no fingers. They were from his days as a temporary postman when he needed his rough prints to sort the mail. The iron rail made his right hand seize up. His fingers' pink tips spread their cold upward.

A cry rose from the alley.

"If you're going there, then hell yeah! Leave now—"

"Do you see me leaving?"

"Bitch—"

"That's Batman—"

"You'll be leaving—"

A smack arose. Then silence. More smacks, these ones of feet hitting the pavement with half-collapsed, hunched-over running. Another cry came, this one veering into a long laugh. The figures slipped behind the building's brick corner. Nick reached out and clutched grating. The surprise of the curved metal made him pull his hand away. His fingers plucked a dull note from the iron.

He kept climbing to the third and final floor. He had to go to where he used to live, even though the place had no apparent value. He wasn't breaking in for money. He had enough cash to repay Reeny, but he had to see this place first. It held

memories that no one would see as having value. These memories, furthermore, did not become precious when hoarded.

The place was what it was, Nick thought, getting to a window lit by TV. In between the screen and window was a couch with a foot hooked over the top edge. Nick did not want to break the glass, but the window was locked. He did not want to cut himself. He gave the window one final push.

Paint chips showered the inside sill. The noise of the chips lasted longer than the clunk of the lock's screws being pulled from rotting wood. The foot did not move. Nick went through the window, crouching. His shirt hissed against the wood frame. It was then that the foot stirred, once, vaguely, as if annoyed by something familiar, like a cat rubbing its cheek against an angle of the body. The foot went still. At least the man was not dead, Nick thought.

The TV was just loud enough to be heard. Nick went towards its dialogue.

What are you're going to do then?

I don't know. Maybe we'll take him. When he comes in for Moretti's laptop.

Do you think he'll take the risk?

He'll take that...or the loss.

Nick walked around the couch to the kitchen, which jutted from the living room. The man on the couch was lanky. He did not fit the piece of furniture. He was long and bony with jutting joints that would prevent him from comfortably fitting into most things. It occurred to Nick that the man, if he happened to die, would cause problems. It could get Nick life in prison. But this problem did not interest Nick as much as the fact that the wall above the kitchen sink was a dark color. Decades had passed since he and Michelle had lived here, but the wall's color was unchanged. It was purple. The whole place was dark. Nick had imagined when making his God's

Eye that home was blue and dawn. But from the inside, it was purple and earlier. A clock with bright numbers read: 11:23.

The man on the couch moved. Nick turned toward the tangle of limbs. He did not think it weird that the man did not wake, until the man did. His eyes opened on Nick, who said, "I came in through the window."

The man's eyes grew sluggish. He wiped his hand across his face and looked into his own palm. "Are you real?"

"Yes."

The man wiped half his face again, stopping at the eyes. He pulled his hand away and shook it hard while still looking at it. "Come the hell on!" he shouted as if yelling at the fate mapped across his palm. His age was hard to tell, his wrinkles looking like the result of having been crumpled and then smoothed out with a horrified regret that Nick understood.

Nick said with a force that surprised himself, "I'm real."

The man grimaced. "Jesus Christ." One hand slid down into the crevice between the cushion under him and the back of the couch. "I'm going to...shoot you, you know. His hand continued to fumble behind the couch cushion. "Goddammit all. If that's not...you go to sleep for a minute and wake to shoot..."

Nick's heart surged and slowed time. It tried to bring about the speed needed to escape, but the brain made the heart forget this objective by spreading a numbness, cold and thick, down into the limbs. The eyes, meanwhile, revealed a second layer, dark and semi-transparent, to the man whose hand kept searching. This layer peeled up with a negative image of the man. Nick opened his mouth. The proclamation that came out of it seemed to announce his own death: "I lived here."

“Yeah, well...” said the man, still fumbling. “I live here now. With a gun. Somewhere.”

“I lived here fourteen years ago.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, pulling up his face so that the bottom half was left looking vulnerable. His exposed teeth gave him a look of general stupidity. The TV was talking about the side-effects of bladder-control medicine. “I don’t know where my...Jesus. You keep a gun in the couch.” He leaned back with a sigh. “So you lived here. So have a lot of assholes.”

Nick found that his body had removed rage from his reach. “Yes, I’m an asshole,” he said with a sincerity rarely matched with this statement. “Paul Newman was making a movie at the diner when he was here. I thought he was an asshole too.”

The man blinked hard several times, studying Nick. It was difficult to tell if he was thinking or trying not to speak, which he did eventually. “Are you retarded?”

Nick’s heart was loud, his numbness having ebbed. “Because I thought Paul Newman was an asshole?”

“No...I mean...Paul Newman’s not an asshole, but that’s not...Because you broke in here. You broke in here to talk about being an asshole. Into my crap-ass apartment.”

“I’m not retarded.”

The man turned to retrieve his cigarettes from the table behind him. “OK. Fine. Not retarded. Officially. But something’s wrong with you.”

“Yes.”

The man lit a cigarette and sighed out the smoke. “Look it, so you know, I’d shoot you if I could. So that’s a sign that the conversation should be over. I’m sorry you lived here.”

Nick expected the man to remark on his own authority in regard to the misfortune of living above the vacuum-cleaner store in Hudson, but the man remained silent. “We’re like twins,” Nick said.

“Oh, no, no, no.” The man slowly shook his head, half smiling. “We are not twins. You are someone who broke into my apartment, and I am the unfortunate victim of your...I don’t even know what to call it.”

“My breaking in.”

“Your lack of judgment—no, motive. You don’t want to kill me or take any of my things. Who the hell knows what you would take. My TV—” he turned to look at a digitally manipulated piece of throbbing candy “—you’d be a fool to take that.” His voice was so vague, it was unclear if he was considering the value of the TV or its candy.

“I have a motive.”

“What?”

“To see the apartment.”

A glow spread across the man’s face so surprisingly, it looked like surprise. The man’s eyes, which, when squinting, could draw up all his features, widened and softened. “You could have just rung the bell.”

“I did. You didn’t answer.”

“I’m a heavy sleeper.”

“It was last Christmas.”

The man let out something between a laugh and a cough. “Well, you’ve seen it.”

Nick looked around at the radiator whose knob would leak loudly and the closet that he and Michelle would turn into a pretend elevator and the window where

a fan once sliced the thickest air, sending the slices onto his mother's legs and arms and face. She would lie on the couch, her eyes closed and tensing, as if she were counting objects that the sun would not stop bleaching out. The apartment could have been precious with its pretend places to go and its hissing mistakes, but then came the memory of Michelle spinning and rocking herself where the TV now settled on one of its favorite topics: autopsies.

The man was studying Nick. Light, numerous lines had returned to his expression.

"Your face is full of regret," Nick said.

The man's cigarette was gone, a fact that became glaring in light of his sudden stillness. The only change on his frozen body came on his face where the lines deepened. His eyes grew wet and sharp. "I can't find my gun, but my legs still work. You're an intruder."

"I know that."

"I could get up."

"But you wouldn't."

"No, I would. I wouldn't try it. I don't even know your name."

"You wouldn't kill me."

"I'd bludgeon you."

Nick noted that his body had not gone numb. "You would regret it."

The man squinted, pulling up his whole face. "I regret nothing."

Nick's body carried him to the window. He slid out onto the fire escape where he could feel a faint throb of distant music. The image of the dancing candy appeared before his feet, as he watched one foot go down a step. The candy seemed to be dancing to music that some building on Warren could not contain. The dull beat

leaking out of walls somewhere did not match the rhythm of the candy's thrust. From above, the man said, "I found my gun," in a wistful tone. Nick thought while jumping off the escape that the man must be talking to himself.

The building that Nick descended did not resemble the ones that Diane spied through the theater's facade. The two skyscrapers she saw looked like the Twin Towers with their similar shape and singular antennae, but they were tiny and approachable. She could talk to them about mundane topics, such as the deleterious effects of mildew on rubber and grout.

Eventually, perhaps, their shape influenced her preoccupations, for soon she began to speak (her lips moved silently) of cooked books and uncooked books. The cooking was necessary, Diane explained to them. In restaurants, so many employees had to be paid in cash. It kept things cheap! Taxes, workman's comp, insurance—it all added up. Food was expensive in the making!

The problem was...but here Diane turned her attention to a large worm across the street. The arch in its crawl was one story high—of a normal-sized building, that is; it obscured her two approachable ones. Her lips parted silently. She could not remember the problem, which was documenting income in a restaurant. Someone had to admit they were making money. If she put more of a burden on Fiona and Margot than either Sean or Kelly, it was because the two of them did not complain. They were ashamed, she usually assumed. In any case, Diane always made sure that, at the end of the night, her bitches got something better than the kick she could catch in the head.

Emerging from her forgetfulness, Diane decided that tips should not be taxed any more than a wink should. The worm turned. While it did not wink, it was clear it understood.

Whale

The party got bigger. It smelled. Spirit gum and sweat, fake fur and vinyl. Everything that could get crammed into a room did. Xanax, vodka, witches, George Bushes, a vampire named Sam, a tall Pan named Sam, a short Frankenstein monster who grunted on the verge of his first word. Ruth did not stay long. She had to do a litter cleanup the next morning and, the day after, a drive to get out the vote. If costumes had called the election, George Bush would have won already. No John Kerrys pushed through the crowd with store-bought rubber heads, but a few Georges did. Edward Utensilhands got one of them in the rear with tongs before poking the drag queen, Musty Chiffon, in the chest with a ladle. Edward asked, “Are they real? Are they real?”

The Spider King thought it mean. The Queen said that it was out of character, Edward being such a sensitive boy. The Queen, though, went on to posit that, by taking the scissors from Edward’s hands, the King had created a character who was less sensitive about hurting others.

“We become more aware of another’s feelings,” the Queen, aware of the wooden sticks and character, said, “when we know that we cannot help but hurt those feelings naturally.”

This proclamation came next to the front window not far from Diane. The noise that had pushed the royal couple to the room’s glass wall fed into the Queen’s new confidence. It made her voice bold and proud, which helped keep Margot in character—a moral matter for this woman at the Queen’s core. Margot saw Halloween as a night when people should try to dispel one of the greatest sources of evil: boredom. Nothing was, Margot believed, more boring than having to be one person all your life, and nothing was more destructive than boredom, not even greed.

For what was greed, the Queen asked, if not boredom meeting up with stupidity on its way to the delusion that even more money will create even more fun?

The King said nothing, which could be taken as agreement. It was not. The King knew that the terms, Greed and Boredom, were distinct, and whatever happened after they were placed on two sides of an equal sign did not change the fact that they were important independently of each other. Boredom and Greed, like the King and Queen, were two different things and when added with Stupidity—well, here the King's head swum with resentment. It was wrong to introduce moral math at what was becoming a terrific party.

A fight would undo its terrific-ness—and so the King pushed into the crowd. This royal entered a world that turned round a knowing center. There was no need to worry about what the man in a suit and cow head was supposed to be, and the same went for the woman in a lamé sheath and top hat. The world at its core knew why the woman's pumps were painted green, just as it knew too why an entrance next to a mirror felt more like an exit. Every path opened onto—or parted from—the unknown but understood. The King relished this sensation while pushing through tulle, lace, polyester, felt.

This understanding center created by the Queen could get torn apart in an argument, the King knew. So the subject of moral math remained untouched. The Queen's confidence, while fragile, could be deadly to other species. The connections she made could immobilize those unaware of her thread. They might wrap their mind around arguments that seemed simple enough, only to find themselves bound. The Queen's power lay in her ability to connect a cow head to a top hat and foam breasts. Other species could do nothing with such things except, possibly, question them

morally. Why, another species might ask, should adults put so much thought into costumes when people in Iraq were being killed?

The Queen would have said, “Not *our* army.”

There was no disputing her. Her threads, formed inside her body, stuck onto others with a knowledge of what it meant to be thrown out. She had paid for this knowledge, just as she paid for an army that threw out her species while demanding more money.

The King, returning to the window, resolved not to disturb the web. The Queen turned with an authority that the King had never seen her possess. Without resorting to bodily arrogance—a lift of the chin, a plummy voice—she asserted her knowledge of life in this theater, saying: “We know that we belong when we can feel the world turning and we’re not falling off.”

Reeny was on Warren Street next to the church. She had on a pink shirt beneath her black jacket. She stood by the high stone church past the red traffic light and one-way sign. Nick, moving towards her, went beneath a wooden placard for a shop that swung from an iron rod.

“How you doing, Nick?” she asked.

“I’m fine. I broke into an apartment.”

“Did you?” She looked down at the sidewalk and up at the lamppost but not at him. “What’d you take?”

“Nothing.”

She laughed once.

He took out cigarettes. Reeny pulled out her own. A car drove up to the red light beside them. While Reeny was focused on her lighter’s flame, she seemed to

sense the car too. Moving her lit cigarette around in the closed, shifting fingers of her lifted hand, she looked at Nick. But the side of her body closest to the street seemed to have nothing to do with him. It seemed to be speaking to the car, saying as it stiffened: I know you better than you know me.

“Where you going?” Reeny asked Nick. The car left.

“Fiona and Margot’s.”

“Is that home?”

“For now.”

“After that?”

An emptiness that had grown in Nick’s stomach pushed downward, moving with the force of panic. *You won*, he thought, his legs numb. The words were distinct in his mind, but their meaning, mysterious. Combined with his panic, the mystery made Nick try to understand Reeny’s win. He owed her money; he feared being held at gunpoint; he had to fight. “There is no after,” he said, the words reminding him of the question. *After that?* Too much had happened and was still happening. His answer came out again, this time with the force of remembering the question.

“There is no after!”

Reeny winced. The crinkle of her brow was softer than the pain it quickly caused Nick. Around the church was a wrought-iron fence with spikes. Nick said, “Sorry.” Reeny’s face looked delicate in the church’s shadow, he thought. He tried to leave, but his body refused to obey.

Reeny’s face, having lost its wince, offered nothing, not even anger to push against. “You’re a bad gambler, Nick.”

“Yeah, well, you know...you can’t...you can’t win.” His voice infuriated him. It reminded him of the man on the couch. “You can never win with some people.”

“You should always know who you’re playing, Nick.”

“I thought I did.”

“You didn’t. So that’s that.”

“So who are you? Tell me.”

“Tell you?”

“Yes.”

“Nick, people tell you who they are by what they do.”

“Then you’re a cheater?”

She looked at him with something like anger but farther away. Reeny could have been looking from behind her own head as she studied him, her gaze steady. The street behind her seemed to grow narrow. “I won,” she said. “You should think about why that gets under your skin.”

It was true: she had won, even if she had cheated. If she were not victorious, Nick would have been able to stop himself from saying: “I don’t know why I should believe you—you not cheating. I—whatever you did, I don’t understand—” There was a logic to what he was saying, if only he could grasp it. “I don’t understand what you did. So how can I know who you are?”

“I guess you can’t.”

“Then just tell me. Who are you?”

“I’m almost fifty. You know what that means?”

He did not know what being fifty had to do with gambling or with anything other than the fading that came before dying, the erasure of flesh, which, for the men in his family, was violent. They worked and drank and smoked and were rubbed down to a hole in the record. It was not a mystery to Nick, why those men drank and, lately, smoked pot. To be sober meant having to grasp at a logic that never made sense, the

equation of home with dawn, the blue of both things next to the pink of Reeny's shirt.

His vision throbbed. His heart, the organ that failed the men in his family, surged.

"Do you know what it means?" Reeny asked again.

"No."

"I think hard before each move."

It meant more, he knew, but Reeny would not tell him what. She would have told Margot with her rootless cheer that made her seem either dumb or crazy. People never worried about what Margot thought of them. Once, he had overheard Reeny telling Margot about driving with a knife in the passenger seat that she had rubbed down with garlic, a coating that made wounds harder to heal. Margot had spoken in a joking voice that always got a laugh, with a nasal tone like her Wisconsin grandma's. "Ouch, that's no good there," she had said, as if talking about a burning batch of jam. Nick never would have made a joke of it, which is why Reeny would not say what the twenty years she had on him had to do with gambling.

"I want to go," he said.

"So why don't you?"

"My body isn't working. From the break-in."

"The guy inside go after you?"

"No, he was sleeping. He just scared me."

"The sleeping guy? Scared you?"

"Yeah."

"You breaking in?"

"Yeah."

Reeny turned towards the lit street to laugh. Her laughter was not loud, and it would not have been long if she had not refreshed it by glancing back at Nick. “I know it’s funny,” he said. “But I don’t know why.”

Reeny made a backwards movement of her head and held the position. “You don’t know why?”

“The guy in the apartment scared me. He still scares me.”

“He’s scaring you now? You, standing here?”

“His apartment is still mine. I don’t want to be, but it is. He shouldn’t have been there.”

All laughter drained from Reeny’s face. The sign up the street on its iron bracket creaked. Trees hit the top of their branches, their living twigs tapping. The steady wind blew the river’s damp up to the top of the hill. “You need to take a turn in your thinking, Nick,” Reeny said. “You’re going someplace bad.” Leaves scraped the sidewalk.

A cry came from his mouth that did not sound like his or anyone’s. It was too loud. Reeny stepped backwards. “I’m not going anywhere!” he cried. “What I’m saying—I’m saying something about that apartment! It’s changing the man. The man in it! That guy should be nothing like me! He’s skinny and tall. He didn’t stammer, but he took a long time to say everything. Nothing he said should have taken long, but he stopped and started. I don’t ramble except...now I do! I’m rambling just talking about him...I, *Nick*, don’t ramble.”

Reeny stood still. “I know.”

“We should not have been alike. I never ramble, and now I’m rambling. The two of us were twins. There was something wrong with both of us.”

Reeny said nothing. Neither did he. The money he owed her was in his pocket. He took it out. He had counted the three twenty-dollar bills before leaving the house and had spent nothing. He held the money out to Reeny with an uncertain hand as if to ask her not only to count the money but to tell him why he was, at last, handing it over. But she did not even count the bills when she took them. He smiled, thinking of how, at last, he knew one thing he had done: he had bought more words.

“I’m free now,” he said.

“No one’s free. Not in this life.”

“*Sanva.*”

“*Attah.*”

“*Sanva.*”

“But it’s night, Michelle.”

Michelle had fallen asleep on the couch with a bowl of candy on the floor. She stood in the living room, her silhouette curled as if trying to block a chill. But the solid house was warm. The language Michelle shared with Nick sounded like baby talk within this home. The walls were solid. They kept out the neighbors’ arguments while holding in their own. The light from the streetlamp came in through the window. The mental hygiene building across the street glowed.

Michelle, who was staying overnight for Halloween to give out candy, had put on enough weight to look as if she planned to stay among the light and shadow. The stir of leaves looked as quick as backtalk and chatter, with light and dark moving over concrete and brick. The shadows inside, in comparison, seemed scripted with the window presenting a well-known rectangle of streetlight. The chair gave a brief

account of its legs. Michelle and Nick, after speaking of dawn and their states of mind, fell silent, their language at odds with the room's predictable shapes.

It took a black cat to turn the room odd enough for the brother and sister to speak. The cat, Luther, lumbered toward the bordered-over and painted fireplace, his thin legs holding up a fat belly. Back and forth the belly swung on the long spine. The cat tipped onto the floor and looked around, his gaze never coming to focus on one thing.

Nick walked over to Luther and bent down to pet him. The cat, rolling backward, lifted one of his rear legs in imitation of his idol, a black mutt who had died. Luther would lay in the belly of the mutt, curled up like a kitten. Nick, recalling the dog, let the conversation lapse.

"I'd go up to New Hampshire, but I can't," Michelle said at last.

"I can't move up there either," Nick said.

"Yes, you can."

Nick could not move away to New Hampshire. If he did, he would have to leave Michelle. The hour was late but should have felt more familiar than the slow drift that weakened Nick's legs. It seemed like Halloween, even though the month had moved into November. His legs stiffened. He had to push through hoarseness to speak, "Do you remember back when we were at the vacuum-cleaner store? One time you were spinning—or rocking—and Mom was doing dishes. Dad was gone. We'd just come back from Arizona."

Michelle's eyes, usually filled with some dream, went cold with either anger or worry. "That moment...it could be any moment. I'm out for a smoke."

Nick followed her. The air was cold. It was around three. The house was at their backs, and ahead was a long yard that ended in the garage where Nick lived.

Michelle's entire body gestured inwardly except for her upward stare, which Nick could not follow into the sky, being stuck on his sister's thinness. She no longer looked girlish and graceful; rather, she looked as if she could break.

Nick's knees bent. His muscles seized up to slow his fall. One hand, reaching out behind him, touched the concrete near the back door. His other hand moved up to his head. "I've got to lie down."

Michelle, touching his shoulder, gave him the awareness of his body that he needed to stand. His head hurt with lightness, but the rest of him felt solid enough to walk. They went to the garage through the dead garden. Stems of vervain reached up to hold the cosmos' wilted fringe. Locus rattled, their pocked heads held up by thick spines. The previous owner had made the garden over decades. Nick and Michelle walked through the shapes that the once-living plants had left behind. Thin tangles and lattices held up the cold air. Nick did not turn on the lights in the garage. Michelle stood, her thin arms hanging down from where they attached. Her limp body made the human form look like an accident, the head just happening to be above the feet.

Nick walked to the space heater and bent over to hit its switch. Its rods threw their orange heat up the wall where the God's Eye hung. Its shades of blue looked blacker in the orange. Nick imagined it was watching a fire burn behind them. Behind them was the faintness he had felt in the garden, an upward rush, like air bending above flames.

"It's good, Nick," Michelle said.

Michelle's arms still limply hung. Nothing about how she stood had any purpose. "Have you seen this before?"

"No."

Why had he thought she had? Because it had been inside him for so long and he had been with her. She left.

Nick remembered Reeny on Warren Street staring at him from two places: from where her body was and from behind her back. From behind her own head, she had stared at him. This Eye too had a double vision locked on him. The Eye was not only on Nick but on a person behind him. Like Reeny, Nick had a double being pulled into a vanishing point. Reeny had stood right in front of a world receding down to the river, the lines of Warren Street growing closer to a point of gone.

He took a step back. He was visible head on, but from behind? The coin could flip and his body go flat. He took another step, knowing he would never be a boy rushing toward a vanishing point on a bike. That point was behind him, he knew, taking another step, his heel and calf waiting for the couch. He took a step.

Ornament

How shiny! Mirrors on a spherical polyhedron! Duller than a disco ball, with not as many surfaces to flash back light. But how it shone! A sharp ball of pollen for the faerie theme in the Blackbird. How retro! Faeries when the only ones left among the gays were the Wiccan kind, those Radical Faeries casting spells in bending circles. Neil did not know of these Faeries in the woods with their wands, and yet he spoke of “benders” as if these men had a magic force, alive and afoot and affecting the restaurant’s stereo with their requests. Neil was convinced of it! He was doing his best to convince Diane in the bar. The couple was conducting their version of a private conversation, which involved, on Neil’s end, lurching. Diane gave throaty reassurances while patting her husband’s arm. The rhythmic touch infuriated him as much as the music’s beat.

But Fiona wasn’t worried when she passed the two of them. She put in a food order and explained to the chef that Neil was “clearing a blockage.” It was New Year’s Eve and mild. The air felt of warmed ocean. Fiona’s hair was very large.

“I knew two Radical Faeries,” she said back at the bar. (Neil loudly muttered “base,” shaking more than one meaning from the word and left.) “Both in France,” Fiona added before explaining to Sean that these fairies were male pagans.

Margot found Fiona’s tone flat and inscrutable. It did not help that Margot did not know the identity of the two Faeries. She turned for help from Reeny, who had a knack with conversation even when the mechanics of the specific problem were not in her area of expertise. She could employ an insult like a flat palm effectively used on the top of a broken appliance—with the correct force and evenness so that those on the receiving end, while not taking the insult personally, knew it applied to them in

such a place that had gone wrong. But Reeny, who was about to go out for cigarettes, was focused on the stuck zipper at the bottom of her jacket.

Margot asked, “Where did you meet these Faeries, Fiona? Do you mean France France?”

Reeny stared at Margot as if the woman were another broken zipper. “France, France.” Reeny shook her head once before returning to her jacket problem. “Move over, Paris.”

Fiona said, “They were from before your time, Margot.”

The idea of such a before—and, for that matter, its matching after—silenced Margot. These two parts of time had turned into a set that could not be broken. To move forward meant to move into the past, Margot had always thought, a principle she could not explain. She could see how Nick suffered at the mercy of it. He could not move backwards and, therefore, could not move ahead, which was why, at times, he came close to tipping.

A husband and wife came in and sat in Margot’s section in the dining room where the “benders” who had so offended Neil sat at a long table. The new customers ordered a Manhattan and a Bombay martini, up, with olives. Margot went to fetch cocktail glasses from the back refrigerator. Pushing open the door to the kitchen, she remembered the phrase “after Fiona,” as the open door behind her sucked in the misty air from the propped-open exit in the back. The hot and cold of the kitchen—the gas flames and waiting hot oil mixed with the cool night—made Margot take a hard, fast breath. What did it mean, she thought, this “after Fiona,” which would come, if not in life, then through death?

Hot water, sprayed over a turned-over pot, further dampened the heat. Margot knew that “after Fiona” would mean not only the loss of their home but, most likely,

bankruptcy for Margot with the house still being in her name alone, and if left living in it by herself, she probably would run out of payments before the house could be sold. “After Fiona” would also involve—but here Margot had to stop staring at the waxed boxes and plastic bags in the fridge and reach for the glass stems on the door.

She told herself she and Fiona would be together always. She pushed open the kitchen door to pick up her shakers and a cherry and olives at the bar. She was moving closer to how most straight people saw the world, she imagined. They kept more of the family they were born into, one parent or the other or both. Even if they never knew their mother, they could dream of such a person loving them, whereas Margot would have been a fool to do so. Now, though, she had beginning—when her flesh and Fiona’s met—and an ending—when this flesh would part. These points seemed as sure (she neared her table with drinks, smiling) as birth and death.

Raphael sat at the head of a long table of men who had drinks but no food below gossamer wings and a hummingbird and, along the periphery, pine cones. The men were discussing undesirable properties. “It’s one of those houses on Columbia Street,” said Raphael, “with an entrance onto the large front parlor with the small bedrooms in the back for the whores. It’s unsellable to anyone who doesn’t want to live in—I don’t know—feels like a notions drawer.” Fiona reached over his shoulder to put down his glass of champagne. “If you want to wake up in the morning feeling like a spool of thread—”

“Or a whore—” Thomas laughed and instructed others at the long table to follow suit with a drop of his jaw and forward thrust of his head. Most did.

Raphael smiled. “Yes, I suppose. It’s rather too functional and workmanlike.”

“Workwomanlike,” said Thomas.

“I suppose, woman.”

“One does not want to think of whoring with such realism,” said David, his eyes cast down on some unnerving thought, which he dismissed with a quick, tense smile before looking at the men and faerie scene. “Jonathan has that listing, right?” He lifted his cosmo. “He should put a little Julia Roberts in his pitch.”

“Oh, just imagine,” said Thomas. “Jonathan of all people. Wearing that god-what-is-it-hat of his—”

“Fedora,” Larry said.

“Don’t dignify it,” Thomas snapped. “Jonathan of all people, gesturing into those dim rooms, talking about how women once wore thigh-high rubber boots when servicing their whale sailors.” Thomas laughed. Others joined in.

“There’s no detail in any of those places,” said David. “No wainscoting, no decorative ceilings—”

“The irony,” Thomas said, lifting his drink.

“You seem quite sure,” said Raphael, “about which way our historical whores faced.”

The men began speculating about the common sight lines of prostitutes. Fiona glanced over at Margot’s married couple. They had no expressions except for the man’s shifting of his head right and left. To Fiona, the shifting looked like the usual awkwardness that arose between long-standing couples who had too little left to say or too much.

“I’ll take another,” said a voice close to Fiona. It was David’s. His gaze was cast down again, this time at his glass, which contained a few sips.

“Yes,” Fiona said.

“Columbia Street,” David interjected with the men, “is going to have real problems from about fourth up to sixth.”

“I bought one of those houses of ill repute,” said Thomas. He paused. No one said anything. “In case you didn’t know. Did you not know? I feel as if this conversation is aimed at me.”

“I did not know,” said Larry, who had settled into an immobile drunkenness at the end of the table. His thin limbs could move fast; Fiona went behind him as expediently as possible without seeming to rush. His mouth held tight to all remaining precision, which seemed considerable when constrained within this tight limit. “I find your paranoia the least appealing part of your narcissism.”

“Well, I find your nastiness the most charming thing about you,” Thomas said, smiling.

“I do too,” said Larry, not smiling.

“You seem quite sure, Thomas,” Raphael interjected, “that the plant will not come in.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” responded Thomas, “but I’d say I have no place to go, so why not put my money on the plant not coming in and New Yorkers doing so in droves?”

“The daily double,” said Frank T.

“If you like horses,” Thomas said. “I don’t. The human animal’s my obsession, and I know my breed—”

“Species, I think you mean, Thomas,” Raphael said. “Humans would be an undesirable breed of horse all around.”

“I’m speaking of humans,” said Thomas. “My breed is New Yorkers needing to get out of the City for the weekend. If I win, the whorehouses will be great for

renters—cut up already with lots of bedrooms. Prices here will have gone up enough that people from the city or locals—good ones, not the one I evicted from the place who had dirty diapers piled to the ceiling—”

“The downside of whoring,” David quipped.

The men laughed.

Fiona went back to the bar where the ornament spun. She was small beneath the pollen speck. Her drink came. The men at the table laughed. The hummingbird stayed still, a blur of red tulle for wings. Fiona put down a fresh napkin with her right hand and, on it, David’s cocktail.

Nick took another step back and sat. The God’s Eye could see behind him through the wall above the couch where two lines intersected. One line followed the man in the apartment, and one trailed Nick. The two crossed when Nick learned he had the same life as the man on the couch. The old apartment had shaped them both—or maybe Nick had haunted those rooms that had rot by the radiator and window sashes that rattled. And maybe he had the life of a car in this garage space heated by red coils.

The cat, Grace, lay near the heater, her ears up and listening to the walls that Nick had made. He had laid insulation over a swimsuit calendar from 1987 that had hung in the garage. It still hung under the drywall. Its pictures did not get him hard. Nothing got him hard. He had left the calendar in the wall but had saved a rope and a choc-full-o’nuts-can of bolts, nuts, nails, and screws.

Why? The coffee can—he went to look at it in the corner—would be made into something else, he had thought. But he could not make it into something else. He had come back to Hudson with some plan but had gotten distracted by Warren with its

corduroys, its red flags and signs, and blue sea. The Blackbird with its flying ships and ass eye had made him forget why he left Portland. If he had just stayed three more weeks at the bookstore, he could have gotten a vacation using the union rights he had helped fight for. He could have gone back to his job. So why had he not stayed? The answer lay inside, he knew, the blue and blur of Warren on that October afternoon when he first thought of what became the God's Eye.

Grace stood. Nick walked towards the couch with the rope. He knew how to tie a noose from years of saying to himself that he could move and, if his plans did not work out, kill himself. But what was his plan when he left Portland? He sat down on the couch and, imagining what the God's Eye saw behind him, remembered his plan to turn everything into something else: yarn, sticks, a picture of dogs in a forest that was half upside down, and also himself. He had become the man on the couch who could not find a gun.

And he had come back to himself in this garage. Grace had hidden.

Behind him, as gleaned through the God's Eye, Michelle was spinning, and their mother was at the sink in front of purple. Their father was gone. Nick's father had beaten both him and his mother, but not Michelle, who instead had gotten attention. With their father having left, she needed to be seen, and so she spun.

This moment sat in the center of the plan that Nick had made before moving back. He had left Portland to turn the moment after his father left into something that could be lived with. This moment should have been good. It should have not needed changing, this time when the apartment was clean with nothing broken or piled up in some corner to be ignored. But Nick remembered the room as having no sense of relief or victory.

Nick could still turn the scene into something else here in this garage where he, haunted by a car, was parked below bare support beams. He could transform that moment of waiting for disaster using the God's Eye. Looking back through the Eye, he could see his mom with her cheek against the window on the passenger side of a car, pregnant. She was waiting for Nick, he imagined, as she watched the tangle of black-eyed Susans pass along road's edge. She was looking out the window, her husband beside her, driving fast. His mother's thoughts, unlike the car, were slow. They repeated. She kept telling herself that your sight could get bruised without the mark ever moving out into the surrounding skin.

Nick saw it all, his mother as soft as yarn and watching the blur. She had been punched where no one could see and everyone was watching.

When the count for the year reached zero, the dining room was dark except for the light of moonflowers climbing two corners, their white skirts opening to show Christmas-light stamens. It was 2005! The crowd hugged, kissed, shouted, and did its best to speak.

"Another year, another god-knows-what."

"Last year you looked different. You've aged three cocktails!"

"Four...one for each..."

Diane was lifted high by several men. Her backside faced the floor and her eyes, the chandelier. She was too relaxed for words and so remained silent when Fiona and Margot said goodnight and walked back home. They passed businesses, the mist thick. Trees stirred beyond the convenience store with unadorned branches.

“It’s so coastal!” Margot exclaimed. It was a phrase that usually came from Margot along with some words about how lucky Fiona was to grow up along the country’s salty edge. “You feel so trapped in the Midwest,” Margot would say. But tonight she did not speak of being trapped as they neared the dead end of the road where their picket fence lay in the home’s shadow.

In the morning, the air was mild. Fiona went to the garage to ask Nick if he wanted to go on a walk and found him hanging by his neck. She called the police. She expected someone unusual to answer. It was, however, the police. She said the address and that it was an emergency. Then she packed a weekend bag and went to Warren. She turned towards the station—a ten-minute walk. The train going north arrived in a half hour. It turned west at Albany to go to Buffalo and Niagara Falls. These were places where Fiona had never been. She had been south past Cementon, now “Smith’s Landing,” and Sing Sing, now “Ossining,” the places’ names changed to hide, respectively, a dust cloud and prison. Fiona did not know what “Utica” tried to hide. Its wideness and brick? And “Niagara” with “Love Canal”?

That they were wired, the falls harnessed for electricity? Fiona had enough to stay in town and hands to work. Her old delusion used to be as bad as the bad hand that did not belong to her. Now it could be a relief to not exist in one extremity if the delusion came back fully. If she thought about it, but she didn’t. Wires crossed the sky in town. The buildings by the falls were tall with lots of windows busted out. The falls seemed smaller than they looked in the movies. But maybe they looked different in Canada where the ocean had made her forget. If only she could leave, but she could not work outside of America. She had to stay here in her own country where the electricity of water falling ran all across the state.

It was still warm that afternoon. Margot went to work. It would be slow, she told herself, New Years being a day for brunch, not dinner. She told Diane that Fiona had gone to the hospital. Margot, whose ability to lie usually was limited, found this falsehood convincing. She repeated it to Kelly at six. The loss of Fiona turned a slow shift into enough of a challenge that the women did not talk for a while. The customers spoke of what they wanted and how many they desired and how done their meat should be, their faces all below Margot's. They all seemed to believe that the right to sit made them superior, even though their arrangement below along with their bald need made them as vulnerable as baby birds.

Kelly's face was suspended at a distance neither far nor close when business slowed. Her lips were bright red. The color looked like an overly optimistic attempt to be seen. "Is Fiona taking visitors?" Kelly asked in the waitstation.

"No." The word reminded Margot of her lie about Fiona and of how it could let her speak the truth. "She's not."

"What happened to her?"

"I don't know. No one knows." It was a relief to speak the truth, if only coincidentally.

"She get sick at home?"

"I don't know. I don't know where she got sick."

"Is she coming home soon?"

"I don't know."

"Gosh, I have tomorrow off. Maybe I'll stop by the hospital. What are the hours?"

The air between them changed, becoming what it was: thick and flickering with food and candlelight. "She got violently ill," Margot said. "They have to run

tests tomorrow, the whole day.” The lie, while no longer resembling truth, managed to turn the room into what it truly was: a place with sounds so familiar that Margot did not hear them. She could not make out the same old conversations punctuated with laughter, the same throbbing, wordless music. Kelly’s lipstick looked like what it was: a requirement for work. Margot went to the bathroom to reapply hers.

The bathroom was large. Margot said in the mirror, “I was meant to be left,” with the self-pity that should have fuelled a joke. When she looked down to pull off the top on her lipstick, she saw a crease where her thumb joined her hand. It was a crease she had seen on Nick’s thumb when he was in a gurney, when Fiona, Margot now knew, was upstairs leaving her. The skin in the hand was folded too loosely. She looked in the mirror, away from the crease below in the sink. She saw in the mirror a woman no one would leave.

Reward

No one celebrated the defeat of the cement plant more sincerely than Ruth. The words of her victory toast sounded brighter, a little like the yellow forsythia blooming out along the county route and a little like the nutrient-rich leaf mold at the forsythia's base. It was April. Fiona had not come home. Hudson was "coastal." That was the word the New York Department of Environmental Conservation had used in its unexpected decision: "Coastal." Ruth referred to the Coastal Zone Management Act. The state cited this act in its denial of the plant's license, Ruth explained before yielding the floor to Aaron. He skipped technical terms along with the whole battle, saying victory had come the moment the opposition had taken up its fight. Corporations always assume no one will oppose them, but Hudson had fought. Hudson had earned the unexpected ending. The speech finished in applause and Thomas raising his whiskey to toast to Water, that coastal thing. He then asked for a water chaser and a laugh and service from Kelly who, like Margot, moved quickly through the crowd.

Margot thought, Coastal. She thought, Two martinis up olive. The faces she passed were peaceful and dazed, the hands limp and warm with sun and sleep. They swatted as if being woken for Christmas in July. All the faces objected to the timing of the win, Margot thought. She lost this idea while adding drinks to open tabs for Larry, Scott, and Sam. She picked it up in the walk-in refrigerator while fetching a ramekin of Korean pepper sauce. The faces objected not only to the timing of the win but also to the method of its delivery. The victory, Margot thought, should have come through a wounding.

But the win had come through paperwork completed by Aaron, who had gained ten pounds from another year at his desk. He sat at a table of admirers and

condiments, spreading pepper sauce across a steak. “No, I haven’t seen McKay and Fulsom since the decision went down,” he said. “I’d imagine they’re pretty surprised.”

A blonde woman across the table shook her head from side to side in a soft show of knowingness. “And you’re not?” she asked.

Aaron lifted one brow along with a knife bright with chili. With a firm nod to confidence itself, he stated, “I’d always knew we’d win.”

Ruth was a clear hero too, having explained policies and conflicts to residents for the sake of signatures and votes. If it were true that she had occasionally spoken with condescension, it was also undeniable that the information she had to give was so boring, it could be hard for any listener to pay attention long enough to understand. Her audience were more apt to focus on the bold plaid of her two-pocket shirt than her remarks on CMP Policy #18. Essential to the victory of those opposing the plant, CMP Policy #18 identified the benefits of Hudson’s status as a coastal landscape, a status that Raphael and Larry discussed when a round of drinks arrived.

“Apparently, there are—” Raphael took a vodka from Margot “—several factors that determine the coastal.”

“Water,” Larry said in a tone as flat as ship-less calm to those wrecked on an island. “Land.”

“I cannot add to that characteristically pithy summary, thank you,” Raphael responded. “I would, however, say that if those two things come together and are not attractive—as happens with, say, Cementon—the state does not safeguard. And this safeguarding I happen to know in its specifics—or at least I know its most relevant one: if you are a coastal landscape, your rocks shall not be moved.”

Laughter everywhere. Liquor washing away technical terms. Conversation turning to astonishment, property values, shutters, dogs. Words were everywhere. For Margot, all of them were lies. She could not remember where she had put Fiona in the story of her life that she had constructed for Kelly. Was it studying acupuncture in the Finger Lakes? Or giving massages in a Berkshire spa? Kelly said she had given notice to leave in a month. She suggested Margot and Fiona come to her graduation from nursing school. Margot thought, May. Kelly brought up her new boyfriend, who also liked to motorcycle and hike. Margot thought, Notice.

She thought, Coastal.

Everyone danced in the humid dark. Water rose from the moving bodies and from the river. The blue stones that pushed up across the Hudson to form mountains seemed to warm the earth everywhere. Buried rocks pushed up their heat, like the bodies that moved with vague confusion under the iron chandelier. The dancers had neither victory's hard meanness nor its supply joy. Their limbs were slightly limp with disbelief. But why shouldn't victory come on this night? A cry arose. Margot thought, I'm the wounding.

The decision against the plant had named Frederick Church's estate, Olana. His house and paintings were two more elements that defined Hudson as a coastal landscape. Olana's views were historic and famous and therefore merited government protection. This protection extended not only to coastal landscapes but to Scenic Areas of Statewide Significance. Margot walked with Michelle through Olana's woods quietly. Margot had no jokes, while Michelle had a language no one else knew. The dogs stopped to look around at the absurd warmth. It was over eighty degrees

Fahrenheit. The daffodils hung their pale heads across a slope. Margot imagined she was moving slowly for Michelle's sake alone. But the truth was she distrusted the ground. It seemed a single stone moved at the wrong force could send the whole hill into the river.

On the ivy that spread across the earth ran something that made the leaves twitch in a line away from the women. Michelle had moved into senior housing with her mother. Her disability made her an exception to the rule about descendants being housed with residents. Margot asked her, "How's your new place?"

"It's fine," Michelle said with no strain in her voice.

On the ground was a collapsed sphere of quills. It was the remains of a porcupine. The dogs had ignored it. So did the women. Margot had a new and constant preoccupation of a credit-card bill she could not pay. Now, though, with Kelly's departure, she felt the promise of one more shift. And with the plant not being built, she had another option that she brought up tentatively: "I guess I can refinance my mortgage. Make the payments less? I don't know how to do that, but I can ask Erica. She was our mortgage broker."

"Do you trust her?"

"I don't trust anyone, really. I don't trust myself."

"Why not?"

"I'm not trustworthy, if I'm being honest. And a lot of times I'm not. I keep lying."

The mansion looked down from its hill, its walls partially shaded by well-manicured trees. The branches seemed naturally considerate of brick and, more generally, property. The house did not stare down with its large windows. It did not have to. It owned everything. Margot turned to Michelle who, being medicated,

showed no emotion. Her calm infuriated Margot, who started to ask, How can you trust yourself, Michelle?— but stopped. Michelle’s body was eating itself. The bones in her face were as extreme as the heat.

Margot exclaimed: “But everything’s fine now! Everything’s wonderful!” This “everything” referred to nothing. It shamed Margot. She added: “The plant not coming in, that’s what—”

The lie that she had been speaking of the plant failed her. Shame spread out like the forest’s green: stubborn, not to go away until autumn. It was impossible to conceive of fall on this muggy day in April. The turn of the seasons did not seem like a natural fact, even though Olana was a “pastoral setting,” another term named in the D.E.C.’s decision. Hudson, the state declared, derived its value from its pastoral character and visual appeal along with its historic fabric and texture. These features, listed as they were in a single passage, made the town sound like a landscape fashioned out of old textiles. The landscape of Olana, though, was graceful and rendered in earth and oils, designed by Church and painted by him with edges that curved.

Michelle and Margot moved towards the *ferme ornée* or ornamental farm, which did not offer the promise of food. Instead, the little barns expressed a nineteenth-century vision of country life in which no one hungered. The women looked appropriately quaint, their fragility and awareness of one another resembling tenderness.

People walked up and down much of Warren that afternoon, slowly doubling back from Second to Third and Fifth to Sixth, as if rereading a passage dense with

legal terms. Soon those who opposed the plant walked with a sense of victory. Even Andor, who always looked uncomfortably suspicious, carried himself with his version of triumph. Yes, he slumped and looked askance, but his sly smile remained aimed at those who had defeated their demise. By the time night came, the win seemed as if it had been there all along beneath the shiny facades and objects. It had been there like the roots of a story now spreading through the Blackbird's chatter. Sam, who a year and a half ago, had photographed an old woman in a feather boa to document a community on the verge of dispersal, took up this emerging version of events.

"I always knew we'd win," Sam said.

"Of course, we all knew," Scott confirmed.

Of course, Margot thought, Sam and Scott would say such a thing. You could always go to Sam for the official story. He would recount it with moral outrage if such a tone were asked for, as it often was. Or sometimes light mockery was in order, the group nipping at the isolated victim, who, if he objected, would be accused of vanity for failing to grasp that he was too insignificant to be mildly disliked let alone hated. Of course, Margot thought, Scott would also feed into this story about always knowing that the corporation would lose. Scott, whose interest in lamps verged on mania, liked to side with the majority so that he would have to not clutter his mind with considerations about anything other than lighting. Of course, Scott would say everyone always knew, Margot thought before focusing on bills, beverages, food, credit cards.

At the end of service, she went into the walk-in refrigerator to fetch the open gallon can of mustard. At her knees was a crossed-out stick-figure of a toddler falling head-first into an industrial bucket. Inside the bucket was marinating chicken. The dancing beyond the electric cold made the floor of the restaurant beat. Margot wanted

to say to the dancers, “I never knew we’d win.” But she imagined it would bring their judgment down upon her. They would say: That is why you lost everything.

“But I didn’t lose everything,” she said in her mind and, surprisingly, out loud.

They would dance.

She went out to the dishwashing station. Reeny’s arm was almost hidden inside the stock pot she was scrubbing. She did not look up from the enormous pot before asking Margot, “Why you staring at me?”

“I’m sorry.” Beyond the window in the kitchen door, men from farms stood in looming groups, their shoulders large and round. “Everything in Hudson is so big, isn’t it, Reeny? The men. This mustard. A toddler could tip head first into that pot you’re cleaning.”

Reeny turned the pot over to dry. “You should go back to jokes.”

Margot took a deep breath to speak but was stopped by an ache in her chest. The can of mustard slid from her arm down onto the counter. The music in the dining room stopped. “That plant,” she said. “It would have paved over everything. It would have pushed it all down.”

Renny untied her apron. “No need to worry about that.” She pulled out a cigarette and headed for the back door. The music started up again. “Try not to tip!” she called out before stepping into a night that would not give up its heat.

The bodies of the men through the door to the dining room were warm and huddled. They stood in groups as if protecting a secret. One of them picked Margot up when she was on her way out. The man—it was Luke—squeezed the air from her aching chest. At first he held her in, but then the salt of the day’s unseasonable heat slipped out. *Try not to tip!* His grip loosened.

When Luke let go, Margot went out. She walked west until she reached North Third, the throb of music behind her. To the right was home. To the left was the prison. Ahead were the dilapidated buildings and the mountains and Fiona. In the northwest corner of the state, Fiona lay in a bed, thinking, Look up. Fiona was still in Niagara Falls, but for Margot, she was gone and good. She was in heaven, looking down to see who should rise and who should stay dead. She was in a mind with connections that ran, sometimes crossing, above. Margot did not know heaven saw wires above through a window. She only knew that it was thinking of what could rise (wires crossed) from rocks and not of her.

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Vita

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