

LOOKING OUT FROM ANOTHER WORLD

by

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ABSTRACT

JAMES MCDONNELL. *Looking Out From Another World*.

(Under the direction of PROFESSOR BRYN CHANCELLOR)

Looking Out From Another World is a collection of five short stories that revolves around Charlotte. It features characters who are experiencing dramatic crises, both from within and without. They try to make sense and meaning out of these crises, and so in another sense they're all on a personal quest of sorts.

The collection tries to frame many of these questions through the lens of contemporary issues in the U.S. I did this by writing about identity, place, culture, and migration. I think contemporary writers of all backgrounds should imagine as boldly and experimentally as possible, and this represents my effort to do some of this. I will continue asking myself what my motives are for this cross-cultural writing as I move forward. Other themes in the collection include violence, gender, sexuality, and digital technology.

The search for human connection especially, across both real and imaginary divides and sometimes in the face of violence, plays an important role in the collection and relates to how each story unfolds.

Finally, one of the things I tried to do was write in a way that was interesting, engaging, and thought-provoking. In this way, I tried to dramatize consequential real-world issues while maintaining a belief in the transformative power of art, hope, possibility, and connection.

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Critical Introduction

Throughout my life, people have asked me “what I write.” It’s a difficult question to answer. In my head, I think about “The Lady with the Little Dog” or “Gooseberries” by Anton Chekhov.

I usually say “literary fiction” to suggest I want to write about real things. This isn’t a good description, because even genre fiction is literary in the sense it’s referring back to real things.

If they ask a follow-up question, I say, “You know, about the human condition.” Fear, pain, bewilderment, grief, passion, hope, wonder, love. All writing does this, so the description doesn’t have the teeth I want it to.

I think about my geographically-linked short story collection I’ve written for my master’s thesis called *Looking Out From Another World*. I’ll use it as an anchor as I try to understand and explain the bigger question. Better to focus on a particular object.

The first thing that inspired this collection were two facts I heard somewhere. James Joyce said, “I always write about Dublin...because in the particular is contained the universal.” The second is how William Faulkner tried to write about France until a friend said he should write about where he was from. These made me think I would find more material if I wrote about where I’ve lived for 18 years. It also made it easier.

Second, and most importantly, I owe the biggest debt of gratitude to other geographically-linked short story collections. Initially, it was Jhumpa Lahiri’s *Interpreter of Maladies* and James Joyce’s *Dubliners* that gave me ideas. Later on, I found Bryn Chancellor’s

When Are You Coming Home?, Aaron Gwyn's *Dog on the Cross*, Claire Vaye Watkins' *Battleborn*, and Oscar Casares' *Brownsville*.

These collections do amazing work narrativizing the human condition. In them, place informs drama and drama informs meaning of place. In Chancellor's stories, it is a search for understanding about what home means. In Gwyn's stories, religion and culture are major through-lines. Watkins' story "The Last Thing We Need" inspired my story "Looking Out From Another World." Casares also writes about home and culture on the U.S.-Mexico border.

Two of my stories take place just in Charlotte. These are "The Cowboys of Front Street" and "Shatter Me." "Blossoms" takes place in Charlotte and the protagonist leaves, planning to return. "Looking Out From Another World" and "In This House They Think Themselves Happy" are split between Charlotte and another location.

Having Charlotte as an organizing centerpiece helped in a lot of ways. It helped me organize and clarify the writing, enlarge on certain themes, and develop, I hope, some symbolic meaning. In retrospect, I think I could have done a better job with this. Most times, Charlotte seems to sit quietly in the background, whereas I wanted it to feel more like an active participant, or to be understood as a place mediated through certain lenses and realities.

Other important influences include Nathaniel Hawthorne, in addition to Chekhov, in stories like "The Birthmark," "Young Goodman Brown," and "Rappacini's Daughter." They have a flare for the fantastical, symbolic, and Romantic that I like and I thought about while writing this collection. On the flip side, I cite Ernest Hemingway in stories like "Indian Camp" and "Hills Like White Elephants" for their realism and economy.

Perhaps most importantly, all these collections, especially the contemporary ones, modeled for me what good writing looks like, which has helped me work on my craft more than

anything. In addition, I have to say without two semesters of intensive workshop and working one-on-one with Professor Chancellor, this collection wouldn't be possible. One of my biggest breakthroughs is when Professor Chancellor introduced me to "lopping," which means excising extraneous information from the story.

What I ultimately found is more important than place to this collection is the people it tried to represent. These particular characters haunted my imagination. They are almost all amalgamations of real people and stories I know. I kind of unknowingly and relentlessly pursued these types of characters. And when the characters told me to go a particular way with the story, I played with it until they were telling me it felt right. That was my experience of writing the stories.

The first story that achieved a finished form was "Looking Out From Another World." It tells the story of a 16-year-old boy in northern California's rural marijuana country. The boy must navigate a world of backwater terror and justice in his hometown in order to help a grieving father 3,000 miles away in Charlotte. The second story was "In This House They Think Themselves Happy." It tells the story of a 29-year-old Dreamer who is undergoing a profound crisis of identity as she tells her story on a beach in Mexico. The third was "Blossoms," which tells the story of Rachel, a recently-widowed woman in her early 70s who suffers from severe vertigo, and has begun recalling repressed memories. In "The Cowboys of Front Street," Dakota who is about to get evicted on the eve of her birthday resorts to any means necessary to prolong the eviction. "Shatter Me" tells the story of an unnamed 7-and-a-half-foot tall, 40-year-old, wealthy former financier, exploring the connection between history, privilege, knowledge, and human connection through the narrator's manufactured identity crisis.

In all cases, the characters are experiencing high-stakes crises, are often isolated and on the margins of society, and the situations they find themselves in lead to life-altering and life-endangering consequences. They have to find a way to make meaning and sense of it. They are all, in one way or another, outcasts.

The collection also tries to lean into character interiority, especially the dialogic relationship the subject has with the external world. It's a quality that is common to all the sources I cited as influences. All of the characters, while existing on the margins, are also on some kind of personal quest, whether in search of self-identity, meaning, or connection. The characters' search for connection with others in particular, across both real and imaginary divides and often in the face of violence, plays an important role in the collection and relates to how each story unfolds. In addition, many have a split or divided interiority.

These stories try to frame these quests through the lens of contemporary issues. I try to marry the personal and the political and be experimental. I also tried to develop global themes and a global consciousness by writing about identity, culture, and migration. I've questioned my motives about this, and I believe it's from my love for humanity and my belief in the power of art. Toni Morrison, whose first two novels also influenced me, gave different advice than the others when she said, "Write about what you don't know in order to find out." I think contemporary writers of all backgrounds have to imagine as boldly and radically as possible. In addition, many of the characters are strong agents of change. I love stories that are subversive, and I tried to do a little bit of that work. I will keep asking myself this question as I move forward.

Finally, I wanted to write about digital technology. This is something I wanted to thematize because I want to write about people in the 21st century, and I think people as a whole are constantly changing. The hacking in “The Cowboys of Front Street.” The smartphone in “In This House They Think Themselves Happy.” Google Earth in “Looking Out From Another World.” The TV in “Shatter me.”

My ability to recognize and describe everything in the project only took shape in my mind late in the writing process. Not only were the early drafts of the stories incoherent and clunky, but I just didn’t know any of what I know now. The revisioning gave me the best understanding of the whole process. In this way, I hope my stories balance the real and the political with the magical and the possible.

To answer the initial question of what I write, those are all things I couldn’t say before. The question feels more like a moving target now. In this collection, I think I was driven mostly by impulse and feeling. In this project, clarity followed the writing.

For me, I find a place in fiction to represent human experience that my normal life can’t offer me, while also exploring new possibilities and ways of thinking.

Finally, I’ll say I’ve come to love the short story form the best. I love the urgency required. I don’t think such a versatile form should be limited to categories. Perhaps the better question to ask is what are you writing now?

Looking Out From Another World

17 Juniper Street

Green Junction, CA 95546

Dear Mr. Brown,

My name's Elijah. I'm 16. I live in a remote town called Green Junction. It's in the coastal mountains in northwest California. If you look at Google Earth, it can give you a better sense than I can describe. It's compiled by satellite images, and you can overlay streets, terrain, and climate-related events like wildfires. You start by looking at the planet in space, and then you double-click to zoom in, single-click to drag and rotate, or search any place in the world in the search box and see it at street-level or bird's-eye view. For example, the other day I looked at Dhaka, Bangladesh, because, as I'm sure you know, the factory collapsed. Then I looked at Lake Como in the Italian Alps. And so on. I've seen most or all the places on Earth, and I know as much, or more, than any world traveler.

I say this because it might help you find your son, which is what my letter is really about. Last night, I was up in the attic, and I found a newspaper clipping in an aluminum box, dated from April 2012 in *The Charlotte Observer*. In it, you, Mr. Brown, describe how your son Miles had just gone missing from your home on Queens Road. According to the article, he vanished at night from his second-story bedroom. In the morning, you found the window open, but there was no evidence. He's a white, 31-year-old male, five-foot-nine, with a thin, muscular build.

The last time you and your wife Alberta saw him, he had brown hair that went to the top of his shoulders, and he was clean-shaven. There's a photo of you and him smiling in front of your house. It's how I found your address. He had no reason to run away, and you're worried something worse happened because he's on the spectrum.

I thought it was strange the newspaper article turned up so far away, Mr. Brown. At this time last year, when Miles went missing, Mom, Joe, and I had just moved into this house from down in the valley. It's possible Miles himself was here or someone who knows where he is. That's why I'm writing to you. If you want my help, I need to know if he's still missing. The Sheriff's Office can't help you. There are too many unsolved missing persons cases here.

Best of Luck,

Elijah

8950 Queens Rd
Charlotte, NC 28207

Dear Elijah,

Thank you for your letter. We haven't found Miles. You're the first person that has come forward with information in almost a year. I talked to the detective on the case, which is now cold, and he said the article you found in your attic is not a strong enough lead to investigate. I

called the Green Junction Sheriff's Office to register a missing persons case with them in the event he was, for some reason, living there.

I took your suggestion and looked online. It's mostly forest, your town. I typed your address in the search box. I see an empty two-lane street, a dark green mailbox with the red flag sticking up, a cattle gate padlocked with a metal chain, and a dirt road that rises into the trees on the other side.

It feels strange for this to be the only indication of Miles' whereabouts. If he's there, I never would have imagined it. It's so far. I don't think this is a joke or prank. I also have a copy of that article, and you described it to a tee.

In terms of his personality, he's high-functioning. He was accepted to a college in the fall. He keeps to himself, which is the main thing. Only when he's around people for a long time, especially if they're loud, do his social anxieties come out. It's why he's had to live at home with us.

In the meantime, I've handed it over to the police. Thank you, Elijah.

Sincerely,

Mr. Brown

17 Juniper Street

Green Junction, CA 95546

Mr. Brown,

Why did you call the Sheriff's Office? A deputy came to our house. He said the same thing I told you: They can't help. Green Junction is about 2,000 people, and there are 230 missing persons. It's because of the farms, the transients, and the miles of densely forested mountains. On top of that, Mr. Brown, people come here because they themselves want to disappear. They want to live off the grid. It's called the "Redwood Curtain" because there are coastal redwoods on the highways that conceal what goes on behind.

Joe was furious. He's hot-tempered, big and brawny, with black hair and eyebrows and tan skin, like he's Mediterranean. I narrowly escaped a beating by denying any knowledge of what the deputy was talking about.

You don't understand, Mr. Brown. If you want my help, you have to promise not to call the authorities. You can only reach me by letters. I don't have internet or phone.

Elijah

8950 Queens Rd

Charlotte, NC 28207

Dear Elijah,

I promise not to call the authorities again. I don't have another choice, short of my coming there and passing out fliers.

I don't have the resolve I had a year ago. Now I'm trying to save my marriage. Alberta, my wife, hasn't come out of her room in the past year. I think you're old enough to hear this. We don't speak to each other anymore, and we sleep in different bedrooms. I hired a full-time caretaker for her. I still don't sleep, or function well generally. I sit up through the night reading and drinking scotch.

My last words to Miles before he disappeared were, "I wish my son were normal." We were arguing. He wanted to go to his room and livestream concerts. The argument became uglier and more heated, and I said those words. He left the room, and that's the last time I saw him. They were vile words, and Alberta blames me for his disappearance.

It's ruined us. I read and reread the same page, because I don't understand what I've just read. Your letters give me hope, so please write as soon as you have new information. Time might be of the essence. In the meantime, can you describe how, where, and in what state you found the newspaper article?

Sincerely,

Mr. Brown

17 Juniper Street

Green Junction, CA 95546

Dear Mr. Brown,

I have news. Last June, Joe was trimming the harvest. He subcontracts it out to Ray. It goes on in a shed in the woods. I rode to the other end of town, and I knocked on Ray's door. You don't understand the risk I take on by leaving the house at night. But my midnight-blue BMX bike is fast, and the opportunity presented itself when Mom and Joe went into their bedroom.

He was here, Mr. Brown! Ray told me Miles worked with him as a trimmer. He said Miles talked about going to Alaska but didn't know anything else. I asked Ray who worked with him, and he said Juanita and a French-Canadian named Amélie. He then told me to stop asking questions, or I would end up missing too. I'll work on those leads.

Since you promised, I'll tell you the story about how I found the newspaper article. One night, about three weeks ago, I got up to use the bathroom, which is across the hall from my bedroom, and I saw the attic ladder was down. I know Joe's been doing work on the house, so I assumed he'd been going up and down, and that he'd forgotten to close it. I go up. If Joe caught me, I'd be dead. But I'm small for my age, so I can walk in my bare feet without making a sound.

I should probably tell you I live on the side of a mountain. The mailbox, gate, and dirt road you described is where I live. In fact, from the attic window to the left, I can see the dirt road rising windily up to my house through the trees. Past that, there's a valley that runs into a ridge, and beyond that for about 25 miles you can see the Pacific Ocean. When you look out the window to the right, it's pine and redwood forest for as far as the eye can see. The only exception is you can see car lights creeping down the 101, which is the coastal highway. It's very peaceful with the quiet, the breeze at the open window, and the moonlight. It's dry season

here. I look at the 101 in the distance and think it's a place where people disappear too, like the men that come in and out of Green Junction. I don't want to be anonymous like them. I want to be famous.

I see a line of ants coming in at the open window. I noticed them from the moonlight reflecting on their backs, which made them silvery. They're disappearing beneath a crack in the floor. I gently pry up the floorboard, which was already loose, and there's the aluminum box. I find the article along with some blank stationary and envelopes. It's what I'm using to write these letters. When I lifted up the box, I noticed there was a hole in the ceiling that looked into Mom's and Joe's bedroom.

It's strange, Mr. Brown. When I got up to use the bathroom, I'd just woken up from a really vivid dream. In the dream, I was working on the farm. The farm is laid out in rows of 10 by 20, so 200 plants. It was a good dream, because I love working outside on the land in the sunshine. I was talking to the plants, and they bent towards me in gratitude as I watered and pruned them. Then I looked down, and I saw I had a letter in my hand. I've never gotten a letter.

It's like what I was beginning to say about Google Earth. There are so many more virtual things than I thought. There's a whole virtual world. But, whatever it is, whether the online maps or a letter, I also take away something real with me. I do think letters are the best, because right now you're handling the same document I handled. Even though letters or emails or anything virtual like that are like ghosts and die at the moment you send them, the connection becomes a real part of myself. In the dream, I felt myself get stronger just holding the letter in my hand, connected to whomever wrote it.

Dark thunderclouds moved in, and I began wrestling with the tarp. It unfurls across wire arches, and it's hard to maneuver because the garden's on a steep grade. I was trying to cover it from the wind and rain. The letter blew away in the wind before I could read it, and the dream ended. It's why I don't like dreams. They're not logical or continuous. If there weren't absurd things, like the letter blowing away in my hand, we'd be in danger of mistaking what we're dreaming with what's real.

Like I said, I'll work on those leads. In the meantime, can you tell me more about yourself Mr. Brown?

Elijah

8950 Queens Rd
Charlotte, NC 28207

Dear Elijah,

This is incredible news. Please work on those leads. Write back to me as soon as possible. When I know where he is, I'll jump on a plane and bring him home.

To answer your question, I'm in my early seventies. I retired a few years ago. I'm from New York City. When I was your age and older, I loved it very much. I've always lived in the city. I went to college out west, not far from where you are, in San Francisco. It's where I met

Alberta, who's originally from Japan. Living in San Francisco, in particular, made me want to write books, but I couldn't publish anything.

I got a law degree, and I began a career in corporate law, the career I just retired from. Alberta and I lived happily, despite not being able to get pregnant, as we wanted. We vacationed often. In town, we went to theaters, museums, libraries, fine restaurants, excursions on the lake, baseball games. It was really the perfect life. In our early forties, after giving up on having children, we had Miles.

When Miles was a teenager, I found out he had a talent for writing. I made him write every day to develop his skills. That's what precipitated our final argument. He wanted to livestream his concerts. He likes to livestream concerts from all over the world at the same time. When I said my last words to him, what I meant was he's not sharing his natural gifts with the world. But it amounts to the same thing. It's dangerous for fathers to try to live vicariously through their sons, or for parents to stake unrealistic hopes on their children.

We have many friends here, which is why I worry myself by spending nights shut up in the library. I still go downtown by myself sometimes to get out of the house. I saw an Italian opera at the Blumenthal last month. Two days ago, I went to the Bechtler Museum of Modern Art to see a new Picasso exhibit. A place like this is where a person like you belongs. The way you described your town reminds me of places not far from here, in the Appalachian Mountains. Please forgive me for saying so, but I always considered them beautiful and haunting.

I'm worried for you too, Elijah.

Sincerely,

Mr. Brown

17 Juniper Street
Green Junction, CA 95546

Dear Mr. Brown,

I tracked down the two trimmers, Juanita and Amélie. They both said Miles planned to go to Alaska, and then they never saw or heard from again. Juanita, I could tell, knew more than she was letting on. I caught her in a lie, and after a tense stand-off, she told me Miles is working on “you-know-who’s” farm. He’s still here, Mr. Brown!

Juanita’s right to not want to talk about Big Hoss. He’s the most dangerous man in Green Junction. He’s a redneck with ginger hair. If anyone says the wrong thing to the wrong person, they end up missing. Big Hoss pays twice as much for trimming than Joe, though he demands it done in half the time. I don’t know when, or if, Miles plans to go to Alaska.

Today, I found another garden in the woods for growing poppies. Mom was homeless and on drugs when she met Joe, and together they moved up to Green Junction to disappear. They weren’t expecting me and didn’t want me. I think they might have loved each other a long time ago, before I was born.

I’ve been going back to the attic. I see, through the hole in the floor, Mom and Joe as naked as two eels. I watch Joe mount Mom three or four times, between which he gets up and

smokes and paces. The smoke curls around his lips and smells like chemicals. Mom just lays there breathing slowly, not moving.

It is, just like you said, beautiful and haunting. It's not just the rawness and remoteness of nature that surrounds Green Junction that transforms people into bad things. There are other things, like the law. And there's my family. My great-great-great-grandfather committed a heinous crime when Green Junction was first settled in the 19th century. I found the records in the Green Junction Public Library. At the time, they'd found gold. The first missing persons cases in Green Junction date from that time. Ever since then, violence has run in every generation of my family.

All this has to do with the virtual world I was telling you about, the one I've been describing with online maps and letters.

I just want to disappear sometimes. If I could disappear anywhere, Mr. Brown, I think it would be the Himalayas. It just seems so high up that nothing can touch you. I think of those multicolored Tibetan prayer flags whipping in the wind, and those golden shrines, and nothing but silence and the cloud-covered mountains.

Elijah

8950 Queens Rd

Charlotte, NC 28207

Dear Elijah,

I want to disappear too sometimes. But then I'd feel like I'm giving up on Miles and Alberta. And you'd be giving up on all the gifts you have to offer to the world. I can tell by the writing in your letters how bright you are. But I'm old, and you're young. You have your whole life ahead of you.

If you came here, you could finish school. You could go to a good college. I can give you books to read, since you like writing letters and are good at it. I have so many books I have one of those ladders on rollers you slide along the wall.

Your Mom and Joe can't take care of you the way someone like you needs. Please let me help you.

Sincerely,

Mr. Brown

17 Juniper Street

Green Junction, CA 95546

Dear Mr. Brown,

It's not completely true, like I said, that Google Earth's made of satellite images. It's also made of street-level photographs, taken by those cars with 360-degree cameras on top. It so seamless when you look at it it's like walking down the street. A woman on her phone carrying

groceries here, a man chasing his dog there, a boy riding his bicycle, a bird in mid flight, all frozen.

The car can't come up our dirt road because it's locked and gated, so all you can see on the computer is the bird's-eye view from a plane. In the absence of everything else, form an image of me in your mind through my letters, and we're connected in real time. I don't need to come there for us to be connected.

If you try to intervene, it will cause things I can't predict the outcome of. That's just the reality. It's like how you didn't plan for Miles to be the way he is, he just is.

I'm afraid how the battle of the virtual world will play out, the question I've been trying to pose in so many words, Mr. Brown. I'm turning 18 in two years, so for better or worse, there's a time limit to all this.

Books are part of the virtual world too. The ones I have I hide in my mattress and underneath the floorboards. Mom and Joe can't see me with them. Sometimes a feeling of darkness descends on me at night, and the books—like your letters, like online maps—are my sword and shield.

I'm up in the attic again. I see Mom and Joe through the hole sleeping. Then I look through the open window at the black wilderness, the vast ocean, and the starry universe, and I wonder if those two worlds—the lower and the upper—are the same world. If they are, I can't put them together. You remember when I said I wanted to be famous, Mr. Brown? Well, instead I think I'd like to be an astronomer. The first time I saw how bright and beautiful the stars were was when I came up here and saw the full, unobstructed view. I wonder if it goes on forever.

Because that would mean looking out from another world is you, me, and Miles all together and happy.

I have one final piece of news! Miles escaped Big Hoss' farm, and is alive! Miles made made a run for the woods. Big Hoss pursued, but he escaped. I went to drop this letter in the mailbox and found a postcard from Anchorage! He said he's going to live in the Alaskan wilderness, like Christopher McCandless.

I'm sorry I couldn't find Miles while he was here, Mr. Brown. You have all the information I have now.

Best of Luck,

Elijah

Valley of the Moon

Sonoma, CA

Dear Alberta,

When I got to Green Junction, I read an article in the local paper. It was on the front page. It said FBI and DEA raided the farms of Big Hoss and Joe and Sue Ellen Collins, Elijah's parents. They found hundreds of marijuana plants, drugs, guns, and money. Joe was armed and escaped through a tunnel beneath the house. They found Elijah was missing too. They think Joe abducted him at gunpoint. They also found a sleeping bag, cans of food, and a hunting knife in the attic when they searched the house.

I broke my promise to Elijah. I was trying to help, but everything I touch seems to dissolve.

I went to the house, but no one was home. It's a small, two-story house with dark brown shingles. The windows are dusty from the August heat. There's a veranda out front with two rocking chairs.

On the other side of the dirt road is a steep ridge, which I climbed up. At the top is a cluster of junipers. Through the trees, you can see out. The view is exactly as Elijah described. To the west, there's a valley and after that the ocean. To the east, there's evergreen forest as far as the eye can see. I sat down with my back against a tree and wept. As I began to drive away, I looked up at the attic window, and I thought I saw the figure of Miles as a boy, when he was around Elijah's age.

I stopped in the Valley of the Moon, where we had our first date. I could see the pale crescent Moon in the sky, even though it was broad day. I walked through the square. It looks the same it did 50 years ago.

Tomorrow morning, I'm flying to Anchorage. If Miles goes into the Alaskan wilderness, I'm afraid we'll never see him alive again. When this is over, I dream of disappearing from our old lives into new. It's beautiful country here. You would love it.

Before I forget, I had a dream last night. In the dream, I got a letter. The postage had the map of an island nation with beaches and palms trees on it. It was written jointly by Elijah and Miles. In it, they explain how Miles and Elijah were switched at birth. They said what's done is done, but that they were living happily together in paradise. They said I could write to them, but if I tried to find them they would vanish into mist.

Love,

JB

In This House They Think Themselves Happy

Las ilusiones son las más valiosas y necesarias de todas las cosas. It means: “Illusions are the most valuable and necessary of all things.” I can’t forget that line. I’m still puzzling through what it means. It’s from a 1937 Spanish translation of *Orlando* by Jorge Luis Borges. The original 1928 novel is written in English by Virginia Woolf. If you know anything about translation, as I know you do, you know it’s as much the translator’s work as it is the original author’s. It’s a new, collaborative product of the two.

It’s a first edition as well. Here, look. Here’s the title page. It says in Spanish, “This book was printed for the editorial *Sur* in the Lopez Printing House, 666 Peru Street, Buenos Aires.” As you can see, it’s falling apart. I picked it up a week ago from a retired Mexican professor who was moving back to Mexico City.

It’s about a man named Orlando who becomes a woman halfway through the book. After the transformation, she lives for three and a half more centuries, meeting people throughout British history, like Elizabeth I and Shakespeare. The professor said I should take it if I believed in “radical transformations.” Ever since I finished reading it, I’ve been thinking about radical transformations. What, for example, qualifies as radical and transformational? What did you say? It’s true. I’ve never been to Mexico, yet here I am at a beachside hotel in Mazatán. I can feel the warm ocean breeze coming in from the window. I can hear the surf. That is a transformation.

It feels strange being here, because Mamá and Tío Malo told us so many stories of their lives in Mexico, me and my brother Joaquín. Mamá’s were colorful and vivid, full of bright and

beautiful subjects. Tío Malo's are dark and lurid, involving drug lords, lost women, and Mexican singers who lived fast and died young. I think about those stories as if they were my own, which can create slippages in reality or can make it difficult to differentiate true from false. My earliest real memory is a bottle of Dos Equis whizzing past my head from the hands of Tío Malo.

To illustrate my point about the slippages, take the Pacific Ocean. It looks so calm right now. The tide is high, and the moon is full. Did you see that school of dolphins? Can you see their fins? Look, right there. Looking at the image of the ocean refreshes my mind, it makes me feel that all is right with the world. But if you go out there, you're suddenly at the mercy of cosmic elements. That's the difference I'm trying to illustrate.

Thank you for the martini. Is it pineapple and coconut I'm tasting? Why don't you sit in the moonlight where I can see you? Remember the scene in *Bruce Almighty* when Jim Carrey lassos the moon and pulls it closer? That's how big it looks.

The following night, after I'd read the book, I was in bed scrolling through Instagram. I saw your post. This one, from May 9th. You were in Mazatlán! My family's home! It felt like a sign from God, because Mexico had been on my mind. What I wanted more than anything was for the image to become real.

Look at my page. You won't find a single picture of me, or anyone else. Instead, there are some artistic shots I took. Here, I'll show you. This tree is supposed to look like India ink on a winter sunset sky, and here's a field of purple and yellow flowers at Lake Norman. Here's a picture of a sidewalk and a stoplight with the Light Rail passing behind.

It doesn't tell you anything about my real life. Consider my birth. I was born at a truck stop in Brownsville, Texas in the back of a Dodge pickup truck driven by a coyote. I was born within a mile of the border.

One month after I was born, we came to live with Tío Malo on the northeast side of Charlotte, where I've lived for 28 years. We were undocumented for five. When we got sick, Mamá made at-home remedies with oranges, honey, and ginger. She walked to Compare Foods after her shift as a housekeeper at a local hotel. She could never fully pick up English. Joaquín got very sick once, which required documentation, and Joaquín and I were registered under DACA.

I live alone in Sugar Creek. It's all I can afford, and I already have 50 grand in student loan debt. In the morning, I go to school to study painting, and at night I work at Tío Malo's bar. Joaquín and Mamá are gone. Joaquín died in Afghanistan, fighting for the country we came to to escape violence, and Mamá from leukemia. There was no way we could afford treatment. They are both buried in the cemetery of our Catholic Church. Look, here are my rosary beads. Touch them if you want.

Do you want to test my vintage Americana? Consider the 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life*. Ah, that one you've seen. I think it's one of the most beautiful films, but it doesn't describe my life in America.

I then wrote a letter to the Dean of Students withdrawing my enrollment from college. I was planning to go back to Mexico. I was halfway to the 7-Eleven to drop the letter in the postbox when Leon messaged me on Instagram.

Did you hear that toucan? Listen, there it is again. It sounds like a washboard, or a deep-sounding cricket. Have I taken an ornithology class? No, silly. You can just YouTube “toucan call.” Here, I’ll show you. By the way, is there an outlet to plug my phone in? Yes, plug it in please. The last one I touched mysteriously burst into flames.

Why do I paint? Take you, for example. You’re half-Indian, half-Navajo. You speak three languages. You studied Anthropology, and you curate an Indigenous American museum in New Mexico. You’re here researching early American populations. If I painted you now, the question is what new knowledge will the painting reveal through the synthesis of those different parts, and me the artist?

So as I was walking to the 7-Eleven, I got an Instagram message from Leon. Look, here’s his profile. He’s tall, slender, a bit tan, muscular body, thick blond hair and green eyes. I’ll show you the conversation:

HEY, I’M LEON.

HEY.

I WAS LOOKING AT YOUR PICTURES. THEY’RE INCREDIBLE.

THANK YOU.

I’M A PHOTOGRAPHER.

NICE. I ACTUALLY PAINT. OILS AND ACRYLICS.

I WOULD LOVE TO SEE SOME OF YOUR WORK SOMETIME! MY DEGREE’S IN FINE ARTS, SO I DID A FAIR AMOUNT OF PAINTING!

REALLY?

YES! AND OF COURSE I'D LOVE TO SEE SOMETHING :) YOUR PHOTOS ARE REALLY BEAUTIFUL AND VERY ARTISTIC!

THANK YOU! I'D BE HAPPY TO. LET ME GET BACK TO YOU. I'LL FIND A GOOD SAMPLE.

When I went to class the following day, Dr. Garabedian announced we'd be experimenting with different styles of portraiture. I was working with oil that day. At first, I painted the stars and moon. Hyperrealism is the form I'm working in right now. I painted a beach at night. I added a purple, cloudless sky, palm trees with backs bent, the white-capped waves, and a brown wooden rowboat on the shore. Then I painted in a shirtless Leon. He had pale, glistening skin, carrying a fishing net, with his big, green eyes looking directly at the viewer. I'm sorry I can't show you any of my paintings. They all got burned in a fire, and I deleted the photos.

As I was about to turn off the light in the bathroom later that night, I looked at myself in the mirror, and I saw Leon's portrait reflected in the mirror from where I'd placed it on the windowsill. I moved my body to where it was, so our bodies were touching. I slowly undressed myself, removing the gray tank top and panties I sleep in, revealing the big diagonal scar across my belly. The scar is from the day I was born, when the coyote, who carried a dagger, was called to assist with the birth. It was a weird out-of-body experience, like when you look at yourself in the mirror, and you suddenly don't know what "you" are. I ran my hands along my body, starting from the top and working my way down.

Your face is in shadow again. It's because the Moon's over our heads. It's traveled half its nightly course. See, look. I'll show you in this app called *Night Sky*. It shows a complete

map of the night sky as it is right now, constantly updating via satellite data and computer projections. You just point at what part of the sky you want to see. It plays a soothing, drifting-through-space kind of music. Amazing, isn't it?

Two days later, I started a new painting in Dr. Garabedian's class. It shows the silhouette of a woman in repose, with long hair, her neck and shoulders bare. She's holding her phone in one hand, which creates a diffusion of blue light around her head. Beside her is a life-sized stone statue. What made me think of that is this story "Chac-Mool" by Carlos Fuentes in which a statue comes to life, but in that story the statue was evil and malicious. Tio Malo can recite it by heart.

Here's Leon's reply:

IT'S AMAZING! YOUR TECHNICAL SKILLS ARE REALLY, REALLY IMPRESSIVE. SO BEAUTIFUL!

THANK YOU, LEON.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO COME TO THE BOTANICAL GARDENS TOMORROW? I CAN GIVE YOU A TOUR. I DO PROMO FOR THEM.

I'D LIKE THAT.

OK. TOMORROW AT 11 AM WORK?

I'M FREE THEN. SURE :)

SEE YOU THEN :)

The next day I met Leon at the Botanical Gardens. They're west of the city. Very pretty, scenic area. It was a gorgeous, late-spring morning. We enjoyed the ambient sounds of the garden, which I prefer to talking. In each walled-off garden there was something new. Beds of

crocuses and tulips. Japanese maples. We walked under an arbor of crabapple trees full of pink blossoms spiraling down to the ground in the wind. Green, manicured lawns and bushes cut to look like geometrical shapes. A stone pond filled with lilies. I saw white-and-orange-dappled koi moving around in the pond. I could hear the rustle of water when they broke the surface with their backs and puckered, O-shaped lips.

After an hour or so, we stopped and he looked at the display on his camera. We were standing beside a bed of orchids.

“We have a team of researchers and interns here studying orchids,” he said. “It’s because they’re the oldest, evolutionarily speaking. Can I take a picture of you with the orchids?”

He looked at me through the viewfinder. I covered my face, and he apologized. He told me how talented he thought I was. He said I could be really successful, that my work could be in a museum someday, like the Met.

We agreed to meet again, and he drove me to the train station. We kissed. After that, I was on cloud nine. I spent the afternoon going to the art museums downtown. The Bechtler is my favorite, the Mint my second.

That night, I saw a picture of Frida Kahlo’s house on Instagram. I’ve always wanted to go to Mexico City just to see it. It’s called The Blue House for its vivid, blue outer walls. It’s where Frida was born, lived, and died.

Here, I’ll show you. If you swipe left, it gives you a complete virtual tour. You start in the courtyards. As you can see, they’re packed with luxuriant plants. That pink one is honeysuckle, and those purple ones are poppies. Fountains, pools, flagstone walkways. It’s not as controlled and perfect as the Botanical Gardens. When you go inside, the rooms are white,

and the doors and windows are open, giving it an airy, breezy feel. In each room, there are tapestries and pottery, and Frida's paintings are hanging on the walls.

I got up in the middle of the night and did another painting. It was modeled after a room in The Blue House. In it, the walls and ceiling of the room were stark-white and the floor dark wood. There was a large, square window in the center of the wall that looked out onto a courtyard. The female subject's back was to the viewer, and she was wearing a traditional Mexican dress. She was sitting in front of a blank canvas with a paintbrush in her hand. Her hair fell to the middle of her back. On the walls were hanging works of mine I've done throughout my career. I worked on it all night, and in the morning I sent it to Leon. Here's what he said:

IT'S STUNNING! REALLY. I'M BLOWN AWAY BY YOUR TALENT. YOU SHOULD START SHOPPING AROUND FOR AGENTS. I THINK WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT THIS ONE IN PERSON. HOW ABOUT I CANCEL MY LUNCH MEETING, AND WE GO FOR COFFEE IN THE PARK?

DON'T CANCEL ON MY BEHALF!

IT'S OK. I DIDN'T WANT TO GO ANYWAY :)

THEN YES. SOUNDS GREAT :)

Later that afternoon, we met for coffee and walked to a park right in the heart of downtown.

As we sat there by the fountains, scattered clouds rolled in, and a shadow moved over the park. It covered everyone, which were mostly families out picnicking and enjoying the sunshine.

The parents and their children were playing and laughing in the giant shadow on the big lawn. One child fell in the grass, and his father started tickling him, and the child burst into laughter. Another child, a little girl, almost fell into the fountain until she was swooped up at the last second.

Leon took a picture of the families. “You can look at the same thing a thousand times and see it differently every single time,” he said. “I’ve been to this park so many times, and I’ve never gotten a shot quite like that, with the play of light and shadow.”

“I understand what you mean,” I said.

“When you capture an image, you always capture a part of the artist who made those decisions.”

“And what does it say about those families playing on the lawn?”

“I don’t know, not much,” Leon said. “Less about them, and more about the artist. Especially painting, I think. Painting tells you more about the artist than the people or objects in the painting. It’s how I felt when I saw your Instagram photos, and then later your work. I felt I knew more about you than if we’d gone on a date and talked for three hours. It’s like you’re looking directly into someone’s soul.”

I kissed him passionately, and we fell off the concrete wall of the fountain into the grass. He looked shocked, and then he smiled. I was ecstatic. I couldn’t contain myself.

“What do my paintings say about me?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” he said.

“Come to my apartment,” I said. “And I’ll show you.”

I took Leon back to my place in Sugar Creek. It's a studio, and I told Leon to look around while I went to the bathroom. It's basically a very tiny gallery, but not in the quantity of works that cover the walls. Almost every inch of wall space is taken up by one painting or another I've done in the past. Paintings of all different types of people, most Mexican and American men, women, and children. There are dozens more canvases leaning on the walls and in stacks in the closet.

As I sat there on the toilet fixing my hair and makeup, my mind started racing. As I said, I can't describe the ecstasy I felt at that moment.

When I opened the door, I saw Leon's back in the mirror. I saw him looking at the windowsill.

"This is me," he said. He held up the shirtless portrait I'd painted of him.

"Yes," I said. I couldn't believe I'd left it out. Yet, I'd invited him into my world. I just didn't expect it to happen so precipitously. That was my mistake.

"You're a true talent."

When he turned around, he looked at me intensely. He came over and stood in front of me, brushing the hair out of my face. He then began undressing me. I didn't stop him. He drew his hand along the scar on my belly. He moved me onto the bed. Then, as he entered me, he said, "My little Frida."

As he was fucking me, I burned with a pale, hot rage. I grew sicker and sicker as the act progressed. I realized I'd somehow become alienated from my desires, or I had different desires now. I was just stuck in that in-between state that characterizes so much of my life. The result was I felt nothing, which turned inside out into rage. I just let him finish and didn't say anything.

I'm nearing the end of my story now. Two mornings ago, I dropped the letter to the Dean of Students in the postbox across from the 7-Eleven, and I went to see Tío Malo.

Tío Malo is heavysset and dark-featured. I told Tío Malo I loved him, and I wouldn't be coming to work anymore. He told me he loved me, and asked why I was forfeiting my immigration status and my degree, and I explained as best I could. He said he was sorry for everything. I always sensed my life shared a closeness to Tío Malo's, even more so than Mamá's sometimes.

I returned to the apartment, and I used the last of my money to buy a plane ticket to Mazatlán. Leon was still asleep in the bed. It was around nine in the morning, so I knew Dr. Garabedian was teaching class. I was sorry to miss it. As I waited for my flight, I took out a canvas and began to paint a miniature. In this one, the last painting I've done to date, the female subject was lying naked in repose. You could see her full naked form, face and body, except where her wrists and ankles were bound by orchids. It was the best self-portrait I've done to date, for its technical prowess.

I laid the painting on the bed for Leon to see when he woke up.

In terms of how the fire started, I can't remember. All I remember is watching the fire grow higher and higher and hotter and hotter. It started on the bed and snaked up the walls. It was as if the flames were shooting out of my hands, like you see in superhero movies. I think all the oil paint I use accelerated the fire, because I remember stripping canvases off the wall and throwing them into the blazing fire with Leon underneath it.

My soul lives in a kind of no-man's land. It goes back to the slippages in reality I described earlier. At the time, I was burning down everything I suffered at the hands of life in America, not Leon in particular. I couldn't differentiate between the two.

This all happened very quickly, because the smoke and flames became too much, and I left and got in the Uber waiting for me outside. The fire wasn't visible from the outside until I left, and on the way to the airport, I saw dozens of fire, medical, and police speeding in the opposite direction from me. The driver turned on the radio, and they were talking about a devastating, ongoing apartment fire in Sugar Creek. It was so intense that dozens of firefighters were battling to put it out. When we got on the highway, I looked out and I could see a giant plume of black smoke.

In terms of Mexico, I'm not actually coming back to it. I was never in Mexico, except in Mamá's womb, at which point I was shrouded in ontological darkness. If there was any contact from the outside world, it was Mamá's stories and lullabies. Then it was her tears as she lied in the back of the red Dodge pickup, speeding towards the border, having contractions, and looking up at the stars over the Chihuahuan Desert.

I flew over the place where Mamá crossed 30 years ago. From 32,000 feet, it's just a dark blue line in the desert. My flight connected through Mexico City, at which point I considered getting off. I could blend in. I could go visit the retired professor who gave me the book. See, he left his number on a business card tucked in the back.

Instead, I took the connecting flight to Mazatlán. I came down here to the beach. I was wandering around in a daze. I went over to that massive rock over there, which you can see jutting 50 feet into the air. It's called El Clavadista, which means "the Diver." At the top is a

wall where cliff divers jump into the ocean. I stayed for three hours at the top, sometimes looking along the vacant street at the stray cats, the market, the beach, the sea. The cathedral chimed midnight.

I climbed onto the edge of the wall. The rocks at the base of the wall are jagged and dangerous. There was a salty breeze. I looked up at the stars. The Milky Way looked like a giant brushstroke. God is the consummate painter. That's why all the stars and galaxies are just images to us and forever out of reach. I looked down, and I saw the waves colliding with the rocks. And I thought whether I fell to my death or continued to live, it amounted to the same thing.

In our Catholic church in Sugar Creek, there's a painting above the door to the chapel. It's called the *Liberation of St. Peter*. It depicts an angel freeing St. Peter from jail. It's really powerful because Peter is just looking upwards at the angel with a blank expression. You can't tell if it's awe, wonder, shock, surprise, or fear on his face. It was the first painting I ever remember seeing, when I was like four or five. I thought about Mamá's faith. Does God alone witness the totality of who and what we are?

As I thought these things, I was teetering back and forth on the edge. Then, all of a sudden, I saw silhouette of a bird flash its wings, and it flew up from the platform below and landed next to me on the ledge.

It was a toucan, and it sounded its hollow, washboard call, and in amazement I fell backwards onto the platform. It stood there blinking at me. It then hopped down onto the platform, as if to examine me. I stood up and watched it fly away. It was then I saw the beach, the trees, and the shoreline in such a way that I realized this is the very same spot you were when

you took that Instagram photo. The same picture I wanted to become real had become real. That's what's uncanny.

I went back down, and I walked down the beach, which is when I found you. I almost didn't recognize you if not for the clear night and full moon.

What is an illusion? What is valuable? What is necessary? The line, which I'll translate for you, is this: "In this house they think themselves happy...It's all an illusion...which is nothing against it...because illusions are the most valuable and necessary of all things...and she who can create one is one of the world's greatest benefactors."

You've been such a patient listener. It's your turn to tell me your story. Do you want to go for a boat ride? Look, we can take the canoe out there. It'll be fine. Just push it into the water. Yes, climb in. Now, we start paddling. No, let's not go towards the ocean ocean. Let's turn into that tidal river there.

Let's go into that mangrove forest. Look at the submerged trees. It's dense in here. Our boat is passing right through into the interior.

Wait, stop the boat. The Moon is resting perfectly on your face. Your big eyes are twinkling. Hold on. I have to sketch you. You're so beautiful. Your black, flowing hair, your brown eyes, your smile. The urge just hit me like a deluge. This will only take a minute. I have a pencil and paper in my bag.

I feel her hand running along my cheek, not breaking my gaze. Our eyes mirror one another. We fall into each other's arms. The birds in the trees above us are singing a deep-

throated song. From the bottom of the boat, I see a pair of toucans fly across the sky as dawn appears on the horizon.

I hear a splash. I see the contents of my bag fall into the water. My U.S. IDs, my Mexican passport, family photos, my rosary beads, my paper and paint, the retired professor's business card, the 1937 translation of *Orlando*—the pages are dissolving like brown sugar—, and my phone. I watch it disappear beneath the water.

Blossoms

As Rachel climbed the concrete stairs, the green doors, the white sidewalk, the trees, and the cast-iron sky began undulating. The buildings became unmoored from their foundations with ripping and tearing sounds. She saw the spire of her church break off, drift upwards. A child's red tricycle flew past. The wind whistled, and her white blouse ballooned behind her back. She held onto the rail.

She reached the third-floor breezeway and saw, to her horror, the Charlotte skyline fly away like a bunch of balloons. A Godzilla-sized chunk of earth sailed upward into the sky with the people and cars still on it, accelerating by slow degrees like a NASA rocket. It reminded her of watching the takeoff of the 1969 Moon landing live with her father. This was more violent than if gravity was switched off.

When she got inside, she sat down on the leather sofa and called her doctor. He didn't answer. She left a message. The medication wasn't helping. The specialists she saw didn't know what was causing her vertigo. She looked around her apartment with its smart appliances, dark wood floors, granite countertops, and brushed-platinum faucets. It felt alien.

She thought about the first time she met Thurston a year and a half ago. At dusk, she leaned over the split-rail fence. Thurston worked part-time on a ranch in retirement, which was next to her house in the country. Her white frock billowed, and her black ponytail was straight like a bell-rope. She watched him, a big man with beetle brows, smiling eyes, a black beard, drive in nine shiny dairy cows sitting atop his brown-and-white American Paint mare. He wore a

rancher hat with a black leather strap and a quail feather jutting up from the side. He smiled and tipped his hat.

She poured a glass of wine. The cool, wheat-gold liquid felt refreshing in the back of her throat. It was crisp and fruity with a woody aftertaste. She examined the bottle. On the bottle was a picture of a vineyard surrounded by rolling hills. She never left the country and kept imagining what it must be like.

She thought about her life before and after Thurston. They were 180 degrees apart. She had five children and fourteen grandchildren. She was a 911 operator for Rutherford County and retired with a good pension. She had a simple and straightforward life. Thurston was a professor of philosophy at Duke, had been to 67 countries, was fluent in three languages, and published a dozen books. He had no children. His favorite place was Japan in spring to see the cherry blossoms. That's where they were supposed to be right now.

She pulled a straw floppy hat out of her closet. It was big, with little waves around the brim that shook together and a pink bow. She believed the events in her life were divinely inspired, and the right time would come. She was going to see Jordan Burke tomorrow for answers.

That night, she dreamt she was back in her childhood home. A small, squat house with red shutters. She climbed out of her bedroom window. On the side of the house was a creeping vine with purple and white trumpet-shaped flowers. She was flying. She floated down the path into the woods. She was speeding up and the woods became a blur. She could still smell pine. She heard a whippoorwill.

She emerged from the woods into a square clearing. She saw hoses pumping water into the clearing, which formed a depression and collected the water like a bowl.

This land was owned by Preacher McAllister, she remembered. Just beyond the clearing were his cornfields. In the spring, he and his two sons filled it with water and stocked it with fish. People would pay him to use it. Her father took her here to stargaze too. She saw her reflection in the water, which was plunging and dashing in sheets of upwelling water.

When she woke up, NOVA was playing on TV. “Scientists know the Sun will expand into a red giant in five billion years.” The Sun looked like a wall of fire. The Earth disintegrated. “Every last star will die, and the universe will expand infinitely, and it will grow dark and static. Black holes will vaporize. Even the atoms, the fabric of material reality, will fly apart.” The NOVA theme swelled.

She thought about the first time the vertigo happened. She and Thurston were on their honeymoon. The balcony doors were open, and the milky-sweet scent of almond blossoms filled the room. She heard a fish splash in the river outside. She saw the misty blue hills begin to undulate, and then everything flew apart.

She opened the Bible on her nightstand. “Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven,” Jesus said.

She stood in front of the mirror of the mahogany bureau in her bedroom. Her girlfriends back home called her Jennifer Connelly’s doppelgänger, the Hollywood actress. The

resemblance was in her cheekbones, her hair, and her bright gray-green eyes. She was almost 20 years older.

The sun was warm and bright. The red curtains swayed in the breeze, carrying the scent of dogwood blossoms and asphalt. They were pouring down the street. She put on a floral dress with a brown belt. She buckled up her wedges and straightened her hair.

After Thurston died, she moved to North Davidson. There were artisan shops, galleries, and music venues. Some people ate in outdoor restaurants with their dogs. When she went out, she ran into a few musicians. They were friendly. She went to morning yoga classes in the park. She took walks every day, looking at the murals. Her doctor told her to buy a FitBit, which she enjoyed because it tracked her steps. She found out she liked cats when she went to play with them at the Cat Café.

She put on the floppy hat with the pink bow. The mirror looked like mercury, and the surface made tiny concentric circles like atomic explosions seen from space. It was not time yet. She wrapped her fingers around the metal handle of the bureau and waited for it to pass.

She got in a line of traffic at the Coliseum entrance. Police and makeshift pathways with orange cones were directing foot traffic. There was a glare from the idling cars, the police badges, and the white surface of the Coliseum. She watched a street performer playing a guitar and singing.

Jordan Burke was a star whose rise in the motivational speaking circuit was meteoric, she thought. He was in his late 30s and charismatic. He cut through confusion. He was galvanizing people all over the world.

The Coliseum looked like a basketball stadium. A central court and rows of seats angled up and back. On the far end of the court was a stage. A white light was glowing from behind the stage.

A silhouette emerged accompanied by uptempo music and smoke machines. The lights died down, and the crowd roared. She saw his face on the giant monitor. He had an angular, chiseled face, blue eyes, a brown combover, and narrow cheekbones. He was dressed in blue jeans and a T-shirt.

He told the story of how he almost died in his late 20s. He was driving on a road in the Andes. The road was slick, and he rounded a hairpin turn doing 50. The car flipped five times, and he was ejected through the driver's side window, narrowly missing being crushed. The horror he experienced in those final moments of consciousness, he said. It was that experience that revolutionized the rest of his life. He felt, above all, awake and alive to possibility.

She looked at the man beside her, who was snoring. Jordan went into the crowd and began asking questions to individuals. They were remarkably transparent, and they told their personal stories. He would then turn to the audience for a show of hands. This went on for a while. As the Q&A was wrapping up, her eyelids felt heavy. She thought she felt the vertigo coming on, but everything just became still. She tried to move her body but couldn't. She felt an aching in her bones. She felt a soreness blooming in her back.

There were rectangles forming the framework of the dome above her, light fixtures suspended on thick cables, and rows of multicolored balloons. It resolved itself into a slow-swirling cesspool of muddy spirals, like the toxic film on a pond. Then it increased in speed and violence, becoming a black hole. Everything else was rigid and unmoving, and she held onto the

armrests to resist its pull. She looked into the jaws of the black hole, and a churning sickness washed over her.

She ran to the nearest exit. She found herself on the opposite side of the building she came in from, disoriented. Independence Boulevard was awash with Saturday night traffic, and the orange ball of the sun shone in the windows across the street. She ran across a gravel lot and threw up in a stand of trees.

She thought about Preacher McAllister's pond. She was remembering more now. She most often remembered it when it was full and stocked with rainbow trout. This is the place she went as a girl when she wanted to shed parts of her identity. Her life revolved around home, church, and the pond. She thought about how she would take off her nightgown and swim. She hunted for frogs, fireflies, beetles, turtles. They came with the water. Everything flourished except the weeping willow in the middle of the pond. It was slowly drowning and stopped bearing its customary bright, yellow blossoms. One winter when the pond froze over, she bought herself a pair of ice skates and went in circles around the bare, jagged tree. Yes, there was a darkness and melancholy over the pond she couldn't quite put a finger on.

A man was kneeling beside her. He had on jeans and white sneakers. He was in his undershirt because his own shirt, a magenta button-down, was propping up her head. He had smooth skin, rimless glasses, salt-and-pepper hair, and appeared to be in his 60s or 70s. It was the man who had been sitting next to her, asleep.

"The paramedics are on the way," he said.

"I don't need them," she said.

"Look, I'm a retired doctor. Are you anemic, diabetic?"

“Neither,” she said. “I just had a really bad vertigo spell. I’m still really dizzy.” She got up and brushed herself off. She held onto him for support. He held her propped up with her arm around his shoulder. They proceeded in slow steps. He was taller than her and thin. His cologne smelled like grapefruit.

“And the vomiting?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“I saw you rush out. I saw an expression of pain or terror. When I saw you run through the emergency exit, I followed.”

She introduced herself. Ankur was his name. “It means blossom,” he said.

“So what are you doing here?” she said.

“My wife of 35 years left me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK, thank you,” he said.

The police and paramedics were waiting out front. They gave her a pint of fluids and checked her vitals.

“Let me call an Uber,” she said after half an hour in the ambulance. “I have to go home before I have another spell.”

“I can take you if you want,” he said.

She thought about Thurston. How Thurston could see possibilities where no one else could. Ankur, the retired doctor, was no threat to her. It was strange, she thought, how with the onset of the vertigo, fewer and fewer things frightened her. Or, if they did, she did them anyway.

When she got home, which was only a short drive away, she thanked him and invited him into her apartment. She was going to make dinner and wanted to thank him for the service he had done her. He thanked her and took off his shoes at the door. She poured two glasses of wine and put water on the stove.

“I’ll feel better after I eat something,” she said.

She chopped lettuce, red onions, and Roma tomatoes and made a salad. She put spaghetti in the boiling pot and added salt. While she cooked, he said he worked too much, which caused the failure of his marriage. He just retired.

“Would you have done anything differently?” she said.

“I have three beautiful daughters, so no,” he said.

They were at the end of their meal. She picked up the empty plates, and he helped her put the dishes in the sink.

“Tell me more about the vertigo,” he said. “It’s the doctor in me.”

She turned, her eyes downward, and reached for his zipper. It reacted. He didn’t resist, but seemed to understand her need. She felt dizzy from all the possibilities of her arm alone, with its five branches, moving through spacetime, let alone all her limbs, and her thinking, rational brain. All the different possible ways everything could go and move about in one direction or another. “I can’t articulate the vertigo,” she said.

Outside her bedroom window, there were purple crêpe myrtles blooming. She could smell them. The moon and the stars came out. A dog barked. The world was quiet and static. They lied naked on the bed.

“That was amazing,” he said.

She was silent.

“I’m flying to India tomorrow for a wedding. I haven’t been in five years.”

She thought about the pond.

“When I was a girl, my father took me to this open clearing in the woods to look at the stars through a telescope. He taught me the science of cosmology, because he didn’t believe it conflicted with the Bible. He believed religion and science would one day merge. I remember watching the rocket launch of the 1969 Moon landing.”

“I remember,” Ankur said. “We watched it on the news reels back home.”

“He’d be turning over in his grave if he heard the stuff they’re talking about now,” she said. “Black holes, multiverses, dark energy. It’s all getting so strange. He would say Jesus was vindicated by science.

“I think I know what’s causing the vertigo,” she continued. “It seems to come when I see all the different possible variations of my life. Thurston, my late husband, understood this. It’s like he could command alternate possibilities at will, as if he were tearing open the fabric of spacetime.”

He gave her a look of wonder and astonishment.

“Where are you going?”

“Varanasi, northwest India, on the Ganges,” he said.

“I’m going to buy a ticket,” she said.

“What?” he said.

“I’m not asking to go with you,” she said. “I’m only asking to go on the same plane. I’ve never flown before, so I don’t know how it works. Then we can part ways.”

“Wow, OK,” he said. “Sure.”

He gave her the flight number, and she booked a seat.

The following night, they boarded a flight. In the morning, she saw the sun rising over the blue ocean.

When the plane touched down two days later, it was a sunny day. They took a taxi cab through the windy streets. She felt like she’d cracked open Ankur’s skull and looked inside. There were palm and date trees. She smelled strange spices. The sights and sounds were loud and close. People were walking all along the streets. The temples were being emptied out. The afternoon traffic was a chaos of cars, buses, and mopeds. They passed under a red railroad bridge, where she saw a mural of the Mahatma in glasses and a white toga. She remembered the murals she liked in North Davidson. They were headed towards downtown and the Ganges. She saw the gleaming golden spires of a temple.

For three days, she got up early in the morning and took a walk, like she did back home, tracking it on her Fitbit. On the third day, she climbed to the top of a hill on the outskirts of the city. She saw the massive city stretched below her in the morning light. The river snaked into the distance.

She approached a house at the top the hill. There was a mango tree and a stone pathway leading up to the front door. She saw gray smoke coming from the back. She walked around to the side, where she saw an alley behind the house. There was a fire and something roasting on a spit. The juices were dripping off and sizzling on the burning logs. There were three small

children playing with the fire, two boys and a girl. They kept it going by adding wood and prodding the coals.

The children turned around and saw her. They dropped the pokers in their hands with a clatter and looked at her. They began to laugh, deep-bellied laughter. She waved at them, but they buckled over in uncontrollable mirth.

“Floppy hat! Floppy hat! Amrikan floppy hat! Like the movie stars!” one boy screamed.

She became aware of what she was wearing on her head, the straw-colored floppy hat with the pink bow. In the fire, she saw images of her life. Then the waves moved out from the flames. It grew and grew, intensifying and intensifying, until everything was violently ripped apart, and the sensation was of unmitigated free-falling.

It is dry. There is no water in the pond. The trout are gone. It's just a beautiful green meadow. I see the weeping willow with bright, yellow blossoms. There are pink wildflowers growing at the base, a creeping vine winding around the trunk. There are birds singing in the woods. The cornfields are newly planted. The sun is shining in golden shafts. All types of blooming particulate matter are visible floating in the light, suspended in the air like soup. I sneeze. It is spring again. There is Job, Preacher McAllister's younger son, reading a book underneath the tree. He's 10, same age as me.

“Hi Rachel,” he says. His voice sounds distant.

“What is this place? It's so pretty. It's like Eden.”

“Caleb wants to chop down this willow tree and plant this field. He says he’s got to make money off it somehow. He don’t get more say than I do because he’s older. Daddy don’t like to take sides.”

“The yellow blossoms are drooping. It looks like they’re crying.”

He touches my hand, and we fly to the white-steepled church. Behind the pulpit I see Preacher McAllister, ruddy-faced and happy. I want to cry, seeing everyone I knew in the congregation. Then we fly to the house with the red shutters, then to the grave of my mother and father.

Job is gone. Everything is revolving around me. The Earth itself is spinning, fracturing from the velocity. The wind is howling in my ears.

It coalesces again. I’m standing again under the willow tree. I wait for Job to come back. I do not see him or hear him. I call to him.

The sun is now low in the sky. It is almost night. A dark figure emerges from the corn. It is Caleb, Job’s older brother.

“Take off your clothes,” he says.

“What for?” I say.

“My daddy’s the preacher,” he says. “You have to mind what I say.”

“Well, all right,” I say. “I don’t know what you want that for, Caleb. Did you see Job? I was just looking for him. He was around here... We were playing...”

I see the tree, and I see the darkness, and I see blood dripping from between my legs and soaking into the ground. After that, all goes black. It was after that the pond got filled up. It sure was beautiful, that place.

Wherever I am, it's very black in here. I can't see anything. Wait, it's opening up. I see the blue sky, the clouds. Then I'm in space. I pass the swollen belly of the Sun as the Earth disintegrates. I'm flying among the stars and galaxies. The stars are exploding one by one. It's getting darker and colder. Everything is still. There is a glow in the darkness, slowly growing brighter.

I see Jesus approaching on a cloud out of the blackness. He greets me and takes me up. Together, we fly through the universe picking up everyone, and off we go... This place, this Eden is beyond memory... Then you'll see the rainbow trout, you'll see the flash of their rainbow bodies...

When she woke up in the hospital, a female orderly with dark hair was standing by.

“How are you feeling?” the orderly said.

“What happened?”

“You had a mild stroke. You collapsed about 10 miles from here. You walked a long way. The good news is it was mild, and you're already on blood thinners. We recommend taking them for someone your age. Again, it was a mild stroke, but a stroke. You're clear to go, but you can rest if you need to.”

Soon after Ankur came in.

“I have to go home,” she said. “I was making good progress, beginning to settle into my new neighborhood.”

“One step at a time,” he said. “Come, I'll take you to the airport.”

“I’m excited to go back,” she said. “There’s a lot I want to do. I’m really beginning to love Charlotte.”

“I’ll be back home in three weeks.”

“There’s one thing I can’t figure out,” she said. “We know how the universe will end, but what about this dark energy that makes everything fly apart?”

“It’s very mysterious,” he said.

Outside she heard a commotion. She looked out the window and saw a funeral procession coming down the street. Men and women, barefoot, wearing all white. The procession stopped on the bank of the river and laid the ashes of the deceased in the water. When they left the hospital, there were a few mourners left on the steps bathing in the river and a Hindu priest with a gray beard.

They stood on and watched. The priest performed the rites. He had a palmful of lotus blossoms of every color possible. White, pink, blue, purple, yellow.

“Excuse me,” she said to the priest. “What is bathing in the river for?”

“The purification of sins,” he said. “Spreading the ashes of the deceased in the water hastens salvation.”

“Can it work for Christians? I have these desires, and when I have them, the world comes undone.”

He guided her by the hand to the water.

“Blossoms follow you,” the priest said. “They’ve tracked with all the major events of your life. When you see them, touch them, smell them, think them, or hear the word spoken, do you notice?”

“No,” she said. “Not until now.”

He gave her a handful of the multicolored blossoms. She made a cup with her hands.

“Now, down the steps slowly, into the water,” he said. “You must immerse yourself completely, head to toe.”

As she went down the gray stone steps, the world was perfectly still, only the slow water of the river moving. The priest threw blossoms over the river in a wide sweeping motion, falling like rain. He began to sing. The sun was rising in the east and Ankur, who watched the whole exchange, gazed on lovingly. When she brought her head and body out of the river, she waited to see if the world did not move.

The Cowboys of Front Street

Dakota and Teddy sit side by side on a banana-yellow boxcar in the rail yard across the street. It's dusk. A commercial jet flies overhead, ascending. In front of them is an industrial park, which sometimes makes the air smell like Pine-Sol. The buildings are blank, uniform, and massive. Directly in front is the Charlotte skyline.

Her 21st birthday is coming up. It's on Christmas Day. It's when she plans to take her first drink, at the building Christmas party.

"He won't even let us have a fucking Christmas," she says to Teddy. He's around her age. He's tall and thin, with a shock of dark brown hair, and blue eyes. He's wearing a beige 311 hoody and gray sweatpants. He has a slight hunch in his upper back. He lives in Apartment 3C on the floor above hers, 2A. "Where the fuck am I supposed to have my birthday? At a fucking hotel?"

"I'm really sorry," he says. "I'll celebrate your birthday with you, wherever it ends up being. I can't go home for Christmas."

"Fuck Evans," she says.

She finishes drinking her Coca-Cola and throws the glass bottle. It lands on one of the steel rails and shatters. She lights a joint, inhales deeply three times in succession, and passes it to him. He takes it and does the same.

99% of the time the multicolored boxcars sit there, she thinks. They look like shipping containers on wheels. Sometimes, they play musical chairs overnight, and the colors are in a different configuration in the morning. Sometimes, in the dead of night, she hears a whistle and

the vibrations in the building. The yard seems to operate by its own logic, like a thinking, feeling thing.

“For someone who’s so scared to drink, you smoke a lot of weed,” he says, coughing. Last week, she and Teddy were in the ABC store, and she asked him to buy her a gallon bottle of Grey Goose for the party. She liked the picture of the goose on the bottle, which was flying with outspread wings.

“I’m glad we’ve become more open with each other Teddy,” she says. “For a long time, I just thought of you as my dealer.”

“Dude, I’m a hippie,” he says.

She laughs. “In Indigenous American cultures, hallucinogens can be used for spiritual experiences. I’ve tried them all. They can open you to different avenues of understanding and enlightenment.”

“I dig it,” he says. “You’re talking my language.”

They hear a deep-bellied laugh behind them. It sounds like Ms. Sherman watching *The Price Is Right* with her window open. She won’t hear Ms. Sherman’s laugh anymore when she watches her game shows. The flat-fronted, three-story, red brick building will be torn down. She remembers seeing it reported on the news a year ago. “The new hotel going up will be close to the airport and center city,” real estate developer Eric Evans told reporters. “We’re the fastest growing city in the Southeast, and we want more people coming to see our beautiful home.” Evans was middle-aged, with a wrinkled brow, and sharp gray eyes.

“I’ll celebrate Christmas with you,” he says.

“If I knew where Evans lived, I’d go fuck his place up so bad. Throw rocks and stuff at the windows. Throw trash in the yard. Bust it up. At least make a statement.”

That night, she sits in the dark-blue fabric rocking chair at the window, looking out onto the street. There is a side table with a red lamp and a large book. She eats three quarter-sized peyote buttons she bought from Teddy. She chews them up and swallows them. They’re dry, crunchy, and bitter-tasting.

Sometimes, she watches the cars during rush hour speeding everywhere. Sometimes, she sees Ms. Sherman pull in from church service or Teddy pull out to go to the gas station for rolling papers and a cherry slushee. Other times, she just sits and waits for the police with the eviction orders.

Evans is right, she thinks. The location is perfect for a hotel. The street is on a main access road to and from the airport. 99% of the people who travel this road are transients, and hotels are good for transients.

She picks up the big book on the side table called *Illustrated History of the American West*. She always took an interest in the West, because her ancestors are from western Michigan, and they were met by white settlers.

She opens it to a page. It says, “Front Street—Dodge City, Kansas.” There’s a photograph of a street of frontier stores and saloons from 1872. It looks harmless, maybe even pleasant. Below the picture, it says, “Once the most lawless boulevard in the whole world.” In front of the stores, there’s a group of white settlers in their cowboy hats alongside members of

one of the Great Plains tribes. *Kiowa*, it says. No one is smiling, and their faces look serious and furrowed.

She knows nausea and vomiting are common at first. Then the sickness dissipates. She settles into a calm acceptance. She sees beautiful colors, spirals, and geometric patterns. It looks like the burnt orange couch, the TV, the family photos on the accent table, and the dreamcatcher are melting, then breathing. She begins to feel her ego die away. As she looks out the window, she sees pale white ghosts flying through the air. They're going up and down the street. Men, women, children. Some are sailing through the sky. Up, down, left, right. Some look like they're about to collide, but they pass through each other and go on their way.

Then the street outside is a wide plain. She sees a herd of buffalo in the distance. It reminds her of running along the long, desolate dirt roads of her hometown that went on for miles and the open slate-blue sky. She'd run down the road, flapping her arms. She sees men herding the buffalo, hunting them, killing them in great numbers. Then they're riding towards her, wearing their cowboy hats.

She and Teddy are in his apartment the following afternoon. It's the first time she's been inside his place. The walls are dark gray with posters of 60s and 70s bands like Simon & Garfunkel, The Grateful Dead, and Bob Marley. He really is a hippie, she thinks. She digs it. There's a fish tank with brightly colored saltwater fish, including a Dalmatian pufferfish. In the corner beneath the TV is a stereo playing "Buffalo Soldier." They sit on the couch, which is made of colorful, striped fabric. On the coffee table, there's a half-pound of weed. "The strain is Northern Lights crossed with Lemon Gelato," he says. It fills the air with a fresh, sweet, odorous

smell. He places some on a scale, bags it up, and hands it to her. Then he packs a big glass bong and lights it. She hears the gurgling of the water and the clink of the ice cubes as he inhales. He passes it to her.

“I wonder what it would be like to live in the Old West,” she says, coughing. “I’d put a bullet in Evans’ back. No trial, no jury. Just cosmic justice.”

“Why don’t you hack him?” he says.

“I don’t know the first thing about hacking,” she says.

He takes another hit from the bong, puts it down, and stands up. “I want to show you something,” he says.

He opens the door to his bedroom, turns on the light, and walks in. There’s a bed on one side with a pile of clothes on it, a spinning ceiling fan, and on the other side are six computer screens side by side in a perfect half-circle on a desk above a black tower. There’s a red and black gaming chair at the desk. The screens share a continuous desktop background. It’s a grassy field with purple and yellow flowers and a snow-capped mountain, like the Matterhorn she thinks. He drags the same cursor across all six screens.

“What is all this?” she says.

“Six Alienware ultra-HD curved-screen monitors. This tower here is the computer. It’s custom-built. Has the processor and RAM of five normal computers. This blinking device with all the ports is the switch that integrates all the operations. I use it for everything basically.”

“This is amazing,” she says.

“See, you’re getting to know me more,” he says.

“No kidding,” she says, looking at his setup.

“It’s almost like we’re talking,” he says.

“What?” she says.

“You know, before dating,” he says.

“Teddy, stay focused,” she says. “Are you saying you can hack Evans?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I just need his IP address on his home computer. If I can find out where he lives, I can access his network, password-break it, and get his IP address. I can nmap his server to find all the services running on his system. I can also determine which OS he’s using and all possible daemons with ports. Then the attack might differ.”

They hear a car door slam and a double-beep. They go to the window and look out. They see a white Rolls Royce Phantom parked in front of the building.

“This motherfucker,” she says. The only reason she remembers the car’s brand is because right above the front grille there’s a chrome emblem of a woman with flowing robes that look like wings. When the driver turns the car off, the winged woman retreats into a flap beneath the hood.

“I’m going to go curse him out like I did the first time, and tell him to get the fuck out of here,” she says.

“Just wait,” he says. “Get behind the curtain so they can’t see us.”

They watch a man get out. He’s wearing a dark blue suit, brown Oxfords, and a Panama hat, one of Evans’ employees. Evans never runs his own errands, she thinks. He has on dark aviators under his hat. He’s tan with a trim mustache. He wears a white shirt with the collar unbuttoned, showing his chest and a gold crucifix. A second man gets out wearing an orange

reflective vest and a hard hat. He sets up a land surveyor's optical device, and he spreads out large blueprints on the trunk of the car.

After 15 minutes pass, the man in the vest begins packing up his equipment.

"We need to know where Evans lives," she says.

"Oh yeah," he says.

"We have to do it now," she says. "We have to follow them."

"Are you crazy?" he says. "There's another way."

"No, there isn't," she says. "Look, they're leaving. You have to drive."

After less than minute of consideration, he grabs his equipment, throws it in a book bag, and they run down the stairs to his car in the back parking lot, a black Dodge Challenger.

"It's faster than the Rolls," he says, as the engine starts up like a snot nose. "But it's not quiet."

He drives fast. He leaves enough distance between them to avoid detection. The car takes I-85 to I-77 South. It's the beginning of rush hour, and Teddy's weaving in and out of traffic like he does it all the time. At times, the Rolls Royce speeds up in a burst, and then it slows down again. At one point, an equally fast Ford F-150 Raptor overtakes them and cuts them off, and they lose sight of it. They see it again getting off on Tyvola Road at the last minute heading east, and Teddy cuts across three lanes of traffic just to make the exit. They follow it down Tyvola, where it turns south on Park. It turns into a gate, and when they approach she sees a black sign with gold-plated letters that says "Quail Hollow Country Club." She knows it's a wealthy, membership-only gated community, because it's where they play the PGA game every year that brings busloads of people.

“This motherfucker,” she says.

A security guard in a white gatehouse waves them through. The streets are narrow, residential streets. After a series of turns, they see the tail end of the Rolls Royce pull through a gate and up into a driveway on a slight hill.

“So this is where Evans lives,” she says.

“Seems so,” he says. He pulls up under the cover of a tree, where they can see the house, and turns off the lights. “Let me get to work.”

She sees columns, balconies, and all types of exotic trees, including palm trees. There’s a fountain with an angel and water squirting from her mouth in the middle of the driveway. On the right side, she sees more gardens and a glass solarium with an indoor swimming pool. On the outside, it looks like something from Tuscany with white stucco and a red-tiled roof.

He opens his laptop and pulls out a device with an antenna on it. She watches for security patrols. A few cars pass by, including a Lamborghini, a Bentley, and an Audi. It’s fucking gross, she thinks.

“I got the IP address,” he says.

“Good,” she says. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

Teddy works through the afternoon into the night. She’s too anxious to sleep or go back to her place. She gets *The Illustrated History of the American West* from the side table and goes back to his apartment.

She takes the book into his bedroom. She sits on the edge of the bed, right behind where he’s working at the desk. She sits cross-legged. He looks at her bare feet and unpainted toenails.

She uses the surface of the book to break up weed and roll a joint. It's pungent and sticky in her fingers.

"It's from my stash," she says, lighting it and passing it to him.

"Thanks," he says.

"How's it going?" she says.

"It's just a waiting game," he says, through exhalations of smoke.

She shows him the book, and he takes it in his hands and looks at it.

"That picture is a street. It's called Front Street, in Dodge City, Kansas in 1872. At the time, it was the most lawless street in the entire world. It's like us, in the new Old West. You're hacking; you're a gunslinger."

"I dream of living in a world without laws," she continues. "Someone could shoot you in the back at any time. But it also means everybody's freedoms are equal, and when land was in more or less communal ownership. Only in a world like that could I avenge myself on Eric Evans. I need Doc Brown to build me a DeLorean so I can go put a bullet in his great-great-great grandfather's back."

"It's weird," he says. "The people in the picture look like ghosts."

"It's probably because it's a daguerreotype," she says. "It uses natural sunlight. The cowboys had to stand next to the Kiowa people like that for 10 minutes without moving to get that shot."

She thinks about her mother, the pale blue house she grew up in, and the long, dirt roads of her hometown. Of her friends and cousins, the snow, and Lake Superior. She remembers

going to the shore. It's too cold to swim. Of flapping her arms down the road. She sees her young mother in the coffin. Of everything afterwards, Charlotte, the building, the train yard, her neighbors.

"I corrupted his server," he says. "You won't believe this, but I found some emails to local politicians."

He hands her half a dozen pages of printed emails. "I'm not a legal expert, but it looks like a pay-for-play scheme," he says. "Not only that, but he has a bunch of other projects like this in the works."

"Holy shit," she says, turning and reading each page. "We need to give this to the media."

"That's fine, but it's probably not going to give you the Christmas party you want," he says. "Not in time. You're better off writing a direct letter to blackmail him. Write it and we'll bring it over to his house."

She asks for a pen and paper. He suggests she type it on his computer and print it out. She goes into his bedroom and begins typing. He stands behind and watches.

DEAR FUCKFACE,

WE WANT TO STAY THROUGH CHRISTMAS. I CAN MAKE PEACE WITH IT THEN. PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS MOVING. I GET IT. THEY COME, THEY GO. JUST LIKE THAT. SO FINE, TAKE THE BUILDING. BUILD YOUR FUCKING HOTEL. BUT THIS CHRISTMAS IS MY FUCKING 21ST BIRTHDAY, AND WE'RE FUCKING HUMAN

BEINGS AND LIKE THE HOLIDAY SEASON TOO. WE ALREADY BOUGHT ALL THE SECRET SANTA GIFTS, YOU PIECE OF SHIT.

IF NOT, WE KNOW ABOUT YOUR PAY-FOR-PLAY SCHEMES WITH LOCAL POLITICIANS TO GET YOUR ZONING APPROVALS. WE'LL BRING THE EMAILS WE FOUND FROM YOUR COMPUTER TO THE POLICE/MEDIA. WHY SHOULD ONE CORRUPT PERSON LIKE YOU BENEFIT BY ILLEGALLY SQUASHING SO MANY OTHER PEOPLE? FOR WHAT? YOUR EGO? YOU'RE A FUCKING LUNATIC AND A PIECE OF SHIT, AND IF YOU DON'T LET US STAY THROUGH CHRISTMAS, YOU'RE FUCKED.

SINCERELY,

She puts her name, but then deletes it and writes: **THE COWBOYS OF FRONT STREET—
DODGE CITY, KANSAS—1872.**

She prints it out, seals up the letter in an envelope, and writes “Evans” on the front.

Teddy drives them back to Evans’ house. He parks out of sight under the tree with a pair of binoculars. He passes them to her. She sees Evans come out onto the balcony. He’s wearing a plush white robe, like a dead animal. He goes back inside, where a young, beautiful woman is waiting. They have a brief conversation, and she can see their lips moving and their gestures. Then the curtains close. “Fuck them,” she says. She gets out of the car, walks up to the gate, and hurls the letter through the gate like a Japanese throwing star so it lands in the middle of the driveway right by the fountain with the angel.

That night, she takes three more peyote buttons. The nausea and vomiting come again. This time, she can't tell if it's the drugs or some version of her own interior pain. She eventually settles again into a calm tranquility. She sits in her chair at the window looking out. It's a clear night, and she feels the chill coming from the outside.

After an hour or so, the ghosts return. They're flying in all directions. She sees their faces and bodies in detail. They're of every possible configuration of age, appearance, gender. Men, women, children. They're wearing period clothing. She sees American cowboys of the West and Indigenous Americans. She sees British and French monarchs, leaders of revolutions, philosophers and scientists with their books, and Middle-Passage dead, who are clanking their chains. The majority of faces show fear and anguish. She thinks this is how they looked when they died. They're in constant motion. Going, going, going. That seems to be the ghosts' condition.

The tall prairie grass is bent over in the breeze. The men on horses are on the crest of the hill, and they're riding their horses down the hill. Then buffalo appear, until she sees a train of buffalo three miles wide and ten miles long. Probably 1 million buffalo. This is where they built Dodge City, Kansas, she thinks. She sees the white plume of smoke of the train. When the rail line reached here, it carried hundreds of thousands of people east to west. Packing, running, scurrying into train cars. 20 million buffalo, \$3 a buffalo. A fortune, she thinks. She forms her thumb and forefinger into a gun and shoots.

She hears a knock at the door. She thinks she's imagining it. It comes again, louder. She goes to the door and looks through the peephole. She sees the man in the suit with the Panama hat. She's shocked to see him.

“What the fuck do you want?” she says through the door.

“Evans wants to negotiate,” he says. His voice is dry and deep.

“Now?” she says. “I’m not in the best condition.”

“It’s now or never,” he says. “I don’t want to talk in the hallway.”

“You can’t come in,” she says.

“I’ll wait outside for 10 minutes, and then I’m leaving,” he says.

She goes to the window and sees the white Rolls Royce parked on the other side of the street. The curtains in the rear window are drawn. The man exits the building and waits beside the car. She’s been waiting for this moment for a whole year, she thinks.

She stumbles to her closet, puts on a white down coat with fur trim and a pair of leather boots, and walks out into the winter night. Everywhere around and above her she sees the ghosts. They’re passing right beside her now, looking at her. She feels weightless, like she’s going to fly, but she does not want to join them. She wants to go off on her own way, alone. She has trouble staying on her feet. Their movement creates a rush and roar, and the cold wind blows at her sides, and her long black hair is whipping across her face, as she takes one step at a time across the street.

“What’s wrong with you?” the man says.

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” she says.

“Get in,” he says, opening the door for her.

She sees a cream-colored leather interior, woodgrain trim, and hundreds of little white pinpricks of light in the ceiling, like the night sky. She thinks about the stories and legends that

belong to each constellation, which her mother taught her. There's another man sitting in the back seat.

"Are you, are you...Eric Evans?"

"I am," he says. "And you are?"

"Dakota," she says. "I wasn't expecting you."

"And you're the cowboy hacker?" Evans says.

"How did you know?" she says.

"You followed my driver," Evans says.

"You deserve it," she says. "And more."

"What do you want?" he says.

She looks at his gray eyes, which look like two little, swirling snowstorms.

"I just want, I just want..."

She has so many words for Evans. She knows she has to tell him everything. She knows if he came in person, she has leverage. Maybe a lot of leverage. Instead she thinks about the pale blue house. She thinks about how quiet it is when snow falls, the stillness, and the peace. Sometimes, when she looks at the city skyline from the train yard, she wishes it will melt into waves, earth, and sky and nothing else, like she remembers. No, things go onward, not back, she thinks. Everyone's in constant motion. She sees the ghosts through the windshield. Going, going, going. It never stops. And all she can imagine is getting out of there, away from Evans, and away from the ghosts.

"I just want my fucking Christmas party," she says.

“I’ll move the eviction date to January, so you can have Christmas and New Years,” he says. “In exchange, you have to sign this NDA form.”

“What the fuck is this?” she says. She can’t read it, because the words are moving around.

“Just sign here,” he says, pointing to a line at the bottom of the page. “It means you can’t talk about this anymore, or I can sue you. You don’t want that. Sign here. That’s the deal. Do you understand what I’m telling you?”

“Yes,” she says. “Just give me a fucking pen.”

“If you break the terms of the contract, even if you didn’t read them, I’ll be coming for you with the full force of the law,” he says, handing her a pen.

She thinks about the men on horses in cowboy hats. She sees them on the crest of the hill, riding down the hill, and the buffalo. She signs her name.

Evans nods, and the man in the Panama hat opens her door.

“You’re a fucking piece of shit,” she says. Slowly and feelingly, she gets out of the car. “Nice fucking car by the way. And you with the Panama hat, you’re a fucking sellout too.” She looks at his blue suit, his open collar, and the gold crucifix around his neck, and he ushers her back out into the street in silence.

Three weeks pass, and the original move-out date comes and goes. She sits at the window, waiting for the police to arrive, but they don’t come.

At half past 7, she slips on a white button-down shirt, a pair of brown overalls, black leggings, and boots. She takes the bottle of Grey Goose out from under her bed, and goes to Ms.

Sherman's apartment, down the hall from hers in 2C. When she walks in, everyone's already there. Milad and Farida in 1C, from Iran. Mr. Minh in 3B, from Myanmar. The Mwangi family and their two boys in 2B, from Kenya. Dariush in 3A, from Syria. Mr. and Mrs. Kazan in 1B, from Ukraine. Ms. Sherman, from Houston, who fled after her house got destroyed in Hurricane Harvey. They braved oceans, deserts, and mountains. Trains, planes, ocean-liners, cars, buses, mopeds, bicycles, feet. Running, leaping, flying. Always on the move. Flickering in and out of her life.

Teddy's appearance looks different.

"Did you clean up?" she says. "You look really nice."

"Thanks," he says. "You look great. Happy birthday." He hands her a wrapped gift with snowmen on it. "And Merry Christmas."

"We'll do Secret Santa in a while," she says. "Yours isn't a secret anymore."

"It's not part of Secret Santa," he says. "It's just from me."

She places the bottle of Grey Goose on the kitchen counter. She puts the gift beneath the tree, a real fir tree with Ms. Sherman's multicolored lights and ornaments and an angel on the top.

"That's a big bottle, sweetie," Ms. Sherman says, laughing.

"I didn't know how much," she says. "I got it for the Christmas drinks."

"You can't make those with vodka, honey," Ms. Sherman says. "You need brandy, rum, or whisky. Vodka's more for summertime drinks, sweetie."

"Oh man," she says. "I really wanted Christmasy drinks. You know, eggnog, hot toddies, and spiced punch. Something like that."

Ms. Sherman opens up the fridge and scans inside. “I can make you a Cosmopolitan for your first drink. It’s cranberry, vodka, lemon juice, and triple sec, which I think I have.”

“Thanks, Ms. Sherman,” she says. “That sounds good.”

Ms. Sherman makes everyone a round of regular and virgin Cosmopolitans and serves them on a silver tray. Everyone raises a toast.

“Thank you for coming everyone,” Dakota says. “Thank you for being my family when I didn’t have one for all these years. I’m going to miss you as you all go on your separate journeys. And whether we get together like this ever again or not, just know I will always love you. That’s the only thing that has any actual value in the world.”

They drink the toast. Ms. Sherman starts to cry. She feels the cranberry, lemon, and vodka sting her throat, and she feels a warm sensation spread throughout her whole body. She feels a little light in the head, like a feeling of weightlessness. So this is what it’s all about. She thinks about the night the police descended on the pale blue house, finding her there in her bed, telling her her mother was killed by a reckless drunk teenage driver.

She sits on top of a royal-blue boxcar in the train yard with “CSX” in big white letters on the side. The partygoers have gone back to their apartments, and everything’s quiet. She sees the skyline in the distance. The Bank of America building is lit up in red, white, and green.

Teddy climbs the ladder.

“Can I join you?” he says.

“Yes,” she says.

“Great toast by the way. I loved everything you said.”

“Thanks,” she says.

“I brought you something.” He takes a joint out of his breast pocket. “In case we were able to step away from the party.”

“You go first,” she says.

It’s dark in the yard, and she can see the stars overhead. She sees the Pleiades, and she thinks of the Kiowa legend of the seven little girls chased by bears. They climbed a rock and begged the rock to save them, and it grew higher and higher until they were pushed up into the sky.

It begins to snow.

“On the day I was born, it was snowing,” she says. “Through the window of her hospital room, my mom saw a beautiful Snowy Owl, and she named me Snowbird. My Chippewa name means Snowbird. When I was very little she called me her little Snowbird.”

“It’s beautiful,” he says. “Your mother sounds like a beautiful person.”

She’s silent.

“Did I ever tell you why I moved here? Why I can’t go back home for Christmas?”

“No,” she says.

“My parents kicked me out,” he says. “They caught me in bed with a boy.”

“You’re gay?” she says.

“It’s complicated,” he says. “I’m attracted to someone’s personality.”

“You’ve been trying to get with me this whole time!” she says.

“Take this in whatever sense you want it to mean, but I love you,” he says.

She looks at him. “I love you too,” she says. “But I’m happy alone, if you want to know the truth. All I want is wings.”

The snow begins to fall in thicker flakes. There are tiny, inaudible flashes of lightning in the clouds. They blanket the lights of the city. They sit there in silence.

She knows the ghosts are up there right now. She doesn’t want to join them, but fly off alone somewhere far away, like the Wild West.

Shatter Me

There's a dark spirit that afflicts me. I think it's a succubus, if such things exist, a female spirit that comes in the night to have intercourse with me as I sleep. Right now, any theory is equally good.

All I can say is the pleasures that have sustained my life until now have lost their savor. Food, travel, money, nature, sleep, art. Even looking up at a starry night, which used to be one of my favorites. However strange it might sound, people have to accept what I'm telling them at face value. Otherwise all this calling "mental health matters" from the rooftops is a corrupt form of performativity.

I hit my head hard on the doorframe. "Fuck me!" I shriek, stamp, and snort, violently rubbing the spot just above my forehead. I kick the doorframe, and a piece of wood falls off. Two dead termites fall out.

The low ceilings are the only thing that upsets me about this house. It makes me conscious of my 7-and-a-half-foot height. The China-blue 17th-century-styled wallpaper with full-scale forest scenes is now green and peeling off, exposing the termite-rotten frame of the house. The floorboards are worn completely bare and creak. There are mice, raccoons, and a black and brown-striped cat that live in the crawlspace, and huge spotted owls in the beech trees at night. There are dust bunnies, boxes of gas-station wine, dirty dishes, laundry, empty vape cartridges, half-read pamphlets on political philosophy, and overdue bills laying around. I don't mind those things, because I own the property under an alias, W.S. Henry. I simply don't care enough about my public-facing identity as him to pay the bills on time or clean up.

For the time being, I still have my penthouse on the 51st floor of The VUE. It's where I'm going now.

The sun is low in the sky, peering out from behind rainclouds. As I'm leaving, I stop and survey the house. It's where I've begun to spend all my time. It's a yellow, shingle-style ranch house on one-fifteenth of an acre on the outskirts of the city. It has brick trim, white shutters, and a big deck in the front. My rusty blue 1992 Chevy Silverado sits in the driveway. The grass is a foot high, and the backyard slopes downwards to a tall wood fence and toolshed in the corner where a rusty lawnmower lives.

The only neighbor that can see my coming and going is Brooklyn, the 27-year-old law student who lives across the street. From all other vantage points, I'm hidden from sight by the wood fence surrounding the property and five mature beech trees. I see Brooklyn at her desk working into the late afternoon, probably examining some legal document. If she wasn't the only person in the world who knew me as W.S. Henry, I'd ask her out. She's tall, pretty, with straight brown hair. When we talk, I can tell her eyes read into me with the keenness of a top-notch lawyer.

I think about the dark tobacco-colored stain above my bed that blooms a few more inches every time it rains since April. The roof must've sprang a leak. It's now September, and the leaves are beginning to fall. The stain is the size of a miniature trampoline, and I've begun to notice a dampness and moldy odor.

As I speed down the road, the blue Chevy makes a noise like a gunshot whenever I switch gears, and it lurches forward violently, startling all the other drivers at the end of rush hour. I laugh at this, because W.S. Henry is frightening them like sparrows, violently breaching

their sealed-off lives, like popping a bubble. I haven't always been this bitter, so it's hard to tell who has the illusions, me or them.

When I get to The VUE, other residents get on the elevator with me, and I feel them reacting to the stench of my clothes. When I make it up, I strip down and put them in the washer. I shower, shave, cream, and put on Versace cologne with notes of orange and sage. I put on a hand-tailored Tom Ford single-breasted navy mohair suit with a white button-down, solid pink pocket square, and brown Louis Vuitton dress shoes. I style my hair, put on a pair of gold-rimmed Armani glasses, and then pass again quickly through the lobby. If W.S. Henry serves one purpose, it's that he's made to be forgotten.

The VUE is so close to everything I can walk everywhere, which is what I'm doing now. It's a weekday night, the streets of the inner city are becoming dusky, and traffic subsides to a murmur. The leaves are falling.

Allegra is her name. We meet at a traditional Irish pub, three blocks away. The wood bar has a glossy finish, and the oily smells of Irish food fill the bar. We talk in a booth over two pints of Guinness. It's my favorite place to meet women, because it's within walking distance of the penthouse.

I'm more forthright as my new life is supplanting my old, but I only speak what's true. At this point, my only hope rests with women. Women are the only pleasure I have left. It's in my best interest to be forthright, time being short. If that goes too, I don't consider life worthwhile, without a single one of life's most basic and fundamental pleasures.

"I'm 7 feet, 6 inches," I say.

“I wasn’t going to ask,” she says. She sips her beer, inadvertently getting foam on her top lip, and looks at me with odd amusement. She’s roughly five-foot-four, with dark-brown eyes, a small oval face, bright white teeth, full lips, curly black hair that falls to her shoulders, and two gold hoops in her ears. She’s wearing a black dress with spaghetti straps, a beige cardigan, and black heels.

“All my family is tall,” I say.

I tell her my family ancestry goes back to John of Gaunt, the father of Henry IV. I tell her it was established through DNA analysis of excavated grave sites in England and America, genetic genealogy, and analysis of historical documents. There are letters, wills, deeds, contracts, and bills of sale on my family’s estate in Connecticut, which has recently passed into my hands. I tell her John of Gaunt was known for his size. His armor standing in the Royal Armouries in London stands at six-foot-nine. I tell people this to throw their assumptions in their faces. Most people think I play basketball on the Hornets.

“You don’t have to be ashamed,” she says. She reads me like a book. “It’s very interesting.” I think about the sense of shame I feel that no woman wants to be with me long term because of my size, which is what I want. When I was at Columbia University 20 years ago, they would give me sympathetic looks, and I towered over them like a dumb, gentle giant, unsure of how to overcome the problem of my height.

I decided to remedy my isolation by driving a taxi when I lived in Manhattan. When I picked up passengers, they told me their stories. Sometimes only a snippet or sometimes entire histories, depending on the length of the fare. I incorporated those stories into myself, creating a

beautiful stained-glass window in my soul. It's the only time, when I'm not always or exclusively in the presence of women, where I felt whole.

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I invite her to the penthouse. She accepts. We pass by the Discovery Place and hook a left at St. Peter's Church. I'm taking her the scenic route. We walk through Fourth Ward, a neighborhood of Victorian houses and lawns with white and purple early-fall flowers. The cool air and the smells of dying leaves reminds me of those fall New England days when I was a boy on the Connecticut estate. All I wanted to do was be outside, do simple things, climb trees in the orchard, go fishing in the river.

There's a woman playing with two young children in Fourth Ward Park. In front, the skyscrapers jut out from behind the houses. When I lived at The VUE all year round, I thought this was the image of happiness. As we pass a cemetery, she runs her fingers along the iron fence and looks in at the headstones.

I pour two gin and tonics with mint and ice. The penthouse has an open floor plan with two stories, three large bedrooms, and 15-foot ceilings. In the living room, there's a large plate glass window that looks west, next to French doors that open onto a balcony. We go out. The

city is visible in the twilight. This view from the 51st floor also used to be a joy for me. She looks out stoically.

I feel life and warmth returning to me talking to her, watching her movements, listening to her speak. I'm just happy to be in the presence of a woman again. It's why I'm still willing to date.

She takes a sip of her drink and looks down.

"What's that?" she says, touching my elbow. She points downward. On the street, I see a large crowd. They are converging from all four sides of the intersection. Some are carrying signs. I see smoke rising. Five police cars fly past, sirens blazing and blue lights flashing. "Something's going on."

Across from the bar where I made the gin and tonics, there's a 98-inch flatscreen HD Smart TV. "TV on," I say.

The local news comes on. The anchor says a Black man was murdered a few hours ago by police in northwest Charlotte. I flip through CNN, MSNBC, ABC, Fox, BBC, Al-Jazeera. It's on all of them. We watch footage of the protests. There are thousands of people spilling into the streets. There are vehicles burning downtown. There's a helicopter footage of hundreds of people blocking a major six-lane highway in the heart of the city.

I go back to the balcony. They're all moving towards center city. All you can hear up here is the wind.

It reminds me of a dream I've been having. There's a giant rock floating in empty space. On the surface, I see human shapes moving with the patterns and spatial arrangements of ants, like an anthill enclosed in plastic or glass. The human shapes migrate and congregate in

predictable patterns. I can recognize patterns, because my education and professional career for the past 20 years are in finance. The planet in my dream could be Earth when it looked different. Brooklyn says it's possible modern civilization was created and destroyed many times over. She says, in 2019, they found ancient traces of man-made radioactive cinder in India.

"I have to go," she says.

I stay at the penthouse that night, puzzling through the events rocking the city. The protests go on into the night, and there are clashes with police. Maybe this is what unsettles me now when I walk around the city, a dark undercurrent too unspeakable to imagine. I sit there watching the TV, unable to look away. I watch the headlines.

Floridian Fetuses Test Positive for Zika. Wells Fargo Fined in Racketeering Investigation. Tensions Mount Over Dakota Access Pipeline. Syrian Government Drops Chlorine Bombs in Aleppo. North Korea Tests Nuclear Warheads. ISIS Claims Responsibility for Nine Stabbed in Minnesota. Deadly Typhoon Megi Hits Asia.

"It's the third murder of a Black man in America by police this month," says the BBC anchor.

I see a burned-out bus in the middle of the road. I sit there, mulling over the stories in my head, trying to incorporate them into the stained-glass window of my soul. It's now I feel the succubus most powerfully, weakening at the points of connection.

I don't have the strength to move. I watch from the balcony as the protests carry on into the night. I'm tired of the dumb show my life is. I take the elevator down. My suit is crumpled from where I slept in it.

As I walk towards downtown, I smell the dying leaves. I remember late autumn afternoons on the estate, where I spent my time in our private apple orchard, climbing the trees and picking the red apples. That was before I shot up to my present height, before people saw me as just a body.

Chants and cries cut the air. There are police in riot gear. Traffic is stopped in all directions. It's hard to see this happening to a city I used to love so much. Some people give me strange looks.

"I'm asking you to be peaceful tonight," says a speaker with a megaphone in the middle of the crowd. "I'm so tired. Tired of the violence. Of the myths people tell themselves to propel that violence. Is it really that hard to live in a world without violence inflicted from one human to another?"

When the crowd moves, I can see the person holding the megaphone come into view, who is short by comparison to the others. It's Allegra. Her hair's tied back tight, she's wearing blue jeans, a purple hoodie with a black backpack, white high-tops, and the two gold hoops. Our eyes meet. She looks at me with a sad, sympathetic expression, as if she can see right through me and understands everything.

It clicks for me then. I know it's what I've been waiting to understand. Everything I enjoyed in life came from a wellspring of corruption. The estate, Columbia, finance, even the apple orchard. Everything. The only thing that might not be is my love for the natural world, but maybe that too was somehow corrupted. All those passengers in the taxi whose stories I greedily listened to, whose lives were so much richer than mine, because they felt real, could

have been me. All those stories on the TV could have been me. They are, in a way, part of me now. I need someone to shatter me, like with a hammer, and remake me.

Then she's gone into the churning sea of humanity. The future looks so bleak, I think. It's women that have to save us all. Let women run the world, and you'll see how quickly everything changes for the better. If not, it will be destroyed by stupidity.

I go back to the penthouse and fall asleep. I don't know how much time has passed when I wake up, but it's full-on night. I see the waning moon. I light a few candles and draw a bath. Before I'm able to get in, I hear the buzzer.

"Who is it?" I say.

"Allegra," she says. "Can I come up?"

I buzz her up and offer her a seat. She sits cross-legged on the couch with her arms on her knees, and I sit next to her.

"Something tells me you understand what I came here to say," she says.

"You won't go out with me on a second date," I say.

"Do you think either of us chose the initial conditions of our lives? Or did the world already decide them for us? We're too far apart, like two ships that outrun each other, passing in opposite directions."

If there's one thing I'll always know, it's that men need women, and women need men, and men need men, and women need women, and humans will keep needing other humans.

"I have to see you again," I say. "I must."

"It's got nothing, I mean nothing, to do with your height."

"Tell me one thing before you go," I say.

She looked at me, waiting for me to speak.

“None of it—the violence, I mean—is random, is it?” I say.

“No,” she says.

She touches my hand. I look at her.

“Why don’t we finish what we started last night and act as if the world isn’t there for a few minutes?” she says. “It’s all we can ever do.”

She already knows I can’t resist her touch.

The following night, I hang up my suit, put on my faded blue jeans, dirty New Balance sneakers, and stained gray T-shirt. I drive back to my house on the outskirts of the city. I had the dream again of the human figures and the rock in space. In it, the human shapes begin showing signs of hostility. The rivers swell with blood, and then everything goes on as it was.

I’m sitting in the living room facing the street. I’ve returned to reading pamphlets on political philosophy, vaping, and drinking gas-station wine. I sit and reflect. I look up and see Brooklyn bent over her desk. She seems to be copying or writing notes. She looks up, smiles, and waves. I wave back. I have an idea.

“Brooklyn,” I say, knocking on her door. She opens it. I’m nearly breathless. “I want you to come to my house.”

“Hi W.S.,” she says. “I’ve never been to your house. You never invited me in the entire year you’ve lived here.”

“I am now,” I say.

“OK,” she says. “It’s a strange request.” She puts on a coat and boots, tucks her 9mm Smith & Wesson in her waist because she doesn’t take any chances, and we walk over to my house. When we go inside, the stench of mold smacks in the face. I know there’s black mold growing in the spot above my head when I sleep. By now it’s penetrated into the rest of the house.

“Good God,” she says. “It smells awful in here.”

“This is my house,” I say. “Let me show you around.” She covers her nose and mouth with her coat.

We enter the bedroom. The tobacco-colored stain on the ceiling seems to have grown while I was away. It’s almost the size of the entire bedroom ceiling. I’m shocked.

“What is it?” she says.

I lie down on the bed, demonstrating there’s no harm, and when I shift my giant frame, it sends a shudder up the wall. My vision darkens as I look up at the water-logged ceiling, and I see the face of a beautiful woman looking out at me. I know it’s the face of the succubus. I feel a steady stream of cold drops falling onto my forehead. I shut my eyes, and I hear the whoosh, groan, and crack of the succubus, coming to take me away...

“Fuck me!” I shout in anguish at the top of my lungs. I’m writhing in ice-cold water and black slime, my eyes and mouth frothing and foaming and spitting bubbles and bits of wood, drywall, and black ooze. Most of the ceiling collapses on me. The water is bracingly cold, and I become conscious of my body looking up at stars. It used to be one of my fondest joys. I look up through the hole in the roof at the starry sky where the rain was entering from, and I see

myself as I am, the ridiculous, derided giant, wriggling all over with coldness, humiliation, and despair.

“I won’t do that,” she says, laughing. “You’re all filthy and disgusting. But I will go out on a date with you. I was wondering if you’d ever ask. Even before that, you need to make some serious changes.”

It’s like she knows me better than I know myself. I don’t know if she’s doing it out of pity, but Brooklyn has always been kind to me. Brooklyn represents my last hope. I’m sorry to lay that at her feet, but if I—now fully W.S. Henry—die, I’ll make sure she can’t tell the difference.

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