

The New Syllabus Presents

*A Beach Without Water
is a Terrible Way to Die*

A Romantic Novel

(Digital Re-issue of the 2014 Edition)

by Antarah Crawley

New Syllabus DC
2017

Part One

Lydia

The joint had been snuffed in the ashtray and pleasant tea time chit-chat in Lydia's sun-drenched living room had given way to more personal matters.

“I know exactly how you feel. I used to drag my baggage behind me when Richard left. Bags and bags of mascara and toner and concealer...metaphorically of course...to hide the scars...” Lydia gave an intense look of epiphany, as if she had surprised herself; it soon subsided, leaving behind a soft afterglow.

Her hair had grown, Joan observed as she leisurely scanned Lydia's ageless face; past those grass-green eyes, spring's perpetual domain, that long narrow nose like a Rocky Mountain snow cap, those pouty apple-red lips looking as if they'd freshly fallen from the branch of her brow, then returning to its horizon where a golden field of high, bending wheat blew in the breeze of this perfect pastoral scene. She must have stopped cutting it, Joan thought, just like she had stopped using deodorant because she thought it might be a link to breast cancer.

“So you got rid of all the bags?” Joan asked.

“Yes.” Her eyes were now closed and she had gone back to meditating on her ottoman.

“But the possessions...all of the things you spent your hard-earned money on...”

“That's just what they are: possessions. You have to

view them as such, and not as necessities.”

Joan sipped, nodding introspectively. “You think it's so easy.”

“You will, too, soon.”

“It's so easy for you to say that. You seem so at peace. So...perfect.”

“Far from it. I shudder for my life to be perfect again.”

“Again? So the good years with Richard, when you were first married? Those weren't perfect?”

“No, no, I'm saying that they were perfect, short though they were.”

“And you wouldn't want that back?”

“Well,” she opened her eyes, “Of course not. I said, they *were* perfect. Perfection is always temporary, either in the wake of tragedy, or something better. I don't want those years back, perfect though they may have been. It would have led to him cheating on me again.”

“But what if you could have just the perfect years. And those lasted...”

She gave a quack of a laugh. “The monotony of a perfect life will grow stale...like how even a blaring siren might eventually fade into atmosphere. Even during the good years, you know—God I loved him—but I was beginning to feel dead. More dead with him than I ever did when he first left me. That old love story gets stale, monotony turns to silence; silence is death. I kind of wanted the pain of heartbreak again. I wanted the pain so I could feel alive.”

“No.”

“Yes... Hm. You wouldn't understand. You're too involved in it at this point.”

“Involved in what?”

“In yourself. The misery you feel. As this journey of yours continues, you will realize. You'll realize that the misery was good, that you needed the misery to begin the journey.”

Joan made an expression, the kind one assumes when aching to say something more, but she withheld her quandary, and the streams of sun running through the three wall-sized windows slowly drifted toward the East.

There was an interim in which they spoke of inconsequential things, as people will do to avoid topics more pertinent. But through these frivolities, the shadows behind the objects slowly emerge, and one finds that it is the shadow which holds all meaning, and the object is superficial.

Men came up. Lydia balked. So childish, no naïve. To Joan, naïve as well, but only in the abstract sense of which they were speaking. Behind the idea of a well-dressed man with a good salary and white teeth, darkness fell, and soon engulfed the topic.

“I've been doing it again,” Joan professed. “I've been seeking out danger. I mean, not danger. I'm no racist.”

Lydia nodded.

“Black men aren't dangerous...per say... I'm drawn to that side, though. And not in a romantic way. I mean, yes,

in a romantic way, in terms of the whole idea. But the relationship I want, decidedly not romantic.”

“The rape fantasy.”

“It can't even be rape if I'm allowing it to happen,” Joan said dismissively.

“Well...”

“I...I like going to Southeast and being around the...I guess, working men. Or maybe they don't work, I don't know. I mean, like, men of the underbelly. But...I'm not racist. How can I be? I think about them all the time.”

“Mmhm.”

“But I don't like where it's going. It's becoming more than a fantasy. I'm seeking it out.”

Lydia nodded.

“I think it's...a condition of my madness.”

“See there—you say that all the time, 'your madness,' like you're claiming it. But how can you be mad if you admit to yourself that you're mad?”

“Well, it doesn't matter how removed or not you are from you own...quirks, let's call them. They're still objectively quirks; they're still beyond the norm. These...images I come up with, they're not things that everyone experiences.”

“Well, no two people are ever experiencing the same thing.”

“But there's a general bell curve of human conditions, no? Most people, in terms of...sexual desires...fantasies...cluster in the middle of the spectrum.

And that, by consensus, is what society—the average of it's sum—deems normal. I know I'm not normal, but I'm also not stupid.”

Lydia sighed. “What's normal--”

“Okay, okay, preach your hippie bullshit about subjectivity and all that. But identity doesn't exist in a void. There's always a norm—a society around you—off of which you analyze your own actions.”

“And...”

“What do you mean 'and'? And, I'm mad.”

“Okay, let's say that.”

“Yes, dear. Let's.”

“Okay, what's so unnerving about giving into your own deep, personal desires? Even if they're not the norm. Everyone gives in to at least one of their...vices... Nietzsche'd say that every man has a bait he cannot resist biting.”

“Well, I don't want to go too far. I know who I am, I know what I want...kind of. But even if I don't know completely, I know when I am taking things too far.”

“Can we measure these things?”

“Surely. By the ruler of society. That's why it's there. To give us a guide. And sure, you *can* veer off the beaten path, to use a beaten phrase, but why do it if there's no overwhelming call to. I mean from within. I don't want to be *that* woman.”

Lydia nodded and looked about the room.

“I mean...I started going mad...that is,

developing...strange, twisted urges...maybe shortly after 2001. It was very scary, and especially so because I could see myself losing it, like there was a conventional, conservative Joan being silenced; who could only watch from some ethereal place as her body went about its own disgusting way. But, I admit, I grew to enjoy the...madness. And I was aware of it, keeping it in check, but I realized, Hey, I like this, a little bit of it can't hurt. When Early would be away on business, and Timothy by this time was gone, and Camilla... Well, when the house was empty, I could let my fantasies run free without being self-conscious, because I knew that they were contained inside the walls of that house. It was fun. But now it's like, I wholly submit to my fantasies. They're intruding my life now, they're becoming rampant. And I don't want to lose control of them, obviously. I see a dark man. Not black per say. But just...dark. Dark features. Like he's always under a shadow. I see him when I close my eyes and he turns me on. I see a boy too, a real black boy. And I see ghosts. Sometimes.”

“...Do they frighten you?”

“No, I just said I like them.”

“The ghosts I mean.”

“Oh. Well, the ghosts...I don't know. The ghosts, I feel, *have* to be there. They're always there. It's like the darkness can't exist without the ghosts. And since I'm aroused by the darkness, I guess, the ghosts go hand-in-hand...even though...more often than not...they mean the end of darkness. Or, at least, their mission is to thwart it.

To conquer it.”

“To conquer the darkness.”

“Yeah.”

“...You have these fantasies...at home, or...?”

“They used to occur only in my house. More often after Early left for good. They kind of kept me company. It was comfortable for them to be there. I could...you know, *do my business*, anywhere in the house without anyone interrupting. But then I started thinking about them everywhere. And I'd get wet in the most inappropriate places. And I wouldn't be able to stop myself from...going somewhere and...*doing my business*...lest I start rubbing away in public. Sometimes I'd use objects. Whatever was around. The handle of a toilet brush. You know... Or maybe you don't.”

“No, no, I understand,” Lydia said touching Joan's knee.

“...Anyway, yeah, I don't know. I just don't want to be seeking out what...I think I'm looking for. It's too dangerous.”

“Pleasure is dangerous?”

“Yes. The most dangerous of all. At least when it comes to pain, you know what to expect. But when pleasure causes fear, it's the most frightening thing.”

“Have these fantasies become any more severe?”

“Not really. But now that Timothy's in my house, I feel...like I can't be how I want to be. It's very annoying. My desires are my only friends. Without them I'd be manic,

more mad than I could every be while having them around to cope with. What do I have without them? Shit. A shit life. No job, no partner, no loving children, a house that's been recycled so many times it doesn't even feel like it's mine. And Timothy's there, shoving all the past in my face. I just want to be alone, that's what makes me happy, that's what keeps me sane. There was love in the house when I was there alone. Now...there's no love. It's been drained. What's a house without love, huh? May as well be as cold and cruel as the woods. That boy has stolen from me my solitude, my only happiness.”

“You appear to harbor feelings toward your own blood which can only snowball into rage. And then what?”

“My own blood? There's a grown man who I hate living in *my* house. That's not the boy I gave birth to. I don't know where that kid is. Maybe he died. I had so much fun with that kid, but that feels like eons ago. Another life. I don't know who this strange man is.”

“I feel like I have to ask you this, considering his...stranger-ness...and the emotional stock we put into the 'neighbor-thing', the unknown, the uncanny. In a dark way, do you want to have sexual relations with him? Or, I should say, do you want him to advance you. Is the hatred you feel really resentment toward the fact that he won't, and, indeed, cannot?”

After a while, Joan said, “No...I'd rather kill him. I want him out. I want him out!”

Lydia uncrossed her legs. “This is a dangerous train

of thought, Joan. Do you have fantasies about killing him?"

Joan dropped her head.

"*This* is a madness that you need to get a hold of...before it starts to...run rampant."

There was silence, and Lydia continued, "It sounds like you have an affliction of the soul, a pharmacon of the spirit. There are those who specialize directly in these...spiritual plagues."

"Psychiatrists? I had a couple. And let me tell you, you do a better job than any of them ever did."

"No, psychiatrists specialize in afflictions of the mind, which, while intangible like the spirit, is a different can of worms altogether. Think of it in the rule of three's. The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. Mind, Body, and Spirit. Or in Freudian terms—the Id, Ego, Super-Ego. Legislative, Judicial, Executive. We can go on and on. But Freud offers the best model, even though his correlated directly to the mind itself. Nevertheless, we can make it fit: the body is the Super-Ego, our projection to the world; the mind is the Ego, the informant of the Super-Ego, the mediator between societal norms and our raw instinctual trends; and the Spirit is the Id, the suppressed Other of our psyche, that which manifests itself in strange and peculiar ways, that which informs our every thought, action, and desire, and yet that which we try hardest to erase. It's a horse of a different color. You need one who specialized in the uber-subconscious, that which we *don't know* we don't know; that which is logically impossible to our notion of our self. You

need a plague doctor. If you don't get the problem under control now, your disease will manifest itself permanently in your psyche and manners. And society will *definitely* not look favorably upon that.”

Joan drank the rest of her tea, over-extracted and lukewarm, made a grimace, and asked, “Where do I find one of those?”

Dr. Dunnlevvy kept his practice in the basement of an old curiosity's shop in the far west end of Georgetown. Joan was admitted to him by his secretary, so it seemed, a skinny girl with dark hair and a poor constitution. The only endearing things about her were her ocean eyes, which rippled with clear, vibrant greens and blues. As was intimated, she only appeared to be the secretary, for when Joan found her, she was dressed merely in a black tank top and jeans, sitting behind the counter reading a magazine. The ground level of the building in which the supposed illustrious Doctor practiced looked more like a place one went in order to avoid going to a real doctor. Adorned on all walls and shelves were shrunken heads, jars full of oddly-colored concoctions, incense, burlap sacks filled with unknown supplements, tins of herbs and teas, glass containers housing live insects, burning candles, freshly-woven spider webs, lanterns hanging from the ceiling, and browned, faded, ancient-looking scrolls hung upon the walls elaborating, in vague sketches and foreign characters, how to complete such tasks as an exorcism and a séance. The

room itself appeared to have been built sometime prior to 1900. It had evidently never been painted. The bare wood gave off a pungent organic smell full of all the secrets and desires absorbed over the past one hundred years.

Compared to the aroma of a clear autumn day, of dry leaves and pumpkin spice, as was present on the outside, the interior of this building gave off an odor of fertile soil, rain, and grass, much like a freshly-dug grave.

The girl looked up quite startled when Joan, by entering, set off the bell above the door. She had at first believed herself to be in the wrong building, but was promptly corrected when she noticed above the counter a wooden sign that read, in peeling red paint:

Physician

Dr. William Quentin Dunnlevvy

Then the girl affirmed her.

“You're Joan Markowitz?”

“Yes,” replied Joan, looking around anxiously.

“Ah, right. Lydia recommended you?”

“Right.”

“Right, you're expected.”

“It didn't look like it, the way you shot up like that.”

“Oh, that,” the girl laughed, brushing off her behavior. “That was just because no one comes in here at all. I almost forgot that we had a bell above the door. Surprised me, that's all.”

The girl retired her magazine and got up, making her way toward a closed door beside the entrance to the

receptionist's counter. Stopping at the door, she looked at Joan and gestured for her to join. Joan followed with much hesitation. As she approached the door, the girl opened it; from that dark hole sprung forth an odor more pungent and unfathomable than was present in the shop.

“Lordy,” said Joan.

The girl laughed, then gestured at Joan to enter.

As she descended the dark, creaking staircase clutching her purse, she turned to the girl and asked, “Won't you accompany me?”

“Oh no,” the girl said. “There's nothing wrong with *me*.” And then she proceeded to yell, “Patient's coming,” and closed the door abruptly.

A darkness bolder than that one induces by closing one's own eyes then engulfed poor Joan, now petrified, and she was momentarily filled with pre-death, the acceptance of total annihilation. But that brief feeling subsided as a light then flickered slowly forward—a natural light. Its source was obscured by the staircase; she descended and found its origin, as well as its benefactor. At the bottom of the stairwell, she found herself in a mostly-empty room whose walls were made up of chipped, exposed brick and whose dusty floor had never been done. This quickly became a moment in which Joan observed that the nature of those few objects in the room was more important than their scarcity. There was one table in a corner upon which two dozen candles had created a mountain of red and white wax. Half of them were lit; that was the source of the light.

The other half of the candles were being lit by a figure whom Joan, for lack of an introduction, was forced to assume to be Dr. Dunnlevvy. “Dr. Dunnlevvy?” Joan inquired; but when no response came she returned to looking about the room, and he remained silently in that corner, his back turned to her, while he finished lighting the candles. There was no chair in the room on which she could sit, which is why she continued to stand, her hands remained firmly on the straps of her purse. The only other articles of furniture were a desk presumably belonging to the Doctor, although there was no chair at it nor was there anything medical-related upon it, and a wooden rack reclined to a perfectly horizontal orientation so that it resembled a none too inviting bed. Joan turned around and noticed that in the far dimly-lit corner, there stood an iron maiden. As the significance of this observation dawned on her, she turned her head back around to inquire, and was met with a sight much more unnerving. The Doctor himself was an oddity. “He” may even have been an inaccurate pronoun for Joan to use, for his person was completely obscured by his dress. Primarily, his face was covered by a large black mask which held the shape of a beak. In it there were two large, opaque, gold-lined glass lenses which resembled aviators' goggles. His covered head was adorned by a wide-brimmed flat-topped black hat. His mask gathered at the neck like a scarecrow, and the flaps of it hung over a floor-length black leather gown. He wore large floppy gloves reminiscent of a welder's, and black leather

boots. His only tool was a wooden cane he held in his left hand. At the sight of him Joan was much too bewildered to be scared.

Dr. Dunnlevvy looked through his glass lenses at Joan for some time without speaking. Joan passively, and even graciously, received his inspection. He then pointed his cane to a location on the floor before the rack. Joan quietly and meekly obliged him. He took her purse when she neared and placed it on his desk, and then he uttered one word: Undress.

Joan obliged once more, and when she was quite bare, he lay his cane upon the rack, which she promptly mounted and lay thereon awaiting further instruction.

Somehow, it all felt so routine. The coarse wood on her back and buttocks felt as comfortable to her as a standard paper-lined operating table in a brightly lit office would have felt to a Georgetown housewife. She tried to keep herself from getting too aroused.

The Doctor rounded the table as he continued to inspect the naked woman. She could not discern anything he may have been thinking, whether it was medical quandary or sexual intrigue, behind that dense black mask. Finally, he stopped. He set his cane into a holster on his garment and proceeded to tie Joan's ankles to the bottom roller with coarse rope. He spread her legs apart and secured them in that manner, and Joan feared she might burst forth a gushing stream of excitement all over the Doctor's nice rack. He then secured her wrists likewise.

After everything was in its right place Joan, in attempt to seem a bit less willing to spontaneous bondage, asked, “Is this quite necessary?”

Without answering, the Doctor promptly cranked the handle, drawing from Joan an animal scream, until she was fully elongated. Then he went to the center of the rack and cranked the pivot until Joan was situated on the apparatus at around seventy-five degrees. Coming back around to her front, they could now see each other more or less eye-to-eye. Joan displayed no emotion. The Doctor simply observed her, looking her up and down. At length, he commenced his physical examination, by which he prodded her in various places with his cane for many minutes. After a while of this he said: Speak. And Joan asked, “What about?” to which the Doctor replied, “Why have you come here? Your illness, no? Speak on it.” And Joan, whilst enduring the curious, fetishistic methods of this so-called Doctor, relayed to him all she had told Lydia, all her feelings toward her son, her ex-husband, her desires, her sexual fantasies, the grief regarding her mother, what her other psychiatrists had said, and what she herself genuinely believed to be true. And when she had exhausted herself, the Doctor said, “You are hurting. More than many. You feel more. Because you desire more. The more you desire the more you'll hurt. My diagnosis? How to stop hurting? Cut the wounds deeper. Cut deeper, bleed out, salt, repeat.”

“Salt?” replied Joan.

“Salt the wounds,” said the Doctor. “Preferably in the

process of washing them.”

“So use salt water? You want me to cut myself?”

The Doctor did not reply promptly. He only said, “When the wounds reveal themselves, you must bleed them and salt them. Go to a beach without water. There you will find a deserted ocean and you will use its water to salt your wounds.”

“How will I get water from a beach that has none? Where will I even find a beach that's all dried up?”

“Go to where the love dried up...”

“What?”

“Where you lost your greatest love...”

“...I think I understand...”

“Go there. Leave your son; and maybe, if you return, you might be able to truly love him.”

A bout of silence then ensued, during which only stares were exchanged; and it was about ten minutes into this episode when Joan realized that she had leaked all over the wood of the rack. The moisture began to chill on her buttocks. And yet she could not look away from the mysterious beakéd man. No sooner did Joan feel she was going to leak again did the Doctor pull off his gloves and drop his garment, revealing a smooth, fit, caramel-colored body. The Doctor then said, nearing her, “Let's get you cleaned up.”

* * *

“I've got to go away,” Joan said over the phone, already making her way up New York Avenue after having stopped

off at Lydia's for a quick nap.

“Why?” Timothy responded over the sound of exploding machine guns.

“I just need to clear my mind now. It's been racing since the summertime... And all I want is what I can't find now. So I'm going to Annapolis, maybe I'll find it there. I hope you can wait...”

And she waited for a response, but the computer-generated war going on in the background of the phone call had already stolen the boy's attention. Joan hung up and peered into the rear view. The cardboard boxes in the back seat ached to speak to her. She wanted them to say something, to comfort her. But they remained inanimate, these pieces of baggage. And so she could not distract herself from thinking of her son who she felt had died in that imaginary battle. What have we become as mothers? The war machine continues to run, polished and humming; and we keep feeding it our children.

Part Two
Tin Flower Blues

ROWE BLVD SOUTH, EXIT 24 burst out of the night on a luminous green sign, Joan's headlights cursing over it;—and she woke. She rubbed out sleep which had accumulated in the corners of her eyes, merged to the right, the hypnotic purring of rubber on concrete threatening to lull her to sleep again, and took the exit onto MD-70 EAST. The deepest part of the night was behind her and the sky had begun to blue in anticipation of its hot lover's coming. Her head began to nod beyond her own control and a prospect of falling asleep and careening off the road into a ravine crept across her frontal lobe. Her nap at Lydia's had been precursory in the wake of a much longer sleep, either on the couch when she arrived at her late mother's house in Annapolis, or in a shallow grave surrounded by a cold, steel body. She thought that, in either case, it would be a relief.

A sign alluding to the COLLEGE AVE/MD-450 WEST exit just several hundred feet ahead approached the car, climaxed, and fell back. There was but one more stretch of highway she had to travel before she entered the city, one more, albeit potentially dangerous for her to travel in her present state of mind. About one hundred feet down, before the turn, a bright neon sign appeared before her reading MOTEL in large red contours, and BAR and REST STOP in blue underneath. Joan slowed in its growing presence until she was right underneath of it. She hunched over her

steering wheel squinting up at it for some time before she submitted to her fading attention span and turned into the lot. She pulled into a parking space in front of a small building and looked about her surroundings. There were no other cars, not in the spaces beside her, nor in the multitude of lots that ran along a three-sided square of ground-level motel rooms which protruded from the back of the building and swung to the right of her. The building in front of her was squat, humble, one story, tin roof, with tinted windows that teased the viewer with opaque colorful lights on the inside and a lit OPEN sign by the door. A hand-written “menu” taped to the outside of the first window, water damaged and bleeding ink, read “concierge, tap, coffee, your heart's desires.”

Joan got out of her car and walked to the black wooden door of the building with a temperament that treated danger in this situation as some vague prospect cast somewhere in the distance. She pushed the door open; it resisted force for three short centimeters, and then with Joan using all the strength of her body, it collapsed altogether with a pained *CREAK* and slammed against the back of the wall; she stumbled in as the door gave way, caught her balance, and composed herself; looking up she was met with the vision of a country night—many bright eyes all focused upon her from under the veil of an almost completely unlit room, most of which which fell with contact. All the eyes of women.

The bar was an island in the center of the room.

Above, a round cabinet mirrored its circumference; this was the structure on which the only lights in the place were hung nude. Joan could see a woman at the bar, and the bartender. Booths ran along the walls of the room. To each booth sat a woman. They were all dressed as if they expected, at four in the morning on a highway in eastern Maryland, to be approached by some young naval officer and whisked away to a ball. Some of them glanced back up from under their veil and then immediately averted their gaze. Joan attempted to pay no attention to their looks and walked to the bar. Those eyes would appear again from time to time. She assumed it was only because she looked terrible. "Where did *she* come from," is what they must have been thinking.

She took a seat. The bartender polished glasses behind the counter and did not look up. At the adjacent side of the bar sat a woman who appeared to be aged fourteen and forty at the same time. Her face was thin and marked with definitive angles around her jaw. Her dress was cut low, red, and showed how modest her breasts were. She wore black sunglasses and shimmering red lipstick, and when Joan observed her on an occasion when the woman looked away, it was clear that she presented a well-executed illusion of soft clear skin, when in fact scrutiny revealed the bumps around her left cheek. Joan looked away from her when the woman turned her head back toward the bartender, and then back again when she presented the opportunity. She couldn't tell if she was attractive. She

presented a rough kind of beauty that might take years to excavate—yet the surface made it clear that such beauty was present.

“What are you looking for?” the bartender asked.

There was a silence the wake of this. “...Love,” Joan laughed.

“Love? We got that.”

“I—I was kidding. I just needed a, um, room...a piece of paper outside said that the front desk was in...this bar.”

“Yeah. Yeah, I can help you with that in one moment.” The bartender turned to walk away and then stopped as if there was something he forgot to say. He made unsuccessful movements to turn around, and then finally, with his head turned over his shoulder, said: “But, uh, if you need...Love...we got that.”

Joan smiled a short segment of a smile as the bartender walked away. She knocked her knuckles lightly against the wooden bar and balled her lips in impatience even though the bartender/concierge had walked away not two seconds prior. The smell of burning oak permeated her nostrils and she looked up to see that the woman across from her had just lit a cigarette. She looked away.

“Love...” said the stranger, in a voice that vibrated the air like the D on an upright bass.

Joan turned a shy countenance toward her.

“...World's longest four-letter word. Takes a mile to travel from the speaker's mouth to the listener...and even still, it takes a lifetime to process it...its magnitude.” She

spoke this as if to the liquor bottles, as if to her own reflection in the mirror behind the bar. Then she turned to Joan and smiled. She picked up her pack of Reds and extended it in offering, "Want one?"

Joan's head nodded slowly after hesitation. The woman got up and walked around the corner to sit in the bar stool directly beside Joan's. She pulled a cigarette from the pack and put it to her lips, the flame to its tip, and inhaled. She removed it, stained in red at the filter tip, and handed it to Joan who received it with uneasiness. Her skepticism lifted as of the first drag. Her lead became lighter, much lighter than before. The lights became brighter, whiter. The woman assumed a queer allure.

"You seem lost, honey," she said.

"No," Joan inhaled, "I was just on my way to Annapolis. But I got tired," she exhaled.

"Mhm. How romantic that you came into our little bar then, isn't it?"

"I guess." She inhaled again, leaving a thin tail of smoke behind to dance before her eyes. "Why are you open at this time anyway?"

"Oh, we're always open," the stranger laughed.

Joan began to catch some of the energy in the air and chuckled too, putting the cigarette back to her lips. Her heart rate began to race.

The front door slammed open. Joan, startled, turned around to see a silhouetted man walk in and look around, his image obscured by the backdrop of the neon-lit parking

lot. He stopped turning his head around when he seemed to find what he was looking for, and walked over to a booth in the far left corner of the room.

“Don't mind him,” the stranger said.

“You know him?”

“M-hm.”

Joan took another drag which, when she pulled the cigarette away, left a stream of smoke lingering in her midst, eddying against the natural flow of the stagnant air.

“My name is Sundra,” said the stranger.

Joan's face contorted.

“I know...it's weird,” Sundra giggled, inhaling again. “But I'm weird.”

Joan nodded politely and made the effort to continue facing forward, but her attention was drawn out of the corner of her eye to this Sundra, who seemed now to contribute more light to the room than the lights above her.

“Would you like to hear a song?” Sundra asked. “I just came up with it, right before you walked in...I was writing it down on that napkin over there. Stay here.” Sundra put her cigarette out in an empty ashtray and walked back to where she was sitting before. She picked up a dry napkin and looked at it for some time. She put it down and picked up her glass, draining its crystal contents, and set it back down looking back to Joan with a smile. And then a spotlight faded in, directed at the right corner of the room where a stage and microphone appeared. (A shadowed doorway could be seen to the right of it.) Sundra walked

from the bar with her napkin and took the stage as intervals of delicate claps echoed throughout the room. A jazz recording sounded from somewhere. It was slow, with light, caressing taps of the hi-hats and melancholy weeps of a trumpet. She took off her glasses, revealing a blue-black bruise around her left eye. She approached the microphone. "This song is called *Tin Flowers*. I wrote it just ten minutes ago," she smiled, the bar laughed, and then she began...with a baritone introduction that pulled Joan's heart down between her legs...

I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you
You wanted roses
I hope foil will do

I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you
You wanted roses
I hope foil will do...

Let's start over new
Before my heart closes
I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you

The truth ain't for you
It juxtaposes, so
I hope foil will do

Yeah, I hope foil will do

I know you wanted roses
I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you

This rose ain't for you
It just decomposes, so
I hope foil will do...

Roses are red, violets are blue
Get out this glass house, before it forecloses
I picked this bouquet, of tin flowers for you
I hope foil will do...

And that last note, that last “do,” echoed throughout the room and around the eddies of smoke and perfume in a piercing E that might have shattered every glass and bottle in the place if after ten seconds it did not come to its humble and composed conclusion. Sundra bowed her head and every palm in the place was slapping palm. She left the stage, the spotlight died, that corner of the room became obliterated by darkness again.

She walked up right next to Joan, whose mouth was left agape by the do. “I take it you fancy my singing then?” she smiled.

“Wow,” Joan struggled to ejaculate. She took a deep breath and was compelled to look away. “You have to excuse me. I haven't been completely myself these past few hours... Come to think of it, I haven't been myself for a couple of months... You know how a person's life can just fall apart, like a sweater with one gentle tug of a loose

string”

Sundra ran the palm of her hand against Joan's back. “When it comes to who we are, can any of us really know? We change every instant, with every observation, with every touch... We're changing now.”

Joan was silent, staring down at the butt in her hand that had gone out.

“I'll tell you something,” said Sundra, “My own mother wouldn't recognize me now.”

The bartender returned smiling, evidently at the relationship that had unfolded in the short time.

“Your room is ready,” he said. “Would you like Sundra to show you to it?” He turned around and went back to polishing glasses.

Sundra ran her hand down Joan's arm and took her hand. Joan put the cigarette butt on the bar and followed the stranger-no-more out of the building, her head hung in thought. She replayed Sundra's song in her head.

The walk to the other side of the lot—door No. 19—was as quiet as the twilight. It had lightened still, at 4:55 being bluer in parts and less overwhelming, but still possessing the sedative effects of darkness upon one's vision. Joan felt herself falling out of reality as her feet hitting the black concrete of the parking lot seemed to float as if gravity were absolving her of its grasp, the only thing keeping her grounded being Sundra. They reached the door and Sundra pulled out a key; she slipped it in.

“Wait,” said Joan.

“Oh, I wouldn't have come in if you didn't want me to--”

“No...that's not it.” She looked into Sundra's yellow eyes. “I just need warmth. I don't know...I've been getting it from the strangest places recently...”

Sundra wrapped her arms around Joan's body. It trembled in the embrace, but not from any kind of anxiety. Joan slid her arms around Sundra's waist and lay her forehead on her shoulder.

“I'm here for you. Our meeting was not a coincidence. This rest stop is a sanctuary for souls like you...”

Joan looked up into her face again. She kissed her. The wax lipstick on Sundra's mouth proved to be some kind of adhesive agent, pulling back as if they didn't want her lips to leave.

“...And me.”

They entered the room, still in each others arms, the room dark, and fell onto the bed next to the door. Sundra kicked the door closed and her stilettos off. Her kisses were superficial and dry, her tongue kept with reserve behind her teeth. She rose and stood erect at the side of the bed. She began to pull up her dress when Joan intervened and slid the short red fabric up her thighs; Sundra took it the rest of the way. The little bit of light showing in from the window above the bed illuminated Sundra's torso, but obscured her face. Her breasts were small and exposed. They were almost not there. But Joan began kissing, first her belly

button, then up Sundra's thin trail of hair to her chest and licked her prunish nipples. She began thrusting her pelvis at the air between them. She pulled herself away and removed her own dress; she pulled her underwear down and grabbed Sundra's hips, pulling her cotton-clad crotch toward her face; it could be seen in the light now. She began to tease it with her teeth through the underwear; but, upon contact, it began in turn to tease her. She pulled her face away. She looked up at Sundra. She could not discern any look of emotion behind the shadowed face, almost as if it were made of stone. Joan looked back at the woman's crotch, which bulged underneath of the cotton drawers. She slowly crept her hands up Sundra's thighs and grabbed at the waist band, yanked it down and within a fragment of a second, she violently transformed into some uncertain pronoun. Joan recoiled into the middle of the bed, her heart rate rising now, her chest expanding and contracting like a accordion, blaring a loud ringing in her head. Her elbows, which she had propped herself upon, gave way and she collapsed into a fetal position on the bed. Tears began flowing freely from of her eyes. Her breaths became sobs and whelps. A puddle of moisture soon formed on the bed below her head.

Joan snorted and looked toward the wall. She snorted again. "It's not you," she whined. She turned her head toward Sundra who stood stark naked at the side of the bed with the body of a little boy and a head obscured by darkness. Joan's cheeks were all wet now. She took her

palm and brashly wiped them, then she got up on the bed and crawled toward the body. She took the balls and penis in her mouth and massaged them with her tongue. She let them fall out and then she took the penis alone in her mouth, soft and comfortable, and began to suck it like a pacifier. It began expanding, filling up her mouth, touching the back of her molars now, and she gagged. She spit it out and began crying again. She pulled her legs back up to her chest. The body bent over and began to pull it's underwear back up.

"No," Joan said between sobs. She grabbed Sundra's arm. "Please. Come," she said pulling the arm around her.

Sundra, like some kind of apparition, crawled onto the bed and floated around Joan's balled-up body. She wrapped her arm around her and nestled her crotch against Joan's ass. Joan's crying fell into silent weeps, and then into shallow breathing...

"Are you awake?" Sundra asked.

"Will you leave if I fall asleep?"

"...No..."

"..." Joan's breathing returned to a resting beat. "I can't fall asleep anymore..."

"I'll tell you a story," Sundra said. The sweet deepness in her voice had returned.

"Okay."

"I wrote it about a month ago. Semi-biographical; about one of my friends. He's gone now though..."

"I'm sorry..."

“Don't be. He's with me in spirit. He's in the room right now. In the story. Let me see if I can do it justice. I think I've pretty much memorized it by now...” She cleared her throat... “Once upon a time, and all that jazz...”

“There were two guys named Juliot and Haggard.

“They sit on the porch smoking and drinking too much vodka. Haggard sips sitting solemnly sedated. He alternates his cigarette hand with his drinking hand just like clockwork. The sun shines through the purple foliage of the tree lined Adam's Morgan streets, casting a cool milieu over him. He seems at home in it, as if he himself radiates such energy. Who is Ian Haggardy, whose bodily mosaic of tattoos could radiate purple and other cools? He gives no fucks. He takes pleasure in the mere aroma of marijuana and of good food. He's the kind of guy to never go out of his way for anyone. Doesn't have to. He's lucid; a fluid kind of guy. Never inhales cigarettes harsh. Never downs booze in a hurry. His mannerisms are almost non-existent. And yet Juliot, still, feels like a flimsy leaf in the breeze in contrast, whose throat burns with the alcohol.

“Juliot was born on an island just off the shore of Maryland near Annapolis. His house sat right on the water, next to a large cliff. His mother never set foot in a hospital; she ran to the ocean when her water broke, and Juliot was born into this salty, thrashing sea. As a young boy, his father would plunge him into the water and he would respond with shrieks of joy. As a preteen, he'd climb the cliffs. As a teen, he plunged into them. 'You've got to be a

man,' his father'd say. He jumped from the cliffs and let himself get tossed around by the waves. He let that grand indifferent cycle of current drag him in and out. And maybe, if his stars were aligned, the sea would wash him ashore.

"He left the island at eighteen to move to DC. He worked for a while at an indie coffee shop, living cheaply in Mt. Pleasant before the rent got inconceivable...

"He was a favorite of some of the local girls, and when he had to leave his little basement flat they drew him in. He'd go with it, just like he would go with the current when he jumped into the sea; but something about those girls was abrasive, not fluid. They wanted him to fuck them. 'Fuck me, fuck me', they'd scream in their half-sided passion. After many sexual encounters like this, he began to wonder: what is this vague space, the cunt? What is this clit, valueless pearl?

"She looks like a paper bag, when I fuck her,' he once said to Haggard. 'Vaginal sex is like a sloppy handshake.' Conversations like these, he'd be talking incoherently, pulling things to say from a space inside of him that was unexplored. 'I've always liked head better. And ball-sucking and assplay.' He'd chuckle. 'But, like, I keep fucking them and everything. The girls I mean.' He opened his mouth to say more, but the thing he knew was there in that strange place wouldn't roll out: I fuck them because I want to see how it feels to be fucked.

"The first time Juliot met Haggard, they were both

drunk. Haggard was his perpetual, imposing self drunk. Juliot was a queen. He figures he must have made a pass, because in a rush of sledge-hammer heart beats, Haggard was behind him in his Adams Morgan row house bedroom, and Juliot clawing at the pillows like they were anchors, shrieking with pure, sustained orgasm.

“They hung out a lot after that; Juliot eventually moved into the house. They drank but never did *that* again. Juliot often looked for the sign, the shimmer in Haggard’s blue eyes when he looked at him, but he never found it. It was as if it never happened.

“Chance would make it all better, he figured. Natural attraction would work itself out. Those barista girls came around every once in a while but Juliot brushed them away. It was his turn now. It was his turn to get fucked. He hung out with Haggard for several months while they lived together. They ate dinner with their house mates; they watched *Blue Velvet* over and over together. They smoked out on the porch often, and Haggard never stirred.

“One evening, Haggard brought a guy over to have dinner at the house. This guy, Juliot thought, looked a lot like himself. That black hair. That long neck. That boniness. The two of them would always disappear after dinner. Night after night, this kid—Andy—ate the food that Juliot made, and seemed to never get satisfied. Hell knows what he had for dessert.

“Juliot and Haggard continued taking their hourly jack breaks, but they appeared to be smoking for different

reasons. Like today: Haggard holds his cigarette prison style. That purple is shining off of him. Julian sits in the chair slightly behind him, with his cigarette between his index and middle finger. The wind blows his hair about; it has no effect on Haggard's bald, tattooed head. Juliot feels a dank burn from inhaling his jack too harshly. Smoke gets in his eyes; they water. The bald bastard just looks ahead, not noticing the poor kid dragging behind him. It feels like the pollen count is high and particles blow into Juliot's eye like salt water settled in his pores. Those tiny particles scar something deeper than his cornea. He sobs, accidentally. Haggard turn around; Juliot rushes forward and kisses him. Haggard puts his hands up—he doesn't know his own strength—and pushes Juliot back. He falls down the steps, Haggard shoots out of his seat.

"I'm sorry,' he says. He rushes down the five steps to help his friend up. Juliot's hair dangles in front of his face and he's looking down like he bumped his chest on the edge of the step. Haggard rubs Juliot's hair back and the boy is in tears. He pulls him in close, but the boy doesn't raise an arm. 'I'm sorry. I just can't. I have a boy—'

"You can't just leave me like this. You can't just leave me out in the cold. I can't go back. I don't—,' he starts to sob, '—like girls. I haven't been with anyone in five months. I love you.'

"I can't,' Haggard says.

"Days pass and Juliot leaves; he doesn't tell his housemates. He drives back to Annapolis in a borrowed

station wagon, past the city and over the same rickety bridge to the island where his parents lived.

“He can feel the air thin up here on the cliff. The salt fills his lungs and the slapping breeze bites his nipples. He looks down at his penis and it’s compressed like an accordion; his balls are trying to retreat, his feet curl; the two-hundred-foot drop looks like a step away. The late November waters will be paralyzingly cold; good—it’ll be a reminder of the coldness of life before he has to endure the eternal fires of hell. Yet even with those memories, down there in hell, memories of Haggard, he would surely be happier than anyone in heaven. He takes the plunge, the rushing wind sears his skin off and the saltiness scratches the bare muscle tissue. The sting of ice cold water surrounds him. The violent indifference of the waves rocks him as if to sleep. He forgets Haggard in his submergence and lets himself flow with the jolt of the waves and he feels like a man like he did when he was a boy. Maybe it was this all along, he wondered. Maybe I always wanted the pain. Yes, yes, that’s what I wanted. I always wanted, I always wanted, to return to the body where I was born.

“Juliot goes to sleep in the waves; maybe, just maybe, the waves will wash him ashore again.”

A silence filled the air in anticipation.

“Did he die?” Joan asked, her voice muffled by the warm arm wrapped around her.

“Well, that’s where the story ends. No one saw him again so...”

“Doesn't sound like that bad of an ending.” She nestled into the fold of Sundra's arm. “That sounds kind of nice, actually. Just go into the water and let fate handle everything.”

“Don't even think about it.”

“You've never thought about ending it all?”

Sundra hesitated. “I have. But that's not the way.”

Joan's breaths began to come farther apart. Her eyes were completely closed, but an expression of consciousness persisted in her face.

“You can't just jump into the water and try to drown yourself,” said Sundra.

“Why not?” Joan asked.

“Because there is no water.”

“What...what do you mean? The beach is only a couple miles away.”

“There is no beach.”

Joan opened her eyes—only slightly. She turned over. She smelled Sundra's breath, the smell of salt and smoke. “All dried up?”

“About six months ago. No one knows why. One morning all the water was gone. There was just wet sand. Dead fish and crabs everywhere. They plundered all the sea creatures from the sea floor. But they soon realized that they couldn't eat them. They all went bad. It's been pretty hard around here. Fisherman and sailors are out of work...”

“Just...a beach without water?”

“No one knows why.”

Joan began to slip again into wakeless consciousness. “I...don't believe it...,” she said. And then the waking world suspended itself all together from her mind.

Joan woke groggily upon her back. Even after several morning blinks and the wiping away of sleep did a bluish haze persist upon her vision. She turned her head to her right and saw through the haze that it was 12:43 in the afternoon. She blinked twice more but the blue film continued to cover the walls, the ceiling, even the sunlight shining in through the window behind her. She lifted her arms and stretched. She thrust her pelvis toward the ceiling and cracked her back. She lowered it slowly, as that particular motion conjured sparse memories from the night before, and Joan realized that she was in this bed alone.

As if the bed itself harbored mental lice, Joan scurried to get her feet upon the floor. She saw, over in the bathroom mirror, her naked reflection. Quickly, she searched the room for her dress and shoes. Her pocketbook was hanging on the bed post. When she had prepared herself, all except wasting time in the mirror applying makeup (because the question was, “for who?”), she walked toward the door with a convicted yet weightless stride, as if she were stomping on clouds. But she stopped. She stopped at the bed. There was something queer about it. It had red sheets. It had a white covering. It's pillows were also red and white. It's sharp contrast turned her stomach. What were those colors doing next to each other? Why would

anyone taint the white with the red? It may have been the haze over the day, but at places the two colors appeared to fade into one another. There was something she couldn't quite place here or there. She surmised that it was something to be forgotten.

The outdoors were brutal. As she walked onto the unshaded parking lot the sun shined brighter than her eyes could see, and it turned the vagueness of her vision to a violent infrared floodlight. She shielded her face with her hand and turned back into the shaded presence of the motel walkway. When she reached to close the door she realized that she had no key, no way of returning if ever she were inclined. But why would she be? She closed the door, which locked with an inaudible click. She jiggled the handle immediately thereafter but it did not budge. She walked away from it with skepticism, across the parking lot toward the bar.

She passed her car on the way to the front door. Traffic was picking up along the short stretch of MD-450 WEST, but the parking lot in front of the bar and along the motel corridor remained empty. The bar was also dark inside, but she chalked it up to it being sunny outside and thus harder to see through tinted glass. But the OPEN sign was not on. In fact, when when she consciously went to look for it, it was not there. She went to the front door and tried to open it. She then remembered that it took some force to open last night, and so she pried the handle as hard as she could and rammed her fragile hip into it, but it still did not

open.

“What'er ya doin' there?” came an old, rustic voice.

Joan shot around astonished. There was an old ascetic in suspenders and a blue work shirt who had evidently been sweeping the parking lot before he called out to her. “I'm sorry. I just wanted to pay my bill. It said, last night, the concierge was in this bar.”

The ascetic propped himself up on his broom stick. “You stay in this motel?”

“I'm just leaving.”

He scratched his head.

“Do you know where the concierge is now? Or where I can check out. I never got a key.”

The man continued to squint from a combination of confusion and uncomfortability. “This motel's out of operation,” he said.

“Oh...?”

“This whole estate's been condemned.”

Joan had no words. Her vision began clearing up and the color of the man's shirt became vibrant.

“You were in this bar last night? There were people here?”

“Um,” was all she could express.

The old man took his broom back into his hands and began sweeping again. Joan looked down. The lot wasn't dirty. “I think you should get on now,” he said, and went back to his business. Joan looked around the lot once more. It seemed vacant. It didn't seem abandoned.

She suppressed her desire to ask further questions and got back inside of her car. When she started it, the engine hiccuped, spun, and then whirred into progressively lower octaves, threatening failure, but then kicked back into high gear and Joan spurred aggressively into reverse, almost hitting the old man; she put the car back into drive and made a U so sharp it could have been a V back onto Highway 450 in the direction of Annapolis.

Part Three

Braving the Waves

Joan broke slightly at the sight of her sign: Kavanagh Canal/Athy – Next Right. The entrance to the bridge which connected the isle to the city was obscured from the highway, which had assumed a rural serenity and was now lined by white oaks. The skies in her midst looked close to weeping from the looks of their dark clouds. Through the veil of passing trunks, beyond the vast green lawns and the illusory forms of homes buried beneath the fog and blur, Joan thought she could almost see the dismal blue of the ocean.

About half a mile up there would be a break in the trees and a graveled road that ran over the canal upon a narrow bridge of cobblestone. There the road appeared, subtly implicated by a tiny wooden sign which read “Athy.” Joan had slowed to a near halt and pulled into the niche when she was forced to brake completely at the sight of an elderly woman in black sweat clothes standing at the center of the bridge, looking to the left over the canal, her arms lain with placidity on the wooden rail. Joan opened her car door and stepped out and walked up the bridge to the old woman saying nothing, so as not to startle her out of her passivity. (She realized in her walk, as she looked down at herself, how wretched she must look after having lived out of a car for the past twenty-four hours. In a moment memories of dress-up flooded her mind, her mother putting

her in clothes and make-up quite unfit for a girl of that age—twelve or thirteen—yet all the more exciting to be in. The game of dress-up would continue posthumously for the old woman, and by the undertaker that soul honored with a new dress worn.)

“Good day, ma'am, I'm Joan Markowitz. Daughter of Julia Markowitz. Number 1609.”

The woman continued to look out over the canal as Joan now approached her at an intimate distance and realized, looking into the woman's face, that it was Mrs. Dermot O'Brien, a common bridge partner of Julia's and, according to her mother, a sore sport.

“Oh! Mrs. O'Brien. Fancy we come across one another. You used to play cards with my mother. She talked of you so often.”

“The bitch was always cheatin'.”

Joan, in the kind of shock that slowly becomes apparent, closed her mouth.

“I knew she would'a kicked it before I did and left me alone again. Now she's laughin' at me up there. 'N I can't do anything, now, with the water all gone. I don't have the strength to take one of those knives to mi bod. I don't own no weapons. Now I gotta be here alone. That bitch. She promised she wouldn't go...” Mrs. O'Brien continued mumbling as she walked away down the the cobblestone bridge towards her home.

Joan's shock subsided into pity for this delirious and utterly crazed old Irishbroad, to harbor feelings so vivid yet

so distant from the present. Different communities, she remembered from years ago when she was teaching east of the Anacostia River, have different concerns on the same matter. She looked in the direction Mrs. O'Brien had been focused all that time, into the canal bed, and saw it was as empty as her own. The soil at the bottom did not even exhibit a hint of moisture. She furrowed her brow, brushed it off as maybe canals need cleaning every now and again, and walked back to her car.

The cul-de-sac in which her mother lived was the second entrance off the main road. As she pulled into it, the reality of it all began to hit her. It would not be her mother who would open the door, smoking those god-awful Kools and holding a royal flush. The keys were in her pocket book. She would open the door. She would call out, "Ma," and there would come no answer. The house was empty; it belonged to no one now. Between the late resident, and the one to come, Joan was here to tend it. She wiped a bit of tear that had begun to well up and took a deep breath, as if she were about to swim the hundred-meter freestyle. Her chest filled, she exited the car, and looked up at house number 1609, its windows dark.

A breeze blew in from the east. Joan remembered how laying in the sand with her feet in the water almost erased any memory of Earl, if only for that short time. She closed her eyes and inhaled the air—and yet it was not the salty, cool air she anticipated. It was dry, dusty. It smelled of a forgotten fish market.

Joan opened her eyes and looked around the cul-de-sac. There were houses 1609, 1611, 1613, 1615, and 1617. They were all of modest size, two floors, two and a half baths most likely, and two beds, just like she remembered. It was all uncanny. This was indeed her mother's beach house, she retraced her steps in her head—yes, this was, but where was the beach? Beyond the homes up on this hill, past the green lawns which sloped down between them, she remembered the sand, the shore line, how it ebbed and crashed in frothy white sighs as the sun would rise; how it seemed as infinite as the heavens; how it turned her tragic, complex world into a little marble, and humbled her. Now, there was none but sand. Shells, bones, and sand. The ocean floor depressed as it receded farther into the horizon. For about five hundred miles it sloped deeper and deeper into the earth until, at a point far in the distance, it fell off completely, like a canyon at the edge of the world.

Joan did not believe her eyes. Her pain was not delusion. She repeated this to herself over and over as she strut toward house 1611 where, if her memory obliged her, a Mrs. Ortega resided. She knocked five times in a respectful but urgent manner. After five minutes she began again in the same manner, but the door opened by knock number three.

“I hear ya, I hear ya. What could be so important?” Indeed, it was Mrs. Ortega, the most competent eighty-nine year old Joan believed she had ever seen. “Ahhh, Julia's kin?”

“Yes, Mrs. Otraga, how are you this day?”

“A bit startled. We don't get mysterious knocks at the door like this too often. And definitely not at such an hour. I was about to have some rice pudding and go to bed.”

Joan looked at her watch. It was three-fifteen. She looked back at the small, spectacled woman. “I'm sorry to bother you at this hour. I'm just in the area taking care of the house—”

“Ah, yes ... M' condolences.”

“Yes, but I was wondering...if I am seeing correctly...”

The woman looked up at Joan as if she had no inclination of what the problem could be.

“The beach...”

“...Yeah...”

“Um, there's no water there.”

“No...”

“...You don't find that strange?”

“...No...,” Mrs. Ortega said shaking her head.

“When did it happen?”

“Sometime ago.”

“And no one knows why?”

“Papers said it was *inexplicable*. Never said anything about it since. Miss Markowitz, we have lives here. Kinds of things like that ain't of no use to dwell on.”

“So...there's no water anywhere along the coast? The beach is all dried up? I mean, I know that everywhere else, the beaches are in tact. Wouldn't we have heard about this—a whole beach drying up—in D.C. or anywhere else?”

“What? Who do you city people think you are? Mind your own business. Many of our livelihoods been dismantled just like that. Outta the blue. We're dealing with it. It's a part of life now. We don't need it broadcast on Channel 5 News for your political pundits to spit on. It's getting late, Miss Markowitz.” Mrs. Ortega closed the door.

Somewhat deflated, Joan walked away from the stoop back in the direction of 1609. She left her things in the car for the time, resolving to get them when she came back out to pull it properly into the driveway. Keys in-hand as she reached the door, she unlocked, and opened it. By the grace of God, the inside of the place was just as she remembered it, three months ago, just before the funeral, the last time she'd set foot here. At the entrance there was a single step that led up to the main floor, and a stairway beside it that led to a lower level. The platform around the two stairways was lined with a wooden banister. To the right was the living room, and in the upper right corner, the dining room table. From the dinner plate to the salad plate, the soup spoon to the napkin ring, everything was set all of the time and never used. Joan had only ever shared a meal with her mother on the couch in front of the small analog television. Of course, now, with the switch to digital formatting, it did not even get reception.

To the immediate left was a credenza and a hallway leading down toward the bath and bedrooms. Directly in front of the entrance was the doorway to the kitchen. After hanging her pocketbook on the banister, she slipped off her

shoes and walked right inside of it.

A sense of urgency unsettled her as she rushed to the opposite end of the room to the cabinets located above the stove hood. She flung open the wooden doors and a wave of relief washed over her as she beheld a full liquor cabinet. Any sense of dread she had harbored for the weeks ahead now subsided into apathy. She grabbed the first bottle to her left and, leaving the cabinet door wide open, walked over to the cabinets on the opposite side of the bay window above the sink. She found a cup inside, filled it a third of the way with—what was this? vodka—and filled the rest of the glass with tap water. She hammered back the first glass and poured a second, then took the glass and the bottle back to the living room and sat down on the couch.

A long window faced out into the cul-de-sac, serene, benign. Joan put the bottle on the glass-topped coffee table and took a sip of her drink. She looked before her at the dining table in the wide alcove. Above it there was a window with a view of the beach behind it. At her angle, she could only see the sky. She took another sip, rose from her seat, and walked toward the window; nearing it, the view implied less of the Maryland coast and more of the wild west. The grassy hill behind the house sloped down and turned into sand; from there, Joan could not discern where the beach actually ended and where the water would have begun. The bare sea floor looked less like a rolling Arabian desert, as she would have imagined, and more like the landscapes of the Bisti Badlands, especially as the beach stretched past

one thousand feet. Some of the points of depression seemed infinitely deep. And as they got farther, they got wider. Joan took another sip. Her drink was now at the half-way mark, and she walked over to the coffee table to replenish its volume with vodka. The minutes passed, and each time she saw the volume of the glass to be too low, she replenished it with liquor—until she was now kicking back straight vodka and watching the world turn slowly onto its side.

When she awoke, the thunderous heartbeats of her intoxication had become pounding throbs of her head. No light from outside lent the comfort of illumination to the living room. Joan, now with very much difficulty, rolled off of the couch and crawled on all fours toward the light switch by the banister. She made it past the couch but accidentally hit her head against the wall, sending sonic waves of pain throughout her body. The shock suspended her there on her knees and elbows, her forehead on the wooden floor and tears running up it to the hairline in pathetic prostration toward Yahweh, or, more likely, awaiting the cock of life to fuck her to death from behind. She snorted; a ball of phlegm slipped down her throat and curled in her stomach. She regained her senses and decided to forsake the light; instead she crawled toward the hall leading to the master bedroom. Under the skewed interpretation of the drunk and hungover mind she finally made it inside, welcomed by the lingering scent of menthol

and mothballs. She clawed in the night for the bedpost—found it—and pulled herself up the comforter like a lemur, finally sprawling herself out onto the bed where she again passed out.

This bed is unfamiliar, as is this body. Her eyes closed, she searches the far corners of her consciousness for a sense of selfness, and is relieved—she is Joan. But that is where familiarity ends. Feeling a presence near her, very near, she opens her eyes and discovers she is in the midst of copulation. The feeling takes a moment to dawn upon her. It begins to take on pleasure now. The body writing atop her, a white, chiseled man, muscles contracting with each thrust, is feeling it, too. His cock burrows deeper; Joan gasps and lets him in a little more, to an area no one has visited before. She wraps her arms around his back clutching his shoulder blade and bites down on the tender meat of his shoulder. He grunts with the uncanny mixture of passion and pain and thrusts harder, now digging to the side and stretching Joan out like a ball of dough. With her hips she moves his beast of passion in every direction, like a boy jabbing mercilessly at a joy stick. His back arches and his buttocks, so conditioned and tight, squeeze his pelvis even deeper. Joan scratches his neck with her teeth, runs her tongue up to his ear and down again. He pulls out and in with greater ferocity now, the brute slapping of flesh sounding like applause, as if the very angels of their passion were cheering from on high. She digs her nails into the

broad expanse of his back. He growls with each push, until he is now howling in elongated movements like a wolf. Every time he retracts, the return is deeper, deeper, into parts of her body that begin to feel less like sex organs. Joan, in anguish, feels the sheer pain of something being in the wrong spot, so foreign it is uncomfortable. His cock is expanding; he dismantles her uterine tract; he topples her vaginal walls; he comes in her stomach, a load as large as the gust of a fire extinguisher. Joan screams out in panic and terror; he pulls his cock out for the last time, and along with it a rush of blood which stains the bed red.

The man has disappeared but the weight of his presence remains. So does the pain. Joan looks down for the blood, but her view is obstructed by the large mound of her belly. Had he at last crawled completely inside of her? She looks around and is in a dark place. Still on her back, the warmth of the bed has become frigid, and she realizes that she is on a metal table. She tries to move but her ankles and wrists are tied to the legs of the table with coarse rope; when she moves, even in the slightest, they burn her. A contraction ensues in her pelvis; she writhes in place screaming "let me out!" Her voice echoes off far away walls and she screams again, the contractions come faster. The operating table becomes slippery; she sits up as far as she can and out of instinct pushes down, at that moment incurring a Niagara vaginal hemorrhaging which would have washed her off the table if the ropes were not in place. A pain like the simultaneous penetration of one thousand

savages descends on her, and she screams, her mouth open so wide that it rips at the corners. Her eyes almost feel as though they'll fall out of her open eyelids. She points them down again and a head appears from below her belly. It is mostly black and slick, but the blackness becomes hair—curly, shoulder-length hair; a wrinkled forehead appears followed by large spectacles detailed in flower patterns. Joan looks on no more. She slams her head back on the metal operating table. It knocks her out enough that just as the shoulders begin to tear her crotch in half, she loses all feeling down there.

When she regains consciousness, she can't feel anything but exhaustion. The ropes aside, she cannot even move her own muscles. The object of her vision comes into focus and the image, on its side, is of a doctor in medical whites with his back turned. She can see him holding someone—the dangling head of a woman is on one side of him, and her legs fall limp on the other. “I'm sorry Mrs. Markowitz,” the doctor says turning around. “She died in the womb.” Now facing her completely, the doctor presents, dead in his arms, Joan's mother...

She awoke in a puddle of sweat in the master bedroom in the beach house. Her eyes darted around the room with the pounding pace of her heart rate. Delirium set in quickly like fog clouds assembled in a hurry, and, unsure whether she was leaving reality or returning to it, Joan passed out once more.

THE SUN WAS only about two hours old when Joan opened her eyes. It shined in through the east-bound window drenching the desolate beach in warmth as a mockery. Joan blinked several times before the light came into focus, and subsequently became utterly infuriating. She rose groggily, her dress sticking to unmentionable parts of her body, went over to the window and violently shut the curtains.

The room was now a dusty gray. A sliver of light bled in through the slit in the curtain, landing on the floor at the foot of the bed. The bed was stained a darker color gray in the shape of a large, lean kidney bean dead in its center, the sheets disheveled, the comforter now laying on the floor. Joan crossed her arms with the mousiness of a woman too afraid to display anger, walked around the bed and stood covering the place where the light bled through the curtains. To her left was a low dresser, a lace mat covering the top of it. A bottle of Yves St. Laurent, a gold tube of lipstick sitting upright, and a pair of reading glasses were all that decorated it. An oval mirror hung on the wall above it. Joan avoided its reflection.

The wooden floor was cold underneath her feet. She walked over to the small circular carpet lain before the bed and stood there for some time, all the while not lifting her head, uncrossing her arms, or sacrificing herself to the sunlight.

She was a fixture in the room for the next four hours.

She went to the closet beside the door and opened it.

Garments hung lifelessly, blue dresses, slacks, a wedding gown. Shoes were arranged by color and type upon the floor. There were two rows of heels at the back and three rows of flats in front of them. One pair of sneakers. All of the shoes columned by color. Julia Markowitz, although feisty and outspoken—you could have guessed by her five pairs of red pumps—never made it above five feet. In old age, her body finally just said forget it, and began shrinking again. All of the shoes were about three-fourths the size of Joans', who inherited her father's build and his awkwardness to boot.

She squatted and clutched a pair of red pumps, mulled them over between her hands, feeling the slick finish, tapping her finger on the three-inch wooden heel, cupping the opening up to her nose and inhaling the scent: silk, dust, a faint presence of a woman, slowly disappearing. She leaned back, sat flesh on the floor and put the right shoe next to her foot. It was dwarfish in comparison, as she had assumed. The narrow tip might have been able to endure the size of her toes if it weren't compressed in such a dramatic way, and the arc of her foot would have to have been altered or broken just to slip her heel all the way in.

Joan looked up. The clothes, neatly arranged by color on wooden hangers, lay in destitute await. There is a way that clothes have, having been freshly lain on a bed or hung up in a closet, of being filled with air, in a way anticipating being picked up again quite soon. Over time, what had filled them up—you could say, what filled them with life—slowly

falls away and they become deflated. The dust collects upon them, and even these inanimate articles understand that all hope is lost for reanimation. Joan remembered infomercials for air compressors that used to come on the Lifetime channel late Sunday evenings. Yes, for people in constant need of space, those are necessary. But over time, the clothes will compress themselves, as they did hung in the closet. And many of those clothes were indeed expensive, pieces from Salvatore and Margiela, yet without a body to hug their value turned to worthlessness. They became compressed in their wait, drooping as if they had been there forty years; the clothes, neatly arranged on wooden hangers, lay in destitute await for a body.

In days of dress-up, when her mother still stood five whole feet tall and towered over the twelve-year-old girl, the clothes she would dawn possessed a drapedness and ample comfort reminiscent of bedding. Joan's eagerly-awaited teenage growth-spurt had not yet begun; yet on days like these she did not think of that; she was happy being small compared to her mother, who seemed infinitely grand. She stood in shoes that possessed of ample spaciousness, and the heels she stepped in, which in their slope positioned her on a sharp decline, made her feel like a mountain woman overlooking the side of some high mountain; before the mountain was the bright sun, her mother, peeking through the tops of clouds, possessing something reserved for gods. Young Joan, covered in the wide brim of an over-fitting sun hat like some halo'd cherub

would outstretch her arms toward the sun and smile.

But everything must be outgrown, isn't that what they say? Her growth-spurt came years later, and the games of dress-up stopped. "Let me put you in one of my old school dance dresses. You'll look lovely in it. You may not believe it, but I did when I was your age."

"No, mother," Joan had responded from the top of the stairs. And then she came down in a skirt that teased the bottoms of her buttocks.

"Oh..."

"Don't give me that look."

"Well what do you want me to do? It's the look the boys will give you when they see you in *that*."

"Okay, you don't even know how other girls dress these days, you still wear dresses that make you look like a man."

"What?"

"Show a little cleavage, that's all. Just a little. It's not slutty, it's suggestive. It gives them something to think about."

"Something to think about?"

"Not like *that*."

"Well you're showing you're tits all out, are they going to think about your mind when you walk by?"

"Alright just shut up because you don't know what you're talking about."

"Excuse me?" A horn honked outside.

"That's Earl, I have to go."

“You're not going anywhere like that.”

“Get out of my way...bitch.”

Everything has to be outgrown, right? And the goodness comes from change, right? To outgrow gowns and mothers alike, to outgrow them once out of opposition (“I'm nothing like my mother”), then later out of mortality, and you wonder why you wanted to outgrow them in the first place, when there was so little time left. You later take the place of both and fill the garment of motherhood. But what comes then, when that's outgrown? What becomes of a used-up woman? What becomes of these heels? Joan ran her finger along the silk finish.

She got up, continuing to look at the shoe, and stood before the open closet. She turned her attention to the garments, and ran her fingers across the starch fabrics, some silky, some coarse. They moved little, having been hanging in one position for so long that rigor mortis had set in. Joan eyed the side of a little black number with red accents around the waist. She pulled it out and observed it at arm's length. It may have been knee-length for her mother, a sleeveless dress with thick straps; conservative. She pulled the piece in and held it to the front of her body. It came halfway down her thigh. She ran her hand down the front and sighed, feeling tears well up behind her eyes threatening to break. She fought to hold them back, and walked over to the bed where she lay the dress down flat and removed her own wrinkled, crusted black dress. She lay her dress beside her mother's; a seagull cried somewhere

outside, its voice distressed. Joan's head shot around to the window, which she realized she had closed, and caught a glimpse of her naked body in the mirror above the dresser. She dwelt on her image for some time. There was something about the posture of a woman staring back over the shoulder at her that would have been flirtatious if the woman in question were not as decrepit and malnourished as the one she beheld. Her liverspotted buttocks sagged. Her shoulders sagged, her breasts sagged, everything sagged. Her neck was much too thin for her head. And her head... In a momentary blip of light, it almost looked as if her mother were staring back at her. She pulled her head back around and dropped her gaze to the dresses laying side by side on the bed. As if a draft had suddenly blown in, her body began to chill and she crossed her arms, rubbing her shoulders. Then she picked up the black dress with red detail and pulled it over her head. She walked back to the closet without looking in the mirror again.

Returning to the closet, she sat back down in front of it with a cold look of distance sculpted into her face. Grabbing the right red heel, without any regard for precision, she ran her left foot into the opening and squeezed her toes into the tapering end. Then she pulled with all the force her arms could manage, crushing the arch of her foot upward and sending a sharp pain like rocks pinching nerve endings running up her entire body, buckling her arms, but she persisted—until she heard a crack; she flung her head back sharply and cried out like the

dying seagull. Her arms began to turn to noodles, but still going strong she pulled the edge of the shoe to the end of her heel, and finally slipped it in, whereupon release she collapsed back onto the floor. The pain was liquid, gushing relentlessly throughout her. Her foot swelled within the shoe. A wild sweat broke from the pores on her forehead and her heartbeat shook her ribcage like a prisoner behind bone bars. Joan mustered the strength to push herself up, grabbed the left shoe, and did the same to her right foot. She looked down and her vision began moving in and out of focus. Her panicked breathing became the sole acoustic echo within the room, slowly becoming denser and deeper. Before she blacked out, she saw the tops of her feet scrunched into balls within the shoe resembling tiny loafs of fresh baked bread.

When she awoke, the light which bled through the curtain earlier in the day had expired. She felt her body numb and her muscles ached, and the image of what had happened before the blackout was hazy. Joan drew in her legs and attempted to stand, but when she put her weight on the arch of her foot she toppled over wailing with the physical reminder of what had happened. Unable to control herself, the tears began flowing and she cried fetal on the floor. It was some time before she was able to pull herself from this fit. She closed her mouth and wiped the tears from her cheek. Her whelps subsided to sighs, and she tried again, this time pulling herself up by the bedpost and putting her

weight on the heel at first. Then she had both heels on the ground, and she slowly let the broad part of her foot rest flat—and with it, felt the hammering sensation of railroad spikes shooting through her legs. She gripped the top of the bed post as if for dear life, gritting her teeth till shards of bone came flying out. She took several deep breaths thereafter; she began to conjure pleasant images in her mind, the feeling of holding her baby boy nearly thirty years ago, the feel of a freshwater stream running through her toes, those few times Early made dinner...the pain began to dissolve in the wake of the good things. She let go of the post and held her arms out, balancing herself. She even smiled, and saw the reflection of it in the mirror. Then her ankle began to convulse and the pain resurged. She remembered that Early was gone; Timmy was dead to her; the water was gone. Her legs buckled and gave way and she fell upon her knee caps, a feeling that amounted to mere irritation compared to the now-persistent afflictions of her feet. She took another deep breath and again riled herself, championing in her mind the image of the good that was. She held her arms out as she extended her legs. She wobbled, almost fell over again, but she kept her balance, her feet nonetheless excruciating. The good that was triumphed for the moment; but the reality of its absence always lurked within its shadow.

She walked out the bedroom and down the hall, with each step enduring a surge of lactic acid through the heart. She demanded her self not to let the tears roll, and shut her

eyes until the light from the kitchen illuminated the backs of her lids in red, and she opened them again. She paced through the kitchen, over to the liquor cabinet, and retrieved a bottle of rum. Then she turned to the left where there was a door to the patio beside the stove, opened it, and walked outside.

There was a seasoned breeze which carried that now-familiar smell of fish. Elements such as this may become familiar in their repulsion; she masked the stomach-churning scent with a swig of rum and continued toward the edge of the patio. The hard concrete sent much more intense vibrations from her feet throughout her body, but she pushed through it still, and was relieved when her feet met earth as she descended the grassy knoll. The hill was steep enough that it threatened to unbalance her in her heels, so she held one arm out to the side while she took another large swig with the other. The grass turned to dried seaweed, which transitioned into sand. The heels of her shoes sunk into the beach and her legs began to give way; she persisted still. She walked with bent legs like a crane, all the way to the dark part of the beach where the shore once began, and collapsed on her side. At this point, she could hold it back no longer: the tears swelled so greatly that they finally broke through the hitherto resilient dam of her eyelids.

She rolled over in the sand taking a long, final swig, then tossed the bottle to her side. The streams now ran in currents down her cheeks to her lips, agape, and she tasted

the pungent, salty liquid. At some previous time, the ocean itself would have satisfied this thirst, but now the satisfaction came from inside of her. She touched the tips of her fingers to her cheek, and with that salt water moistened herself. Under her dress her hand rubbed frantically from the offset, wide violent circular motions, and then back and forth, stimulating herself with aggression. She writhed in place like a slug under the salt shaker of a deviant child, faster, faster—until in a bubbling, frothy explosion like water boiling over she returned to the beach a little of that which it had lost, a little bit of herself. She poured out, selflessly, spurting, water from her own personal reservoir. Contorting in this agony, she happened to dig herself deeper into the sand until finally, her dam having ceased its leaking, she lay in a tide pool of her own salty essence. It was her gift to a beach deprived.

JOAN OPENED HER eyes to see a little boy standing over her. He was dressed in a torn brown shirt and cut-off jeans. She rolled her head over one way and saw the rum bottle lodged in the sand. She turned her head the other way and saw the little boy's sandals. She looked back up at him. It was dawn.

The little boy turned around and cupped his hands to his mouth, yelling: “She's alive! I think she's a siren...”

Joan lifted her head an inch and saw someone in the distance, an olive-colored man with dark hair and dark eyebrows. He wore a blue uniform of some sort. In his hand appeared to be a metal cane.

The man said something which she could not understand.

The little boy said, "Okay, Harry," and turned back to Joan. "You need any help, lady?"

Joan looked at the boy, then back at the man in the distance. "No."

"You know your feet's swollen?"

Joan looked down at the red, bulging tops of her feet. "Yes."

"You live over there?" He was pointing to the house.

"Yes."

"Need some help gettin' home?" The little boy held out his hand. "I'm Giovanni."

Joan hesitated, more out of a sense of dislocation than hostility. She took the hand extended and the boy, strong for his size and age, pulled her up. The afflictions in her feet returned, although less intense than before. She wobbled to the boy's side and swung her arm around his shoulder; Giovanni propped her up with his right hand and in this manner they walked toward the house. As they approached the grassy knoll Joan looked back over the boy's shoulder and saw the man in the distance staring at them. He was too far away for her to get a good look at his face, so she turned around again and out of the corner of her right eye saw another figure on the opposite side of her. It was Mrs. Dermot O'Brien. She was staring into the barren expanse of the desert ocean as if awaiting something.

They entered the house through the kitchen door and

Joan let go of the boy and hobbled to the living room and collapsed upon the couch. The boy followed soon after and stood near her. Her feet had of late put her in a perpetual state of exhaustion, and she lay there, her eyes falling shut, consumed with languish.

“If there's nothing else...” the boy began.

Joan opened her eyes and sat up. “Oh, do you think I could just trouble you for a cocktail of grain alcohol and tap water?”

The boy nodded and turned to walk back to the kitchen.

“The liquor cabinet is above the stove,” she called out as he disappeared behind the wall. “Get something for yourself if you wish.”

The boy returned a moment later with two clear, full glasses and set one of them on the coffee table. “I'll just take the tap water, thanks,” he said taking a sip. “It's necessary to maintain purity of essence.”

“...Purity of essence?” Joan said picking up her glass.

“Oh, yes. To revitalize my precious bodily fluids.”

The statement caught her off guard and caused her to squint.

He took another sip. “I think we should drink only the purest water. Or as close as we can get to it. For so long we've taken it for granted.” He looked down at her.

She placed her glass upon the table and stared at it for some time.

“Would you like some water?” asked Giovanni.

She nodded.

Giovanni took the full glass to the kitchen and she heard the *splash* of its contents being dumped into the sink. A run of the tap. Giovanni returned with a tall, fresh glass of tap water.

Joan took it and sucked it down entirely. It was so smooth, it didn't burn her throat or cause her to cough. It was purely and utterly refreshing. She eyed the empty glass in her hand.

"Another?" asked Giovanni.

Joan nodded, and another glass was brought to her. This one, she savored. She even appreciated the tasteful hints of zinc and lead that were in it.

"Are you from the city?" she asked.

Giovanni said, "Yes."

"And the man outside?"

"Oh, him? Yeah, I think. I don't know much about him. I met him a couple days ago walking up and down the shoreline with that metal detector. So I followed him. With the beach being dried up and the fishing culture ravaged—that's what my father did—I didn't have anything to do during the day, so I followed him around and he taught me about the purity of essence."

"Where does he live?"

"By the harbor. In a covered boat that's lodged in the sand. Heh, the rope's still rung around one of the posts, like he thinks it'll float away—Hah!" Giovanni gulped down the last of his water and set the glass on the table. "Well I have

to go now. Bye.” He left through the kitchen and Joan heard the back door slam. At length, she riled herself off the couch and walked carefully to the window above the dining room table and looked out. The boy had just run back up to the man, who rustled his hair as if he were his own son. Then they proceeded up the shore, the boy running ahead in youthfully instinctual directions, and the man panning his metal detector about. At about twenty yards, he looked back, right into Joan's window, right into her eyes, and she felt a strange and intimate connection.

The day was still young, so Joan went to the refrigerator to assess its contents. She pulled up the latch and opened the heavy door: the refrigerator was barren. A single expired avocado, a mason jar of what looked like lemon-ginger-and-honey gelatin (her mother was known to make it when the kids were sick with strep), a box of chai tea concentrate, molded beets and long carrots in one of the drawers; on the door there was a bottle of vinaigrette dressing and a bag of withered lemon halves.

The contents of the cabinets above the stove were well known to her, and she passed over them. The cabinets on the opposite side of the sink were, like the refrigerator, scarce: bran cereal, oatmeal, a bulk package of old bagels, spices and soups.

Joan decided, after this survey yielded such pitiful results, to go into town to market. But, looking down at her outfit—how absurd it now seemed—she realized she needed

to change, so she went out to her car and out of one of her boxes retrieved an olive-green floor-length dress. It had three-quarter length sleeves and a wide neck which accented her collar bones. She remembered, the one time she'd worn it it had fit her snugly and had not made her look terribly famished or sagging in the wrong places; in fact, she had looked quite dashing. She dwelt on that image a while, looking at the dress that had made it, (it seemed so foreign now...) then walked back toward the house.

"You going somewhere like that?" came an old, disgruntled voice. It was Mrs. Ortega, standing at the end of her driveway holding a newspaper.

Joan looked down at herself. "No, I was, uh, sleeping in this," she said, and hurriedly got back inside the house where she dressed and left.

She knew well the way downtown, for she was the one to restock her mother's kitchen when the old woman had become too delirious to drive. There was an indoor farmer's market located on Randall Street, right by the waterfront. She did not think much of the circumstances, assuming that local fish and greens would be readily available. During her drive she thought of little else, and upon arrival she parked her car in a convenient location on the wharf opposite the market; getting out and gazing down the boardwalk, she saw the end of the wharf overlook a tawny landscape of sand that expanded into the horizon; this no longer came as a surprise to her. Boats lay mired on either side, as if

suspended under the brush of a painting, and a seafood diner lay a bit down on the right side of the parking lot. The air was crisp and the sun beamed down, and she walked across the street and entered the doors of the building. From the outside the place had looked like a pleasant country rodeo hall or something, likely to contain plump, smiling faces and fattening home cooking, but on the inside she was instead met with an air of desperation. The customers were abundant, and the produce was plentiful, but the merchants all reserved an appearance of skepticism. Joan walked down the major aisle and took a right into the fish section, the dead catch looking back at her in astonishment. She found the cod priced at twenty-four dollars a pound.

“My God,” she exclaimed.

“Yep,” said the merchant, dragging the word at length. “Priced up again. I’ve had to go farther to import ‘em. I don’t know how much longer we can hold out. The people need fish but it’s getting too expensive for ‘em. Some’a my regulars startin’ to go to the Safeway. I tell you this drought’s a killer.”

Joan left the man and perused the other selections, then made her way over to poultry. The prices there, compared to the fish, were comprehensible, but still on the verge of being unacceptable.

A woman beside her said to an accompanying man, “I’m down to one chicken a week and my kids are fed up. They do love chicken. But I tell ‘em we’re living in troubled

times; they think money and chicken grows on trees. They say to me, Momma, why don't the farmers just breed more chickens and then there will be enough for you to buy more. I tell them it's not that simple.”

Joan walked away. By the fruits, a man approached her and started a conversation. She accepted his compliments, but his banter went on for too long and she said she had to go to another section and he stopped his pursuit.

As she walked away she looked back at him from behind a pillar. He was not unattractive. A plaid button-up shirt and nice, tight slacks. His hair was combed back very fashionably. Joan walked away slowly then, until he was out of sight.

As she walked on through the great expanse of the market she redirected her attention from the products to the people. The merchants, men clad in overalls or flannel shirts unbuttoned one notch and women in aprons, kept their poker faces. The elder ones, in their slight grimace, revealed the great depth of their wrinkles, as if their faces had been eroded by irrigation over the great span of their lives. Youthful mothers squeezed fruits with a firm hand. They were beautiful, all of them, despite the looks of dissatisfaction present among them. There were older men shopping carefully. Younger men looked less interested in food than other young ladies, and at times Joan saw one or two swoop in on a beautiful debutant like a lady in loafers to a deal on spinach, two dollars a pound. A woman read as

she pushed an empty shopping cart though the bakery; a man in beef shook his head for twenty minutes while looking at the prices of ribs; an attractive tattooed twenty-something with enormous breasts adjusted her bra strap and handled rutabaga; an unattended little boy snuck around produce pulling the bottom corner out of pyramid arrangements of lemons; a thirty-something woman argued with a relentless, head-shaking shop-lady saying, "I don't care if you have to go to Delaware for it, forty-two is too much!"; a teenage girl in a "You Hate Me Because I'm Perfect" tee-shirt danced to herself in a corner beside the register with headphones on her ears. An hour passed, and Joan felt as though with each time she observed the same person twice, three more people came into the market clutching their pocketbooks as if it were prone to be snatched out of their hand at any moment. Destitute faces never struck her as so beautiful. The room hummed with the sounds of fish being slapped onto beds of ice, and voices negotiating prices.

In the days that followed Joan went back to market. She ate a hot cup of soup or a bag of veggie chips as she walked, but never took anything back to the house. The merchants with hot food to sell beside their products were her savior, and they attracted more business than the twelve-dollar-a-pound fishmongers.

This change in temperament was alarming to her, but she welcomed it. She took new pleasure in being around so many people at once, the men and women. She imagined, in

the later days, all of them descending upon her at once, clawing with the veracity they once reserved for produce, ripping her clothes from her body and groping her breasts, admittedly small, though they loved them. The men would unfasten their belts and one-by-one, in a line, they would ravish her. One cock would satisfy her with its wide load and the final invigorating burst of its essence, then the next would get its fill, and she would get her fill. And by the fourth or fifth she would be dripping with sea men. It would be so slippery that the continuous insertion and retraction of cock would fade into blissful monotony, and the women would be teasing her tongue with theirs, biting her neck and caressing her body with their warm, soft hands, and showering her in perfumes of lavender. She would have submitted to them all at any given moment. She would brush up against groups of men with desire, hoping, but all they ever said was “Excuse me.”

The fish on parade became cocks, the shoppers their merchants.

She did get approached from time to time, but it was never the approach she wanted.

“Your eyes are as blue as the sea. Well, as blue as it used to be.”

Silence.

“What is your name?”

Sometimes she would answer this question, sometimes she wouldn't. “Joan Markowitz.”

“There was a Markowitz who used to live in these

parts.”

Silence.

“What do you do?”

“I am...”

Most of the time the answer discouraged the inquisitor and Joan could return to her stalking of certain more beautiful customers, and to her fantasies. Although, it happened in the following week that a young man of great attraction approached her with similar propositions. Yet this man was different. Something about him seemed recognizable to Joan. He approached her in the vegetable section where she was watching a husband of thirty grope and canoodle with his wife from behind as the wife inspected leeks. The wife giggle when the husband nuzzled his beard against her neck, and Joan began to reach down to touch herself.

“Hello,” said the man. He pretended, transparently, to feel for a good melon.

“Ahem, hello,” said Joan, and then she happened to glance at him and saw there something familiar. Her eyes hovered over his, and he returned the gesture as if he had stared into her's every night for the past twenty years. He had thick black hair and thick eyebrows. He looked quite tan, and Joan figured he was from another area, for the sun had not been so intense as to cause tanning, and no person in their right mind would go tanning on a beach in such a condition as theirs. He was a bit taller than her, even in her heels, and he looked down at her. Joan at once found her

mind to be blank, her fantasies had scattered again, this time under slightly different pretense. She felt entirely consumed by his presence. It filled her with a strange and pure goodness. This was foreign to her, frightening, and she needed to rush to find some judgment with which to fill her mind.

“What do you want?” she said. Her voice lilted.

“I saw you over here. I've been noticing you recently.”

“Well,” Joan said rubbing her neck, “You shouldn't go around stalking people.”

“I don't think I'm the one who should be talking,” he said.

Joan's eyes widened and she turned around attempting to walk away, but an unacknowledged desire restrained her.

The man touched his hand to her waist. “Wait,” he said. Joan had turned around prematurely, as if anticipating his plea. “You're new to these parts.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Hey,” the man said lifting her chin with the broad side of his finger. “You don't have to be skeptical of me.” He smiled.

Joan smiled in return, and she felt it to be natural and automatic.

“What brings you here?”

Joan averted her eyes then. “Ahem, work, I guess you could say.”

“Mmm,” said he. “What do you do?”

Immediately, Joan responded, “I am.”

He chuckled like a man hearing a good joke for the fifth time. “Oh, so you think then?”

Unexpected. A smile crept between her cheeks. “On occasion,” she said.

The man chuckled again. “I don’t recommend it, leads to self-recognition and independence, nasty buggers to get rid of later in life!” His expression settled into intense musing. “I suppose I’ll see you here again,” he said, and walked away.

As Joan watched him depart between rows of fish and seasonings and condiments, it struck her. That dark hair, that olive skin—he was the man outside of her window that day, the one who led the little boy. Her heart started pounding then, and as he walked away he looked back at her with the same expression he had had on the beach, the same posture. It said to her, Come with me. I can take you. She began to get a feeling that she thought had long since died away with the Millennium, when her late marriage first began to extend itself too far. She didn’t know how to take this—an attraction to a stranger. But was he really? The magnets of their positive and negative energies were complimentary; he was pulling her toward him.

In any other circumstance, Joan would have reasoned herself out of such an attraction. This man knew where she lived. He was dark. He could easily be taken as a creep, with all of that touching. But she didn’t feel it to be so. He had

an unreasonable pull on her—and that is a dangerous thing for a man to have on a woman. She wanted him to be outside of her window when she returned home. She felt safe thinking he could potentially be around the next corner. She liked his attention, and the way he went after it. She liked, for once, being the object of desire.

FOR THE NEXT four days Joan went back to the market and remained until nightfall, waiting for the man to return. She soon exhausted all of the soups and mini sandwiches on display; she memorized the arrangement of the market, the exact location of every section, from okra to tilapia. She unearthed the history of the building. She learned the lives of fishmongers. One had come from a family of fishermen on the eastern shore, and the catch was good each season and provided them with more than adequate funds for the dry season. About one year ago his parents died, and he said that he is now grateful for it, since only a couple months later, the sea dried up. “It would have devastated them,” he said. “If they had not died when they did, of a boat fire, they would have died of grief shortly after the incident.”

“They were like my own mother and father,” said his nearby wife. “They taught me all about the business. Ethics and such; they were sweet people.”

“And they would have been devastated to know that now, I am a mere importer. I have to import my product from upstate to sell it here. The old man would have wept. There is something so serene, peaceful, and cyclical about

being out in the water, rocking and rolling, and pulling up a big net full of mackerel. There's something connective about it all, that the fish know it's natural to be caught and eaten and I know it's all apart of the cycle of life, that one day I'll also die and commit myself to the Great Cycle. And yet there is something so unnatural and artificial about business, negotiating prices and getting swindled daily." He sighed.

The stories were intriguing at first, but day after day of this, Joan became bored and images of the mysterious man flooded her mind as folks continued into the twentieth and thirtieth minute of their life story. As the days stretched on she resolved to go back home earlier. Sometimes she actually attempted to kick her shoes off as she walked into the front door, but quickly realized that they were stuck there, perpetually keeping her heels lifted three inches off the ground. Every night she poured a strong drink, and if after the drink she had the wherewithal to get up and get another, then the drink was too light. She liked to get the kind of drunk where it felt like her heartbeat was sending vibrations throughout the entire house. During the nights that followed the man's disappearance, she fell asleep on the sofa.

On Friday she came home and poured a stiff drink of bourbon and tap water. It had been decades since she had had bourbon, and it hit her with the stiff aroma of burning wood; she sucked it down and retreated to the living room, thinking about what the little boy had said all those days

before. She sucked down another gulp of pure wooden cask.

She laughed and hiccuped at the same time, and took another sip.

There was a rotary phone on the side table. She picked it up and there was no tone. She continued to hold the receiver to her face, and slowly looked down at the body of the machine. A cord extended from the back of it, down below the table and out of sight. She leaned over to see where it led; below the table, she saw that it was cut. She hung up, and took another gulp. "I guess we're not talking to the Lord," she sputtered.

Joan sat in a cheap plastic reclining chair and bemoaned the desert ocean. She had begun sitting on the back patio after she returned from the market day after day, and each time she cried for a different reason. It was a silent cry, more or less underwhelming, but she liked to shed a few tears for the beach every night; it was more like a mode of thought, sitting on the patio and musing over emptiness. Most evenings, Mrs. Ortega would be sitting on her own patio overlooking the landscape. Joan often wondered if she were not also crying silently, but she resolved to keep to herself.

Her tears were triggered this time by a seal lying fleshless and unrecognizable far over yonder. At a glance it wasn't terribly obvious what the animal was, but over time the carcass began to resemble a seal in the way the beach carcass resembled its old self, reflecting in the mind's eye that which it had once been, and was no more.

Tears silently stained her cheek while her face remained deadpan. She had come out here and looked at the beach so often that it sometimes took on a different effect, much like words repeated *ad nauseum* devolve into a series of meaningless sound waves. It could have easily been mistaken by a passerby as something to be overlooked. Joan sometimes pretended she was in the Sahara on vacation, sometimes New Mexico. She even thought once of buying a sand buggy. But those fantasies always fell away when she remembered the reality of where she was. The beach could be *interpreted* as anything. If it stays this way forever, then the next generation might never think twice about being surrounded by the desert. But, in this moment, for those who knew the life it once sustained, it was indeed a tragedy. Maybe that's why Mrs. Ortega sat out on her patio so often. She also had memories of the water running past her ankles and the wet sand slipping through her toes. Joan adjusted her position in the chair; the rubber bands which composed the back were beginning to leave impressions in her skin. She looked over at Mrs. Ortega again, then back at the beach. She felt now as though she had lost a part of her home. She felt more like a resident of this house now than she ever had. Grumpy Mrs. Ortega was her neighbor. Sand storms raged afar.

She had not seen the dark man in a week, and she had not gone back to market since yesterday. She was weary of returning, for the crowd had lost its intrigue. The man was the sole subject of her longing. She feared that if she

returned she would be met once again with disappointment; the man would once again be absent, and to long for something that once existed and exists no more is a worse pain than never having witnessed it at all. So she spared herself.

She reckoned he had left for good, gotten out of this dreadful place. He probably cut his losses here. He might have left on a whim, with willful disregard of the lives, or lack thereof, that he might have been abandoning. Why would he be considerate of Joan's feelings? He barely knew her. He knew nothing of what she had been through. Yet Joan had thought he could see right through her when he looked up into her window on the beach that day, and later in the market. But perhaps she was wrong. He was only a man, after all. You expect too much, she told herself; you expect too much and you get let down. Especially when it comes to people. No person is so connected to another that they will never sever the connection and leave the other destitute, especially if it benefits them. Everyone is a singularity, independent of one another. Not even marriage can force that connection to exist. Perhaps, then, the only unity in life is between the individual and the environment, for the physical is that which weighs most upon the mind. The palpable world leaves behind the deepest impression, filtered through the unique personal temperament and life experiences of the individual; and the personal filters are again formed by impressions of the physical. The feel of cotton upholstery might soothe one person, conjuring

memories of being wrapped in blankets at a baby, yet depress another, evoking stories they've heard of their ancestors. An individual is a single continuous consciousness which comes in contact with other external forces at random. Life is a random series of events, events picked out of the multitude of an infinite number of outcomes. The only truth is that of the individual, formed over time by these random, physical, external interactions. Memory is an illusory pattern based on random recurrences. An axiom evolves: the individual is the sum of its interactions with the physical world. Joan looked out at the beach, empty, and empathized.

But, if the individual and the environment are inseparable, then all individuals form this connection to the environment. Even though the connection between an individual and the environment is entirely separate from that of another individual, in a way, all individuals are unified by a single physical medium. Yet the effect of the medium upon the impressionable canvas of the mind differs vastly from person to person. You could say that there is only one world on which we all live, by which we are all connected, yet there are billions and billions of separate realities.

In this moment, Joan saw the beach in herself. She, too, was vacant and depraved. This assertion lifted her countenance, for she saw that there was something grander, alike, and accessible to her, and she decided that some day she would go into it. She found solace in the fact that her

emptiness, still an emotion so ravaging, was indeed finite. There was an end to it. And it would come in uniting with the great physical emptiness before her. Her infinite and eternal companion lay out there, waiting for her to join and rejoin it. She anticipated that day and her tears dried. A smile crept into the corners of her mouth. Soon. But now, she decided to go to the market again.

When she saw him staring at her, right as she walked in, as if he knew the exact moment she would arrive, she started trembling with terror. Her eyes met his, those dark brown moons concealed by thick brows, those infinite puddles of existence which burrowed deep into her soul. He stood at the far opposite end of the building, mired in a crowd of people passing him by consumed with groceries and heckling merchants. He stood as a component of the crowdedness, yet apart from the grocery mob; he was consumed with *her*. His gaze transcended a distance of two hundred yards, bending the room so that he was staring at her from mere centimeters' distance like a wrinkle in space. The crowd accelerated around Joan in her stillness, looking back at the still man. She turned immediately and left the market, heading back toward her car parked on the wharf in the lot of Larry's Seafood Diner.

She walked with much determination—but determined to do what? She didn't want to drive away. She didn't want to leave him. But he was so penetrating, so possessive in his stare. She thought she might lose herself

completely if she encountered him again. She passed five nameless cars and came upon her Subaru. Clicking the unlock button and flirting with escape, she paused with her hand on the doorlatch.

She hadn't the slightest idea of how long she was suspended there, eons maybe, as if she were lost at sea without a compass, no stars in the sky to guide her, and even if they were, what good would they be, for she had no knowledge of astrology, she was no experienced mariner, she didn't even have the perceptibility to know how many days she had been lost, and yet a peacefulness overcame her of being lost in this transition, lost in the great current—it was more soothing than being tied down to land; she didn't care that she was lost, watching time speed on without her; but in that time, however long it was, the man approached her, breathing on her neck.

“I know you, Joan Markowitz.”

She was petrified, in the way one is after an orgasm. She looked slightly to her right, avoiding the sight of both her car and the man behind her, down at the wood-cast boardwalk.

“Do you know who I am?”

She had an answer but she could not manage to expel it. Her throat was stopped up with all the pressure of defiance. She then turned around completely and beheld the man—a face that could have belonged to an Egyptian. His nose was wide and his large lips appeared soft. His beard was growing back in after the morning shave. He held

her gaze with correctional authority.

“I would like to take you to lunch,” he said. “Over there.” His eyes shot toward the Seafood Diner behind her, and then back into the windows of her soul.

Another pause; she had all the time in the world.

“Larry's Seafood Diner. Would you like to join me.” And with that he began to walk toward the entrance, leading her by the hand. She followed without the slightest hint of apprehension.

They got a booth by the long bay window at the front of the room. The man ordered a black coffee. She ordered the same.

She looked at him, who looked in turn at the menu trapped under a plate of Plexiglas.

After several moments he looked up and smiled. “I've seen you,” he said.

“I know.”

“My name is Harry Tubbsmann. Harrison, if you want to be formal. But it was only my father who called me that.”

“I think I remember that little boy calling you 'Harry.'”

“Yes. He's my friend.”

“Oh.” There was a small bout of silence, although not in any way awkward. “What were you doing out there? With him. Walking along the beach.”

Harry pulled his arms in close. “Well, since the beach dried up I've had to find other work. I used to be a seaman. Fishing for companies who sold wholesale to all those

merchants in the market. But I couldn't do that after...the incident. Nobody could. So I bought myself a metal detector. These days I scavenge the sea floor for valuables. People used to lose all kinds of things in there."

"Is it a good living?"

"Last month I made three thousand. But it's all luck. A woman some time ago must have lost a Rolex watch. But like I said, it's all luck. Some months I make nothing."

"It must be hard for everybody these days, with this terrible happening."

"Yeah... But I try not to think about it as 'terrible'. I just think about it like another bad catch."

The coffee came. Harry took a sip and looked out the window.

Joan poured milk into her's and asked as casually as she could manage: "Just how do you know who I am?"

He smiled again behind his cup of coffee. "Because it was inevitable."

"What was inevitable?"

"That we would meet."

Joan sipped. The coffee was too hot; she set it down. "You're kind of creeping me out."

"No, I'm not."

She couldn't hide her smile, so she lowered her head.

"You and I are similar. Our lives are intertwined. Somewhere down the line they would have had to cross. I could feel it. As if it were told to me in a dream. You're my destiny."

Joan didn't understand but she nodded.

Harry took a deep sigh and looked out the window across the lot at the market, and began to speak from somewhere deep inside of him.

After he was finished, Joan remained silent for some time. She watched him look away unsure at what he was looking. She began to speak several times, but failed each time, closing her mouth and receding into thought. Thoughts about this stranger. Thoughts about this new companion. He looked content, like a saint overlooking the rubble of his people, confident that they would rebuild. She started then: "I think we are similar..."

His eyes shot back at her.

She looked away.

"You're from the big city, right? Washington. Your father, he was a political adviser."

"Yes. I wouldn't call D.C. a big city though. It's a wolf in sheep's clothing, running in a herd under the pretense of belonging, killing silently. You could say I was well-to-do. And my sisters sure took to that idea. They became lawyers and lobbyists and diplomats. I just settled down into love. I felt like that was more reasonable. I felt like that was what life was all about at that time. True love. Cultivating a relationship, a true connection to another person. I settled down with this guy in '90 ... But he wasn't the first. He wasn't my first love. By chance, or by nature, they're the same thing ... but either way it was a girl I fell in love with first. When I was seventeen, at Sidwell Friends ... During

that semester, the blondies started saying things in private. They referred to us as Those Lesbos. Well, word travels, from student to parent, to coworker, to the Capitol Hill watering holes, and into the ears of my mother. She took me out of Sidwell and finished the last part of my schooling from home. She wasn't expressively angry. She said, 'This is just like the bleach incident. You're always attracted to things that are destructive to you. Why can't you drink water like a regular girl?'"

Harry made a face that implied confusion.

"Bleach," she repeated. "When I was a little girl, I'd been prone to think bleach was cleaner than water. The way it smelled, it smelled like the kitchen after Mabel, our maid, cleaned it. When you clean things with water there is no smell. There's no indication of clean like there is in bleach products. I loved the smell. When I was eleven, I drank it. I thought it would clean me. Dad had to take a day off work. Put quite a scare into everybody. I don't think Ma trusted me from that day forward.

"And then this ... She was always bringing up the bleach incident, whenever I did anything wrong.

"Well, in any case, I never saw my love again. I was sad for a long time, but I guess the common psyche can grow on a person. I decided that it was a phase. I tried to like boys again; I went out of my way to find them. But my sisters, when they went on their double dates, used to tell me to stay home. They used to make fun of me. They said balance is necessary in the world, and a triple date with four

girls would unbalance everything... I didn't care. We had begun to drift apart by then anyway. I would take rides with my father. He liked that. There was something in me he liked. Maybe he just liked advising me. He liked that there was something wrong with me. 'Joanie,' he used to say, 'You've got to think about how you look to others. In this country, appearances and actions mean everything. Intentions don't matter. Self-identity doesn't matter. There is only the identity granted by the society. You've got to present yourself like you're perfect; you don't want the public to scrutinize you for a little mistake like being with a woman. You don't want anyone to single you out for the wrong reasons. You don't want to look out of place.'

"We had a lot of father-daughter drives like that, where he'd give me his two cents. It was on these rides that I saw that slick-black-haired man smoking his Marlboro Reds. He had a very possessing appearance."

The waitress returned. Harry gave her an order of two gumbos and a side of cornbread. She wrote it down and left.

"I feel like all the love in my life has been tainted with disillusion," Joan continued. "There was also Lydia, who I met as Earl and my relationship was falling off. But, I don't know... I didn't know if I could do it steady with a woman again. I didn't know if I could do it steady with anyone again. I felt like it was an irrational thing, to be in love. You put all of your trust and energy into someone and something invariably goes wrong. Even a person as much of

a given to you as your own mother. You try to rebuild a relationship, and she dies on you..."

Joan looked up at Harry. "I need a savior," she said.

He stared back, being sure to let her finish.

"And the worst part was, in all these relationships, I never got to say to the other person, 'I still love you.'"

They looked at each other in silence until their food came.

The waitress sat a bowl of gumbo in front of each of them. She turned back to get the bread and Joan began to pick up her spoon.

"AH!" she screamed.

"What? What is it?" Harry asked.

"Spider," she screamed covering her face with a napkin.

The crawling black thing scurried from Joan's silverware across the table. Harry felled his fist so hard on the table that it jolted the whole thing into a different position. When he lifted it the spider was destroyed. He brushed its legs and entrails off the bottom of his hand.

"Is it gone?" Joan asked from behind her shield.

"I got it."

She lowered the napkin. Her face was white. "I hate spiders. Like you have no idea." She began to eat her gumbo.

The waitress returned with the cornbread, and the two ate in silence.

In the parking lot, as they approached her car, Joan turned around and looked directly into Harry's eyes.

"I have this strange feeling," she said. "I feel like you're going to save me."

His expression did not flinch. "Save you from what?"

She turned her face. "This ditch I'm in."

"I can't be the one to solve your problems. The solution, the closure, must come from inside of you. You have to dig yourself out."

"I know. I know, but I have this feeling that you have a part in that. You can throw me a shovel."

Harry smiled. "I think I know what you're talking about."

Joan turned back surprised. "You do?"

His countenance resonated with an unattainable heavenly knowledge.

"I hope this isn't...weird. But this whole thing is weird anyway..."

"..."

"Will you come home with me?"

"I can't love you—"

"I know. But, you warm me. You said it yourself, there's this weird gravitation we have. I feel safe beside you. This relationship transcends the mere physical."

Harry looked toward the market. "I have a package I need to pick up from the market." He looked back at her. "When I come back, I'll drive you. You seem tired."

Joan watched him walk across the street and

disappear through the doors.

When he returned he was carrying a sealed cardboard box. Joan was already in the passenger's seat. She unlocked the doors. Harry opened the rear door and set his box on top of the myriad other boxes populating the back seat, then he walked around to the driver's side and got in.

"This is a safety hazard," he said. "I can't see through the rear-view."

Joan laid her head on the window as he pulled the car out of the lot and proceeded down the road. The humming vibrations of the earth through the car's steel body rocked her nearly to sleep.

"Are we in love?" she asked.

"Do you want to be?"

"What is love?"

"Love is good."

"Oh, hahaha." Some pharmacon took hold of her in her sleep, made her aloof, even as this familiar stranger drove her to her home. "I feel hot," she said. "I'm falling... Am I falling in love?"

"You're not falling."

Harry turned the car into the entrance to Athy, approaching the bridge over the Kavanagh Canal. Suddenly, he made a sharp turn. Joan was jolted from her rest and as her eyes opened her car was being careened into the ravine. A loud crunch of the steel body rocked the passengers, boxes flew all over the back seat, and the car finally whirled

to a stop as its nose was buried in the dry dirt. Joan's seatbelt kept her suspended in air and out of the front window. Despite the siren blaring in her heart, she was relatively unfazed, for she looked over at Harry who had a coy smile on his face.

“Why did you do that?” she asked quite calmly. She was now completely awake and her eyes bulged out of their sockets.

“...This soul needs to be honored with a new dress woven, from green and blue things and arguments that cannot be proven.”

She looked down at the scene of a dirt-filled canal bed that was now before her.

They got out the car. Harry seemed more adept than she in the act of exiting a vertically-parked vehicle. He ran up the ravine and around the car to help her when she stumbled over, holding her arm tightly and supporting her as she rose and brushed the dirt off her dress. He kept his hand firmly there as he led her up the side of the ravine, and when she was safely on the other side, he slid back down the dirt hill and got his box out of the back seat. They walked away from the car hand in hand, with Harry holding his box under his left arm. During the walk, Joan had a feeling that he knew what he was doing, that everything he had in mind for the two of them would be the right thing for her in the end.

They enter the house. Joan is tired from walking but Harry

tells her to stand. She will soon be relieved, he says. "You trust me, right?" he asks.

"I don't know why."

"But you trust me."

"Yes."

He says, "When you are alone in a strange place, it heightens your senses. You feel like you're seeing everything for the first time."

He sets the box down in the middle of the room and goes to the kitchen and fetches a short wooden chair with four legs, no arms, and a back comprised of four panels. He finds it and returns to the living room, setting it down in the middle of the room near Joan. He tells her to undress. She smiles a bit. He doesn't smile back. She obliges him. When she is naked, all but her shoes, he tells her to sit. She sits. He goes to his box a few paces to the right, pulls a knife out of his pocket and slits the box open. A pungent odor fills the room. Harry pulls out a coarse rope. Joan's veins begin to surge, but something tells her it's all right. He is a good person.

Harry ties Joan to the chair, first her hands behind her back, then her torso, then her thighs, then her swollen ankles to the legs.

"Aren't you going to undress?" she asks.

He doesn't respond.

He goes back over to his box and retrieves a large dead squid. He walks toward her with it, slowly. The odor intensifies. Joan cannot help but smile.

“You've been self-destructive,” he says. He begins to slap her naked torso with the tentacles. The sensation ... He slaps her torso, then her thighs, then her torso again. He is silent. His presence is strong. His muscles bulge from beneath his blue work shirt. Joan closes her eyes.

“I've been a bad person.”

He slaps her some more. Then he drops the squid on the ground. It lands with a brute *squeak* like a large chew toy. He goes back over to his box and picks it up. With it, he walks behind Joan and lifts it right above her; she cannot see it. Then he flips it upside-down and shakes it; out falls hundreds and hundreds of little spiders. The sensation ceases; Joan's eyes shoot open and she begins to panic, hundreds of spiders crawling on her sensitive naked body, threatening to enter. All of their little legs tickle her flesh in a very bad way. She struggles; she squirms. She cannot get away. “Get these off of me,” she screams. She screams so that her neighbors may hear. She pulls against the rope but the knots are tied tight, fisherman's knots. They burn her as her limbs rub frantically against them. She panics; her body begins to convulse. “What are you doing?” she screams. She looks up behind her, into Harry's cold gaze. The spiders crawl up her neck; they crawl down her legs; they crawl all over. The fear of death fills her countenance. She is so terrified she cannot speak any more. Harry displays no emotion.

“Do you want to get rid of the spiders?” he asks with political overtone.

Joan nods frantically and looks away, trying as hard as her body can manage to get the spiders off of her. Her breaths become deeper and she closes her eyes for fear that the spiders will crawl inside of them. She spasms, but to no avail. She begins to cry. She feels Harry move around the room. She hears him rustling through the box.

“Open your eyes,” he says.

Joan shakes her head violently 'no'.

“Open your eyes,” he says again.

Still, she refuses.

She feels his hand brush creepy-crawly legs from her neck and face, and then she feels a pressure on her neck. She hurriedly opens her eyes for fear that she's given this man too much license. But the stress is not from his hands. It is from a rubber band around her neck. It is the band of a gas mask. Harry pulls it over her face. Her heartbeat begins to slow but her body still convulses. The mask is now secured and the sound of her breathing resembles that of an astronaut. She looks over at him; terror courses through her; the spiders crawl faster still. He rummages through the box and retrieves a can of Raid. He walks directly in front of her and sprays it all over her body. The spiders fall off in clusters like scabs. Soon her body is dripping with the pungent liquid and all of the spiders are dead. She is tense as a corpse after rigor mortis. She doesn't know what to feel. But she feels vulnerable. Harry begins to massage her breasts like a licensed masseuse, using the bug spray as oil. It feels good.

He walks behind her and pulls off the gas mask. The pungency of the spray bath hits her like a donkey punch. It curls her nostrils.

He rocks the chair onto its hind legs and swings it around and pulls it across the floor, out the living room and down the dark hall. As she is being pulled away, Joan sees the puddle of her terror, hundreds and hundreds of dead spiders forming a black ring in the middle of the living room floor.

He pulls her into the bathroom. Sitting in reverse, she faces the doorway as she's dragged across the threshold and she cannot see the inside of the room, but a strange and familiar smell makes its way into her memory. Harry turns the chair around and Joan now faces a bathtub full of slightly-yellow transparent liquid. She is both frightened and calm at the same time, as if the stinging yet numbing sensation of liquor were coursing through her.

Harry picks the chair up, walks it over to the tub, and submerges Joan in the bathtub filled with bleach. The sound of the back of the wooden chair hitting the porcelain bottom of the tub rings muffled though the liquid. Joan's eyes are shut tight and her mouth is pinched like a baby met with a spoonful of spinach. She doesn't know how long she remains submerged, but after what feels like eternity, her brain puts itself out of its misery.

She wakes to the vague sensation of being slapped in the face; it grows stronger and stronger until it pierces her. The

slapping ceases. Her eyes are open, her mouth agape. Harry is standing before her, naked. Sensory details evolve. Her body feels heavy, as if the gravity of the world is weighing down stronger than usual upon her. She realizes, then, that she is suspended in mid-air, that her wrists and ankles are tied to the tops of the bed posts. She looks down and sees that she hovers almost two feet above the covered mattress. It is damp. She looks down at her torso and sees the liquid dripping slowly, steadily from her nipples and the crest of her belly. She looks up in front of her, at Harry. He is holding a flog made of squid tentacles. His cock is at that dangling position between excitement and subtle arousal.

The hints of a smile form in the corners of Joan's mouth. Harry proceeds to walk behind her, out of her sight. She hears him ascend the bed and position himself behind her.

She feels a surge of intense feeling run from her pussy all the way to her head as flesh touches it like a cattle prod. She lets out a grunt.

Harry flogs her ass and slips his cock into her, pulling her hair as his balls hit her clit. Joan feels like another human-sized being is filling her. Her eyes closed, she screams out as that being begins to thrust deeper.

He thrusts faster. He pulls her hair back farther and puts his mouth right up to her ear.

Joan's face illuminated, her teeth show through her smile; she grunts with each of his thrusts. The sensation of ribbed cock touches every nerve in her nethers, growing

from the outside of the lips, into her cervix, and all along her walls. It rubs against the top, deep inside where she has not felt in forever, that spot. It hurts; it hurts like it did in the beginning, that spot all encounters since have failed to stimulate; that wet, volcanic sore within her. She is outside of herself, outside of her mind, and now in her loins. The sensations turn her entire being into a stimulated clit and her groans become those like brute animal sounds, the sound of lions in heat. And then something new and utterly overwhelming in conjuncture with it all: Harry firmly grasps her wet, slippery ass, massaging it, his thumb running along the ticklish crease of her buttocks, until he slips it into her butthole and the shock of the married thrusting sensations causes her to writhe and shake in her ropes with this new knowledge. This thumb fucks her with the same intensity as his cock, for in her forbidden hole, so supple and sensitive, lies a new virgin deflowered.

Her body pushes backward, squeezing the cock around it, so tight it can't escape. Her facial features wince and contort, her teeth grit until they chip; her soul has gone to the Rapture in a violent gushing ascent; she pushes the cock out of her like a torpedo, followed by a niagorous stream of water, what feels like all of her entrails, all of her memories, all of her emotions expelling themselves at once. She lets out a loud, elongated, dry heave, for she spurts and spasms until she is empty and relieved of the moist burden of being a woman; the last, yet-untouched godly spot triggered, has shot out all it had built up over a lifetime like

flames and powder from the barrel of a gun. Her last backward thrust sends the remaining drops of her burden dripping onto the bed below, and Harry's thumb slipping out of her ass with a last cumulative feeling she could never have fathomed prior—that slipping it out feels even better than slipping it in. And now she hangs like a limp rag in her ropes.

Harry unties her; they fall asleep in each others arms on the rug at the foot of the bed. And for the first time that anyone, including herself, has witnessed in years, she falls asleep with a peaceful, placid look on her face...

“Sometimes being in love feels like an activity,” Joan said. Harry glanced at her, smiled and squinted through the bright sunshine. They were sitting on the beach. The little boy had returned in the morning; he lay near them in the sand, digging a hole. “Like during the early years. We never did anything. Sometimes we'd just lay in bed; we'd snuggle, take a nap, make a sandwich. We were just so content being around each other that we didn't have to do anything. Kind of like now. But even doing nothing and saying nothing feels like doing something. I just feel really fulfilled in this moment. Don't you feel that way?”

“I know what you mean,” said Harry, looking away.

“Love is good,” she said, as if to herself. “But it's only really attainable through escape.”

Harry looked at her again.

“Love is pure, unconditional. So love is escape, from

memories. I loved Earl, even up until he finally cut it all off. I loved him through his drinking and his hitting. No matter what he did, I remembered how content the love was in the beginning—stupid, maybe, but I loved him by disregarding his faults. Unconditionally. To love him like I did, I had to unknow a lot of things, a lot of things that he did to me.”

“It's the only way love can grow: to forgive, to unknow.”

“It was kind of like when we were playing around with sex in his apartment in the late eighties. Being in that apartment felt like escape, escape from the outside world, escape from my parents. Escape from who I was... You know, being in love is like escaping from who you are, and instead becoming a joint being with another person.

“But pain comes when you can't completely escape. Torture comes when you can't forget yourself, when you can't forget the memories of them wronging you. Your brain makes you remember, the memories just flow... The body is impure. The body, the brain, it's what retains the memories. You have to shed the physical to get to the pure—the pure good love.

“I got the idea once, while I was visiting my mom during her final months, that I would want my soul to float on a leaf down the canal by my mother's house, and out into this ocean before it made its way to heaven.” She paused suddenly, as if stricken with doubt of what she had just said.

“You say that as if you won't be able to do it now.”

“Eh,” she said shaking her head.

“Well why can't you?” asked Harry.

“I mean clearly I can't. What's there to float upon?”

“Are you talking about the fact that there is no water?”

“Well, yeah. What would keep my soul afloat?”

“Well, if you're thinking about it in that way, then what do you even have to float down the water should it still be here? You can't see the water now; but you also can't see your soul. That which exists within you, which you can't see, which exists after your body dies, may ride upon that which exists in the ocean even after the ocean has died, that ocean spirit, which exists in its midst even when the body of water is not there. This view is still peaceful, no? The spirit of it lends the same effect as the body. Your spirit will rise as your body dies, and the ocean's does the same. Of course, before the body dies, in either sense, you'll still have to deal with the suffering you'll endure inside of it: the drowning.”

“Isn't it clear that I've suffered myself already?”

He laughed.

She looked back into the expanse. “I know the body's not there, I mean, the water is gone and all. But that makes it all the easier to walk into. And my body would fall somewhere out there, to relinquish itself on the ocean floor. And my spirit will go where the water has gone... I've made up my mind already.” She looked back at him. “I was hoping that when I go in, that you would come with me. We can both get away...from all of this. This stuffy house... all the memories. Oh, I don't know what I'd do if you said no.

If you tell me you'll leave me I might just decompose.”

He rubbed his chin. “Free my mind, my spirit?... It's tempting...”

“Didn't you just say, You can't be landed forever. Your soul will be freed inevitably, why not sooner? Don't you think the eternal freedom of the soul, in the wake of all we've been through, is worth a day or two of suffering?”

“...Sure. But I'm still human. I still have to feel what my body endures. We can talk for hours about the soul and the ideal, but I'll still scream if I stub my toe. To drown is lamentable by itself. But to drown in a beach without water is a terrible way to die.”

They looked up at the sun in silence, following its course until it rolled slightly behind them, their necks bent over on the backs of their chairs. A dry wind blew upon them, bringing with it a quiet static like the soft crash of waves or even the sound of atoms colliding: pure silence. At that moment the world seemed more like a child's marble than their vast human origin, rolling around the large yellow marble above, and somewhere out there there were other marbles and pieces of lint and star-white dust swirling and eddying and slipping past each other in the black felt sack of space. Their hands continued their embrace. The sun's rays shined down harder and caused their grip to sweat.

Later, Harry went to use the rest room in the house.

Joan looked up at the sun, then turned her attention to Giovanni and watched his hole deepen until it could have

possibly contained his person. He stopped digging then and went over to her.

“I'm gonna go,” he said.

“Where are you going?”

“Back home. Ya'll were talking about going to freedom. That's where I wanna be. With my momma.”

Joan felt a bit uneasy at this, that the boy would be wandering off by himself, but then she wondered, what for? She smiled at Giovanni and waved her hand.

“Tell Harry I say bye,” he said. Then he walked away, kicking sand up along the line where the water would have broken and receded back to sea. As he walked he ventured farther out, and then in again, like a wave. After about twenty minutes he was a dot along the horizon, walking back to where ever he came from, almost as naked as the day he left there.

JOAN AWOKE IN the morning with Harry spooning her backside, his arm wrapped around her waist, and the sun had not yet risen on the next day. She softly pulled his arm from around her and sat on the edge of the sofa, taking deep breaths in through her nose and out through her mouth. She closed her eyes, and, maintaining a stern look of determination, she pried her mother's heels off, not once looking down as she finally tossed them to the side of the room beside Harry's box. She walked, shorter in height and more careful in step, to the kitchen, where she had a cup of water for breakfast. Harry came into the kitchen soon after

and looked at her with the familiarity of a man who had been married to this woman for twenty years and was just now realizing how beautiful she had aged. He had himself a cup of water as well. Then he looked at his watch. It was 5:44. He looked at her with an approving glance, then took his watch off, set it on the kitchen island, and led Joan by the hand out the back door. They walked down the grassy knoll, over the seaweed medium and onto the beach and there Joan felt the sand in her toes for the first time since she had arrived at the house.

They arrived at the place where the waves would have broken on the sand, and watched the sun waken from behind the horizon.

“That's where we're going,” said Harry. And after that he never said anything else.

When the sun had reached the halfway mark, and now drenched the land before them in the light of a new day, Harry took Joan's hand and commenced to walk. Joan looked beside herself, unable to control the width of her smile. To her left she saw Mrs. Dermot O'Brien in her black sweat suit looking out across the desert ocean. To her right, beyond Harry, she saw Mrs. Ortega sitting on one of her plastic beach chairs upon her grassy knoll, looking in the same direction. She looked behind herself one last time at the house as it receded. Then she turned around and never looked back again.

As they walked, she sang:

If anybody asks you,

Where I'm going,
Where I'm going, to,

I'm going over yonder,
I'm going over yonder,
I'm going over yonder,
To be with my Lord...

Four days later the couple had not yet faltered in their exodus. That morning, as they watched the sun rise on them for the last time in a majestic display of all the life before it, filling the two travelers with a renewed sense of beauty and hope, they saw come tumbling out of the horizon the towering waves of the ocean rolling back in.