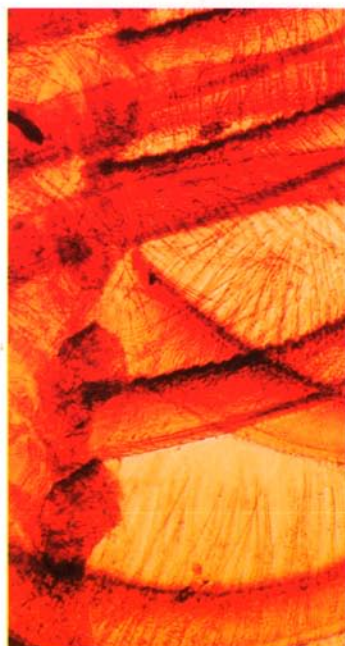




**Skinny Dipping in the Lake  
of the Dead \* *Stories***

**ALAN DENIRO**



"DeNiro performs feats of acrobatic skill with remarkable control. He has created a brand new world, and I believe every word of it."—Hannah Tinti (*Animal Crackers*)

ISBN 1931520178

**FUN SIZE EDITION**

\$16.00

## IF I LEAP

The good-bye girl sits at the picnic table watching the boy fall from the sky. He wears a yellow jumpsuit, and she has nicknamed him Chicken Little. She sips her ginger ale. In the center of the park, an Eastern Orthodox priest gives away toothpick crucifixes next to the fountain. He doesn't appear to notice the boy's plummet.

The boy completes his fall from the Georgics skyscraper, hits the pavement, dusts himself off, and walks over to talk to her.

"What are you doing?" she asks. Two weeks ago her parents threatened to kick her out of the house because she didn't want to spend any time at home with them. So she sits in the park in her summer vacation and eats her brown-bag lunch of baloney sandwiches and Fritos. Next year she will be a senior at Pency Prep. He gives a crooked, beaky smile.

"Practicing."

She finds him fetching.

The next day she gathers the nerve to touch his arm as they sit on the picnic table. It isn't feathers attached to his body. But beneath his jumpsuit his skin has a yellowish tint, the color of lemon Jell-O. The skin is soft. "You're not normal."

He doesn't argue. He can't remember much except his name and the urge to jump off buildings. "Chicken Little," he repeats. He grew up in Nebraska.

“The sky was huge there,” he said. “Dark wheat and deep blue sky.” He shakes his head slightly. “All vaguer than a dream...”

No one else in the city appears to notice him. It’s a private show for her. She doesn’t mind, because the boy certainly breaks up the monotony of the lunch hour, and her lunch hour breaks up the monotony of the day.

One day, while watching him fall, she realizes that her life has been incredibly unhappy. The velocity of his descent doesn’t change, yet she can see him in mindless, excruciating detail, like a slow close up. She stands up from the picnic table, body awash with sadness. Looking more closely, she sees that Chicken Little closes his eyes when he falls, a slight smile, his tawny hair whipping.

The good-bye girl realizes he’s in ecstasy. She drills him about this later, not about why he doesn’t die when he hits the pavement (and at the same time she doesn’t want to know, she doesn’t want to know). He gives a bright, easy laugh. His body is lean and taut, and the yellow jumpsuit is almost baggy draped over his narrow bones.

“You flatter me,” he says. “Nothing makes me happier than falling, nothing.”

“But why do you do it?” she asks. She wants to touch his hands, his soft, saffron fingers.

He laughs again. “Why do you watch me?”

Because you’re beautiful, she wants to say. Instead, “I’m bored most of the time. I have enough money to live but too much time to force me to spend it.” She offers ginger ale and he accepts, tipping the entire aluminum can back. “I have work to do,” he says finally, after drinking. “I might not be back for awhile.” He points to the top of the skyscraper, thirty stories high. It used to be the headquarters of a long-forgotten financial institution. Now the building houses minor telemarketing franchises, art students, and carpetbaggers. The boy keeps pointing to the top of the building.

“Yes?” she says, trying to see the exact spot where he points to.

“I have to remember these tiny falls for when I do big ones.” He

arises from the picnic table and glances back. “You’ll see me soon. Keep an eye out.”

And he’s gone before the good-bye girl knows to say good-bye.

It’s two weeks before there’s any more sign of him. Time slows for her, like it must slow for Chicken Little as he falls off the skyscraper. But this slowing, she realizes, doesn’t *give* her anything. The slowness makes her miss him even more.

She sees a poster for a fiction writing workshop in the basement of a Greek Orthodox church—apparently run by the priest who’s always in the park—but she figures it would be a bad scene to really write what she would like to write in public. She keeps a journal instead, where the thoughts pour out like hot wine. “The wings, I want the wings to take me cool as a feather, because I want him to be my feather-boy...”

Such thoughts cannot bring him back or help her contend with her parents. The house is not actually a house but an apartment, but she likes to pretend. Her room resembles a monk’s cell. She has to sleep somewhere. White walls, a few magenta candles littering the windowsill, a trigonometry textbook on her desk. She carved the book out to make a safe, where she keeps her locket.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, Marlina,” her father says to her mother. “She’s moping around for a reason.”

“Am not,” the girl shouts down from the top of the stairs, from her room, where she can hear anything she wants to hear.

“I think she’s in love,” her mother mutters to her father, amused.

The girl stands on the bed. “Fuck you!” she yells. She can almost see her father rising out of the rickety chair, and then holding his hands up in a supplicating gesture.

“See what I tell you?” her father says to her mother. “Look what we have to put up with.”

“I know what we put up with,” the mother says, sighing.

The girl closes her eyes and hops off the bed. Her knees buckle and she nearly lands on her dresser.

“What was that?” her mother calls up.

“I’m coming up there after I eat supper,” her father says. The girl has scraped her knee and doesn’t bother to Band-Aid it or swab the scratch with cotton. “Damned if I’m not going to come up there.” She hears him sit.

That night, she bolts out the door and wanders to the park. It’s not the safest place in the city to be at night; the empty streets chill her. The pigeons sleep in secret coves. Even though it is July, a brisk air has entered the city. She holds her thin, violet-colored jacket close to her.

The girl stares up at the looming skyscraper. There ought to be gargoyles there. Or him, perched on someone’s window. Maybe to watch TV. But then she thinks that maybe he’s too sophisticated for TV. She walks across the street to the entrance foyer but the door is locked. A security guard has a booth adjoining the vestibule inside; he watches TV, and his unclipped cardboard badge rests on his desk.

She knocks on the door. “Closed,” the man says, turning back to the set.

“Have you seen a boy?” she begins but then realizes it’s hopeless. No one has seen him. She squints at the television, through the grainy glass of the foyer. A disaster has just struck in a South-East Asian country whose name she can’t pronounce. Some terrorist tried to blow up one of the new, hundred-story high rises. The shards of glass glitter on the narrow street in what must be afternoon on the other side of the world. As the security guard turns away, the live camera shows bodies carried away on makeshift stretchers made of sailing canvas.

She opens her mouth and stares. One of the men in the blurry camera’s eye, rushing a bloodied man away to an ambulance, is Chicken Little.

Next week he returns and falls off the skyscraper again, and the girl tells him what she saw. “Cat’s out of the bag?” he says.

“Way out.” She crunches down on an apple. “I’m somehow intrigued by this double life of yours.” She’s pissed at him, for being away for so long and not telling her why, or at least dropping her a postcard.

“It’s really hard to talk about,” he says. “But I’m here for a reason. I have important tasks.”

“Whatever,” she says, crossing her arms. “You could have told me.”

He begins laughing, not unkindly, and her face flushes.

“Falling is a gift for me,” Chicken Little explains. “I get presentiments about disasters that might happen. These dreams, these images of terrible events come to me only during my falls.” He shakes his head. “I try to save people afterward, if it feels right, but it doesn’t always work.”

“What do you mean?” Here, she takes his hand, and he doesn’t pull away.

“Five times out of six I’m wrong. It’s hard work having these dreams while I’m falling; I’m improvising this as I go along. But I have to.”

The priest next to the fountain sees her and turns his head away, hands jammed full of toothpicks.

“This is strange,” she says. “I don’t understand how you can do this.”

“If you don’t understand, I want to make you understand.” He sits up from the picnic table, still holding her hand. “Come on.”

It takes them about fifteen minutes to walk the dusty stairs all the way to the top, silent except for their footfall. The stairwell smells like old taffy; she sees his old footprints crisscrossed on the tiled stairs.

All of the footprints lead up.

When they reach the top door, she gathers her breath, slumping in the hall. He doesn’t look particularly tired, but he waits for her. When her breathing calms, he creaks the door open and they step out.

The platformed roof of the Georgics skyscraper could be the roof of the world to the girl. Barren, blistering, hardly an atmosphere between her and the sun. She clenches his arm for support.

A few pigeons linger and hop, but they're lean and look more like ravens than the fat cooers she's used to in the park.

"Come here," he says, and walks to the edge. Vertigo hits her; her legs want to buckle, but he keeps her steady. "Look down there."

She looks. The street, the park, even the black trash bags sagging on the curb, all appear microscopic and pristine. "It's beautiful," she stammers. She's scared out of her wits but continues to look.

"Hold my hand before I go, all right?" he says.

"Are you scared?" She wants to hold him close and tell him not to jump.

He kisses her neck; she puts her arm around his and notices an extra softness there, like goose down, or extra-fine tissue paper. "Scared?" he says. "I'm always scared." He touches her sandy brown hair and leaps.

She crouches to the edge and for an instant wants to follow him, to see what would happen if she follows him, to let the air kiss her slowly. She stays there and watches him land, though since the ground is so far away she can't see the exact details. Pigeons dart next to her and then scuttle away.

An hour later he opens the ancient door. His narrow face looks tired but purified.

"Anything?" she asks.

"Maybe. It's too early to say." He sits beside her, and their legs dangle off the edge. "It's always too early to say. I'll have to sleep on it."

"Sleep with me," she says, and she can barely believe the words streaming from her mouth. "I mean," and he slides his arm around her waist. "Where do you sleep?"

"Here, on the roof. Don't you have a home to go to?"

"Not really," she says. The thought of her parents milling around the kitchen fills her with dread. "I want to stay here."

That night he discloses blankets in a corner of the roof, with a heating duct providing warmth from the wind. They huddle together as the long darkness comes, as pigeons flutter around them.

“You’re shaking,” she says in his ear, running her fingertips along his thigh. She has never wanted to do this before, like this.

“Yes,” he says, moving on top of her. “Shaking.”

She opens her legs. As he moves inside of her, deep guttural sounds come from the back of his throat. The noise arises from a place inside of him that she hasn’t uncovered until now. He comes quietly, and she not so quietly. She holds onto his soft neck for dear life.

Weeks pass. The girl makes perfunctory visits home to eat and gather her things. When her parents ask her where she is going, where she has been, she makes up an elaborate story about a Nostradaman named Amanthar she shacks up with on the east side. The entire thing is a fiction; she considers what the Orthodox priest would think of her story. The story keeps her parents arguing long enough about what to do about Amanthar that she’s able to slip away, after her parents move to the basement to fight. She tells Chicken Little nothing about her family and home, wanting to keep those two worlds as separate as possible.

Yet school will be starting in a month. She can’t imagine classrooms, desks, the mundane world she used to know.

The fifth time they make love on the roof, it is afternoon, and she notices that the color of his semen, which she wipes from her with a box of tissues stolen from home, is a milky blue color.

“Should I even ask about that?” she says, tossing the Kleenex into a ventilation duct.

Chicken Little doesn’t say anything at first. Then, after they’ve put on their clothes, and he jumps and returns to the top of the roof, he says, “You know I’m different.”

“Yes, but—” She wants to kiss him again and does. “It makes me wonder what you’re made of.”

“The sky.” It takes her a few seconds to realize that he has answered completely seriously.

A week later, she notices that the sky begins to cool. The slightest

hint of Indian summer is around the corner. That morning, Chicken Little looks worried.

She knows what he's going to say next. The girl has been dreading it for ages.

"Something awful is going to happen," he says. He slumps down on their mat; the nest, she used to joke with him. I can't tell you much more, but I'm going to have to leave."

The color drains from her face. "Like before?" She sits next to him but he's either too distracted to hold her or doesn't have the strength.

"Yes. Something like before." He rests his head on his knee and wraps his arms around himself. "Part of me wishes I wouldn't have to go through this. If I could, I would live normally, like you."

She laughs. "I'm not normal either. I'm with you, after all."

"You're right," he says slowly. "Maybe you're not normal anymore."

That night they sleep together, but apart. She doesn't say much or touch him, even though that's what she wants more than anything else in the world.

School begins and he doesn't come back. The summer begins to seem distant to her. Though she doesn't like it much, she's forced to reacquaint herself with friends she doesn't care about, with classes she grows bored with after the second day. The thought of college nauseates her. She sleepwalks through the halls, through the house. There's no reason to get angry or depressed, she tells herself. I'm a high school student. At the same time, the girl knows that something is different inside of her.

She scours the newspapers for signs of disasters: floods, earthquakes, terrorist attacks, of which there are many. There are no signs of mysterious strangers in the grainy photos. Not too many people saved, either. What if he's always too late? she thinks to herself. I'm a morbid bastard.

On a Saturday in the beginning of October, she goes back to the park. The trees have all turned their colors, their pelts. The

Orthodox priest still plies his trade, although there are even fewer passersby than in the summer. He gives her a frigid look and for some reason seems terribly afraid of her. This surprises her. “I wish I would have taken your class,” she calls out, lying, but he pretends not to hear her.

She looks up. For the first time, she sees the Georgics building as a small building, not a vast superstructure but a normal, old skyscraper in a forgotten neighborhood of the city. She pries open the stairwell door and begins the walk up. Someone has cleaned the stairs of all the dust, and she begins to cry. “I don’t even have his footprints anymore,” she says.

At the top she kicks the door open. The sunlight bursts upon her, but the air chills her deeply. The autumn must have driven the pigeons away. The roof is empty; even their careworn blanket is gone, probably thrown away by the same janitor who cleaned the stairs.

Trembling, she steps to the edge. The black frock of the priest looks like a tiny crow below her. The street is empty. She looks at the sky, the sharp blueness, the cirrus clouds stationary there. “I want to be there,” she says, unafraid, and with her toes quivering, she jumps.

At first the girl imagines that she has only fallen off her bed in the middle of a bad dream, instead of a thirty-story building. Then she is nowhere, and her mind slows, taking its time sifting through the sensations around her, relishing the rough breeze of her plummet. Her hair dances in front of her eyes. She doesn’t need to close her eyes to see what she wants to see, what she has been craving and fearing since Chicken Little said good-bye.

The falling disappears. Sounds drown out into silence. She sees Chicken Little in a small jet plane tilted in a weird angle. Downward. The passengers, about ten of them—mothers and businessmen and small children—wail. A stewardess tries to walk through the chaos; she has an airline insignia on her lapel that the girl has seen on many commercials. All these views are crystalline to her. But Chicken Little is there, and from his under-the-seat compartment he pulls out—

efficiently, as if he has been training for this his entire life—a huge bag, large enough that he must have smuggled it on board. She sees smoke come from the wing and she wants to cry out, but she can't cry out. All she can do is watch as Chicken Little pulls parachutes from the bag, about ten of them, and distributes them. A couple of passengers rush toward him crazily, but he gives them a fierce look, and they calm down. The plane starts to shake and blur, and the last image the good-bye girl sees is Chicken Little looking at the crooked window of the jet, in the middle of the disaster without a parachute. But of course he has none. And he looks worried. She realizes that he doesn't know if he can make this jump, so high in the air, and still land on his feet.

Then she finds herself falling again, the freeze-frame loosening. Nothing in her life has ever felt like that descent, gravity sweetly calling her down. The ground comes closer and closer, and she rotates her feet forward. She lands, knees bending but not breaking.

She places her palms flat on the cool sidewalk and appraises the landscape around her, like a cat. The priest, who had been watching her fall, rushes to her, dropping his toothpick crucifixes along the way.

When the priest comes within earshot, sweat beading on his face, she says, "I've seen the future tense. There's still time." Time to find the airline, the flight number, and track him. To save him if he needs to be saved.

The priest looks at her as if she were a ghost. "You've cut yourself on some glass," is all that he can manage to say.

She turns over her hand. A shard of clear glass has lodged below her thumb. The blood trickles down her palm. The blood is the color of the sky on a clear day.

## THE CENTAUR

Once a man was shot in the leg during a battle. Fear of gangrene compelled the field doctor to unlock the leg from the rest of the body. The doctor sawed off the leg and stitched on a fairy tale in its place. The man lay in his cot and stared at the tattered tarp above him, listening to the grapeshot thudding into phalanxes over the ridge. He couldn't tell who was winning. The sky was on winter's edge, threatening either thunderstorms or snow squalls. The scent of gunpowder and rotting straw made him woozy. Birds with heavy purple feathers and scimitar beaks landed on the ash trees outside the makeshift field hospital. They skittered off when the cannons discharged. He missed the light, airy birds of home.

After the operation, when he had regained consciousness, his nurse kept saying that he was lucky, lucky to be alive and full of future possibilities. The nurse had azure eyes. When the soldier asked about the doctor, the nurse—who'd held his hand during the amputation, and bit her lip as if she were the one who had been shot—told him, with a sad face, that the doctor had been killed in his sleep by a wasp. He was allergic, who knew.

While the soldier slept that first night, he had a dream about a knight who was trying to get back home after a long, unsuccessful quest. The knight had forgotten what his quest was in the first place. Now he was trying to cut his losses. He had a wife in his mountain-side manor, and a young son whom he had not yet seen. He was gone for two years, and his family no doubt thought him dead. The journey

home required traversing a dense forest. The forest had no trails; he had to cut through the thickets with his sword, which bore an emblem of his family's house, the squirrel, on its pommel. After the first day, during which he traveled only a few miles, he lost his sense of direction. Every tree looked tall and old. With night approaching, he decided to rest and gather his bearings in the morning. As he slept, a fog rolled in, and with the fog came a troupe of dwarves. Only days before, the dwarves, masquerading as jugglers and clowns, had approached the knight's manor, performed a confused show, and killed the wife and young son. They were capitalizing on the bog's cover to evade the authorities. However, they didn't have much to worry about, since the jaegermeister was at that time on pilgrimage in a faraway land to cure his gout, and the fairie queene of the forest, nominally its protector, was preoccupied with a game of correspondence chess with a naiad and could not be disturbed. The dwarves, far from home, on a secret mission, and desperate for commodities they could transmute into liquid cash, preserved the dismembered remains of the knight's family in mountain ice and cloudfox flowers. They nearly tripped over the sleeping knight, and a few, at first, were eager to slit the knight's throat. Their leader, however, was edgy about the whole failed expedition. He didn't want to press their already frayed luck. He made it clear to his compatriots, in elaborate hand signals, that the knight was not to be disturbed under any circumstances.

One of the dwarves, adjusting his heavy pack on his small shoulders, let the wife's right leg slip out onto the moss and leaves. He was too afraid to stop, and within minutes the dwarves were far out of reach of the knight. When morning broke and the sun discharged its smoky light, the knight woke up. He had had a wonderful dream about his wife. In the dream, he courted her on the ramparts of a ruined castle. In the rolling fields below them, sheep ate bright golden barley, and men in hobbyhorse costumes played jaunty songs on flutes. His wife leaned toward him, stroked his hair, and told him that she would never leave him, no matter how far away he might

be or perilous his station in life. She smelled like apricots. When she leaned forward to kiss him, he awoke. Sitting up and stretching, he wondered about how he would find his way home—he had forgotten for a few minutes that he was still quite lost—and perhaps whether it was worth risking a campfire to cook bacon. When he saw the foot at his feet, he thought at first that it was a dead bird or vole. When he crawled toward it and bent his head closer, he recognized at once the silver buckle set into the shoe. He pressed his fist into his mouth. Unsure of whether he was still in a dream or cursed, he touched his wife's heel. He never grew clearheaded enough to seek revenge or to supplicate the fairie queene for mercy. Instead he left his sword and pack behind and plunged into the thicket, cradling his wife's leg, never to be seen again.

A crash woke the soldier up. The shrieking clatter was loud and close enough to touch. For a few seconds he was deaf. Dirt clouds filled his vision like a locust swarm. He jolted and tried to fall out of bed and run away. But his leg, his fairy-tale leg, had fallen into a deep sleep. It tingled but wouldn't move. The fairy tale, it turned out, was cheaply constructed and poorly suited for sudden movement. The tarp blew off, and he saw soldiers approaching the makeshift hospital from the far ridge. He could tell that they were local irregulars—his country had made frequent incursions amongst them—from their ragged uniforms. Some of them carried pikes instead of muskets. They had harnessed their few stout horses to cannons, which bullied the artillery along the broken road. In an instant, he knew that the front had surged forward, and the medical corps, no doubt under orders, had retreated, leaving the invalid and hopeless behind. A man on a cot next to his called out for his aunt. The soldier looked around wildly for his nurse, whom, he realized at that instant, he had fallen in love with when she held his hand, which seemed ages ago, even though it was had only been yesterday. He loved her, even though he had seven children and a wife, his family, awaiting word from him, hundreds of miles away. He didn't care. Squinting, he saw her. The upper half of her was in one of the leafless ash trees. She was

cut into two. The explosion that had woken him must have killed her and vaulted her into the tree. Her eyes were closed. Vaulted into the branches below her were the hindquarters of a horse, a sorrel. The hooves still twitched. The rest of the horse was nowhere to be seen. He wiped the dust from his eyes and squinted at her. The nurse looked like a centaur, ready to leap out of the tree and gallop away from harm. Sinking his head down on the straw pillow, he closed his eyes and listened to the soldiers' song, bellowing over the ridge, coming closer. The song was a heroic ballad, a plea to defend the motherland from its enemies. Hail the size of frog eggs started raining down, drowning voices. Once in a while, the nurse in the tree said to him, there is something beautiful in our mistakes.

## THE EXCAVATION

The day my wife left me, I found her in the middle of our living room, digging. Her trim archaeological tools were by her side—a trowel, a sieve, a plumb. The floor looked like a moat for a sand castle without the sand. She'd made two piles, one of rug, one of piping. The first looked like rainbow sheep clippings. The second looked like a tangled robot that had collapsed.

I shuffled forward.

“Make a pot of coffee, will you?” she asked. Her tawny hair was speckled with white. I could still see only her back, not her face. Her T-shirt shone with sweat. She came up with a hunk of cracked concrete from the hole and tossed it to the side.

“Sure, coffee,” I said, sullen without knowing why.

I moved to the kitchen and poured the grounds into a filter. The grounds were only slightly less grainy than the dirt my wife sifted through.

None of the houses in our subdivision had basements. Architects never built basements any more, except maybe in Kansas, where you needed cheap insurance for a tornado. If they'd built a basement in our house, I imagined that I wouldn't have had this problem of my wife ruining things.

A quarter pot of coffee bubbled to life, and I took it off the burner, letting the Folgers drip and sizzle down. I opened our freezer door, got a tray of ice cubes, and dumped them into the coffee. I left the kitchen with the pot still dripping, sounding like a urinating

hellhound. My wife submerged her head in the hole she built. She came up, panting for air, with something in her hands.

She held out a baby's smock.

"There's no reason to bring up the issue of children again," I said, crouching next to her.

Her eyes flushed. "This isn't a ruse. I *found* this."

I handed her the pot of coffee. She wrapped the baby-blue smock around the rim, to prevent her hands from burning, and took a deep drink. The ice cubes had already melted.

"I was just hoping to sort things out," she said, setting the pot down. "Plumbing the depths."

I grew impatient with her. I'd settled this dilemma years ago.

"That's the reason we retired from archaeology. How many dollars will it take to repair this?" I pointed at the floor.

She shook her head. "It's not that. I'm sick of repairing. I feel like time's speeding up for me. It's not too long after you bury something that you have to dig it up again."

"You're the one doing the digging," I reminded her.

She threw her trowel in the hole, which was getting deeper. "I have to play the game. Let me."

"Dig?"

She nodded. "Anyway, it's not like we love each other anymore."

That much was true. So I sat on the ottoman and watched TV. *The Cosby Show*. My wife, after an hour, was immersed, rising to pull up buckets of bric-a-brac only occasionally. Nothing of importance, it seemed. In another hour, I couldn't even hear the clink-clink of her shovel. Twilight came and I fell asleep, the TV blaring quietly. I couldn't help but sleep; at my age, sleep was a thief who stole my waking hours from under me. When I woke again it was completely night, and my wife sat on the other edge of the couch from me.

"I've gone deep," she said, and then she held out something. In the dim moonlight I thought it was maybe a teddy bear or rag doll. I reached out to touch it and felt cold, clammy flesh.

"A baby," I said.

“A fetus.” I could barely see my wife in the darkness. “Just sprouting there, on the edge of the tunnel. I wiped the dirt off.” Her arms sagged and retreated to her lap. “It’s the baby we never had. I’m a lodestone for pain.”

“I know,” I said. “That’s why I was drawn to you.”

She stroked the baby’s forehead. “Do you remember college, when you first proposed to me? Fifty years ago. The college by the sea, the California coast. I had no idea what would happen—we were dating only a couple of months. You took me to the sea cliffs and promised me everything.”

“Everything?”

She shrugged in the darkness. “Well, a lot. A comfortable life. A life where I could have independence, yet completeness. Where we could both do our archaeology.”

“Sure. I was three for three, wasn’t I?”

She ignored me. “I didn’t know how much of me is dying, until now. A spoonful a day.”

I sighed. My stomach felt upset. “Is the adventure over?”

“No.” She stood up. “And screw you. I’m an archaeologist, just like you. I’m supposed to dig up bones, scientifically. But I’m finding these bones are my own.” She pointed to her gut with a free finger. “I’ve wanted to make this,” she said. She clutched the baby—was it our baby?—tighter and moved to the hole, crawling inside.

“Your digging form is horrible,” I called out after her. “Very messy.”

We were both trained to dig. I thought of the bog men, our apprenticeship excavation forty-five years ago. Ritual murders. The remains were in Denmark, preserved in the peat bogs for centuries. Each victim suffered, but all my wife and I had to discover was dead tissue, dried blood, ornamental stone axes. Nothing breathed.

We participated in our own rituals, from an untold distance across time. We tried making love in our camp once, mosquitoes swarming around our tent. I couldn’t come, though she wanted me to. The whole experience was a disaster. Bones in careful boxes were

stacked at the edge of our sleeping bags.

I preferred the calmness of the graves themselves, where you didn't have to touch anyone really alive.

What did my wife see in me, then?

Wanting to think of these things no longer, I fell back to sleep.

Morning came quickly. My wife was nowhere to be seen or heard. I had no hunger, though I was thirsty. On a self-imposed dare, I peeked in the pit.

I couldn't see the bottom, but there was dim light, and a rope ladder that led down. I took a deep breath and decided to go. I lowered myself onto the ladder. As I moved down, the cold and brightness increased. After ten minutes or so (my body remembering again the physical exertion of a dig, long after I'd retired) I reached the end of the ladder. I stepped onto a platform, and I realized it was a set of stairs, with an oak banister.

I walked down the stairs. I was in my own house, exactly as above, except there was no hole in the center of the living room. Beyond the windows was only packed dirt. The light came from a wooden structure near the opposite wall. I squinted and realized it was a crib.

Moving toward it, looking down, I saw the baby curled up there, bright as flash fire. The baby was still dead, but unharmed.

"Jan?" I called out. No answer. I didn't expect one. Maybe she was already above me, closing the front door behind her with all our money, ready to start over again, even at her—our—age. I moved to the top of the stairs. The hole I had crawled from was gone. Just the ceiling of our house, though it was not our house. It had become my house, deep underground, me and the dead, bright baby. I tried the front door, but it was locked; it didn't even rattle.

I didn't weep. Justice wasn't always just.

In the kitchen, everything was in order—plenty of food, maybe for months. I checked the TV. It still worked but only picked up one station. It showed one moving image, more or less repeating. A woman and a small child—maybe five or six years old, with dazzling blond hair—playing in a field of red poppies. They laughed,

tumbling. They played. No impediment or shame separated them. There was shame in me, somewhere, but shame needed two: a box to put the bones, a pit to dig to keep the body. Even then, silence usually won in the end. The bog men couldn't express shame to me or my wife when we excavated them, no matter how much they suffered, or wanted to share that suffering.

I kept the TV on, though I recognized neither the mother nor child. I checked on the baby. It was unmoved.

I moved to the kitchen to make coffee, for one.  
Some day they'll find us.

## A KEEPER

Tonight the woman who always calls, calls. This time she asks me how to divide a beggar and an arctangent. What could I have possibly said to her? I think she is a keeper. “Stop trying to mix the humanities and the sciences. And go to bed.” I nod to the phone and the phone clicks off. Outside, a noise sounds like thunder, though it could be a stray dog tipping over a garbage can for shelter. I turn off my flickering bedside light (brownouts, again, all over central Brazil) and tell the clock, “Wake me at six a.m.,” attempting to sleep. I sleep.

An hour later she calls back. “But I can’t sleep. I can’t stand the fact that all across the Americas windows are opening and closing, opening, and I’m not *looking* out of them, all of them, all at once.” I have the vague feeling I ought to know her well; I can’t remember a thing about her.

I imagine her panting and wearing a white tie and a black suit and a round opal bracelet that monitors her position at all times when she takes lunches away from the sanatorium.

Hey, that’s cruel, I think.

I hang up again and move to close the window. I open the storm window again, I look out, and the sky just hangs there, like it’s balanced on the top of the plum tree. Or rather, the re-creation of a plum tree, in quartz. The sagging plums used to be a strong violet, but vandals scraped the color alloys off and sold them a while ago. Long before I reached this tenement as a passing stranger.

I’m rooted now.



Brasilia is a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there. But wait, I do live there. I mean, here. My job feeds the bills. I am a painter in the King Juan Juan Center for the Arts. My body of work, like every other painter's at the center, consists entirely of portraits of King Juan Juan, which tend to adorn every third block of Brasilia, half the billboards, and most private and shared huts.

Because of the methane corrosion, I can say it is steady work.

That next morning, I don't concern myself about the call. When I was afflicted, I did much of the same. The keepers are another pet project of our king. It's a virus that makes slavish pets out of people, makes people want to babble sex and make sex babble. After time, it passes; side effects include utter amnesia. It's what passes for mating in Brazil since Juan Juan's reign began. To most, all other forms of sex appear boring. Everyone needs a keeper; I've had about four or five. Including, allegedly, the one who calls me and asks questions that can't be answered.

Courtship is not easy cake to eat.

As I get ready, letting the kitchen sink brush my teeth, I see Clown Man at the tenement across the street, framed in the window. I don't know his real name, of course. Here, as on many occasions, he's painting his face in front of the window, peering into an invisible mirror. He could stare right at me, but he never does. His eyes are glass, corneas surrounded by red and green chalky paint. Then he nods to himself and leaves the window, his ritual complete, off to entertain or hustle or kill someone, or all three. In Brasilia, it would not be out of the question.

The Center for the Arts used to be a mosque. My studio is usually in the northeast minaret (They liked keeping the painters in them. Virtual imprisonment in the towers?), but architects repaint every room every six weeks by royal decree, and today's my painting day. I work temporarily in the main wing.

All my airbrushes have been primed by an apprentice, and the canvases are warm, as well. Light gleams from an open square in

the roof, and I can barely hear the triple-decker buses and the carriages streaming through the thoroughfare, past the locked gates of Brasilia's Yale campus.

The piece I have been working on is a potential masterpiece. It depicts King Juan Juan, darkly tanned, shirtless, wearing only swimsuit and socks, peering off-canvas on a rocky outcrop. Beside the rocky outcrop, two courtesans sex themselves, the man's head buried between the woman's legs. The woman, actually, gazes longingly at Juan Juan on the outcrop. The gaze will take a long time to perfect, but I'm already pleased by preliminary results.

I fire up the airbrushes and am about to paint when Paula walks into the studio. She's my boss, and used to be my wife, but a wife from a long, long time ago. How much I am attracted to her I can't say. She silently moves toward the tightly stretched canvas and nods in satisfaction.

"The king would be pleased," she finally says. Her hair is soft and fuzzy, like a platypus. "Are you ready?"

"I guess so."

I spray out the lasered mist of paint, and she kneels down next to me, slips my pants to my ankles, and begins to service me. After about a minute, painting, I ask her to stop.

She looks up. "Why?"

"It's beginning to hurt."

"I'll be gentler."

"No, I mean, it hurts from the inside. *Burning.*"

Twenty minutes later I'm in a doctor's office, on afternoon leave. My name chimes. I go in and the doctor looks calm, like he could easily be a cricket instructor.

"What seems to be the problem?"

I describe to him the exact situation.

"Hm. Drop your pants."

I do, although for some reason I am entirely more fearful than when Paula did it.

"Hm." he repeats. "How did you find this out?"

“My boss serviced me.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Your boss?”

“Well, I was painting a sexing, and a lot of curators have been heavily influenced by Carlonian lately, who says that the erotic must be heightened in the painter as much as the painting. But this is probably boring you.”

Instead he says, “I’m afraid that you have a curse.”

“A curse?”

“Yes, a curse in your member.”

I have no idea what he means but am frightened anyway. “How? What’s going to happen to me?”

“Left untreated, you will probably feel mild irritation, then dementia, until you die. It’s a virus—”

“I thought you said this was a curse. And besides, there are no such things as curses.”

He gives that patient, patient I’m-a-doctor smile. “Well, our new manuals have a new ergonomics toward disease disclosure for doctors—I mean, shamen. We are urged to prescribe the most superstitious names and causes possible. It’s supposed to quell tension.”

I’m not quelled. “What do I have to do then?”

He looks at me, as if not sure how to phrase a delicate question. “Have you been sexed with your employer before?”

“No, I mean, yes. But not for a long time.” At least I thought.

“Anyone else? Have you been with a keeper?”

I look at my veined bare feet. I am prone. “Maybe. Wait,” and I remember the woman who has been calling me lately, “yes, it’s very possible. So what do I do?”

He gives another smile, this time with a tinge of pity. “First of all, pull up your pants and put on your socks. Second, you need to find her. Only she can remove the curse, give the password to heal you.”

“In other words, I have to find out why she gave me the virus, and get a blood sample from her so that you can remove the virus from my cell system without killing me.”

He puts his stethoscope in a drawer. "If you want to put it that way," he mutters.

I walk out to pay.

"Be careful; she may be a witch," I hear the doctor calling out after me.

I call in to take the rest of the afternoon off, and I sit in a cafeteria on the west end (but Brasilia has no center, really), trying to envision a plan of action. But nothing envisions itself, chewing slowly on a piece of American apple pie.

Anyway, she calls before I can take another bite. "Where are you, she asks?" she says. Someone laughs behind her.

"I'm in the, um, Dresden. Where are you? I need to talk to you."

A pause. "You are talking to me."

"I mean, face to face."

"The cheery cherry trees. It's the cool fire of the month."

"Listen—"

"No, *you* listen. Did you open the windows of the Americas like I asked you to?"

This time, I'm the one who pauses. "No, but—"

She tones off. A shapely man comes in selling flowers, and I buy nine dozen peonies.

"OK, OK," Paula says. "It's fine to take a couple of days off if it's a medical condition." Evening time, and I find my way to Paula's office in the Center for the Arts. Her office is in the third basement and smaller than those of most of her subordinates. King Juan Juan, of course, hovers behind her in paint. I think Jesse did that one. The king is giving his constituents a thumbs-up.

"Though, of course," I say, wondering if Paula is snickering inside her head, "I have no idea where to begin."

"Begin what?"

"I have to find a keeper."

She begins to laugh through her nose and stretches back on her

recliner. “Now I see what the problem is. How long has she been like this?” Paula was a keeper too, before she took up her lover and married. From what she told me (and she was never shy about these matters), she’d been more passive than the ones I’d seen on television.

“I don’t know. I guess I stayed with her once, maybe two weeks ago? It’s hard to say. But she diseased me.”

She hmms. “Why don’t you try the dog market?”

“I was afraid you’d say that.”

The next morning, smoggy, I am in the dog market. I really hate the dog market, and hate dogs, in fact. Luckily, the name is deceiving—there are more than just dogs here. It’s situated halfway between old Brasilia and what I like to call Brasilia Brasilia, or Brasilia squared, the Guyanese/English section that I call home and work. The dog market is in a wide alleyway since it is, technically, illegal to traffic in smart animals. But no one enforces. The policia, I’m sure, are always looking for good dogs, too.

So I put my credit card (light amber, which isn’t too bad, I guess) lightly against my belt, on the right side. The sigil of a serious buyer. I meander through the cages, many of them brown with rust, and sift through the animals and their sellers with about a dozen other buyers. A dachshund catches my eye because it has three. The seller peers at me, his entire forearm winking in aquamarine, less excited than his dog. I move on.

“Psst. Hey.” A woman about half my height motions toward me. She is in a sari but her skin is whiter than mine. “Yeah, you.” Talking isn’t really allowed, by house rules, but furtive whispering usually doesn’t bring imprisonment. I look over to her, nod, hoping that will do the trick.

She motions me with a crooked finger to peek underneath a curtain covering a shape on the table. She pulls it up. Shapes, rather. Goldfish bowls.

With goldfish inside.

I almost, almost, laugh, which would have gotten me thrown

out at least. I stifle the chuckle and look at the seller with a grimace meant to show bewilderment. She gives an I-know-what-you're-thinking look and offers me a chip, which I reluctantly swallow. She pulls a wand from underneath her sari and touches the rim of one of the bowls. The goldfish inside squiggles up to the top, sinks down, and spins its tail a little.

*Yeah, I'm talking to you.* The augmentation, it seems, has finally trickled down to carnival fish. *So are you going to buy me or what?* At first, the goldfish all look exactly the same (well, gold), but upon second glance this one looks a little healthier, the scales a little brighter. The seller's prize fish, then.

*Well, are you? Impatient fish.*

*I'll need you to find a keeper. In days.*

The fish makes a blooping noise, which—I guess—is a laugh. *You expect a problem? I'm the best. Let me show you. Come on. Keepers are goddamn trancy-dancy shifty whatever's anyways.*

I meander back in the Dresden, with a coffee and cherry pie and a goldfish bowl on the lacquered table. I come here often enough, and tip well enough, that the cashier doesn't ask about the pet, which is probably a health violation. I am a health violator.

Incredulous, here, with a goldfish worth two week's pay.

"All right," I whisper out loud. Even though I don't have to speak, it is bizarrely reassuring to speak. "What do you need from me at this point? How are you going to find her?"

*No problem at all. You infected from her?* I nod. I'm not sure if it can pick up human body language but it does. *Ouch. She must be needing you real bad, then.*

"Then why did she ignore me the last time I called?" I hiss, a little louder than I wanted. A family of three in a booth across the restaurant look up at me from their pancakes, in unison.

*She's playing a game. It's all a game. That's why she infected you. To make sure you come back. But she wants you to work at it too. There is no pleasure without pain.*

“How long does someone stay a keeper?”

*Who can say? It's hard to tell.* The goldfish—whose name I don't even ask for, it would be ridiculous—swims in a tiny circle in the bowl. *Usually after they've mated, at which time they go normal.* I think of Paula, cold in my flat's bed and babbling. *But not always. Never exactly works out the way people want. I don't know. Are you ready then? I'll find her, don't worry.*

“I guess,” I mutter. “What do you need from me?”

*First, I need a sample of her virus, the little bit of titanium that's itching your member. So, if you will...*

“What?”

*You know...* The goldfish possesses subtleties unknown in the fish world.

I sigh, a little embarrassed despite myself; I get a little cup from the water dispenser and enter the bathroom. The family, probably enjoying a day off from work rationing, stare at me. I don't blame them.

The servicing hurts—hurts worse than the first time, a burning like a little dwarf star—but I finish it in the cup and walk out to my table. The family, blessedly, has left.

*All right now. Good. Now dump it in.*

I hesitate.

*Go on! You have to do it if you're going to ever get better.*

I sigh and tip the cup into the bowl. The water gets milky and the goldfish swims around faster, even frenzied. After a half minute, when the water settles, he splashes up, nearly out of the bowl. Can a goldfish be in ecstasy?

*Great. I got the scent. So to speak.* I don't know whether to be relieved or frightened.

“So do I carry you around, while you ... trace her?”

*No, no, no. It's going to be a lot easier for you. For me, it'll be a bitch, but hey, it's my job.* It pauses. *I want you to throw me into the toilet.*

“What?”

*That's the only way. The fastest. I swear, I'll find her. All you need to do is sit pretty and wait. Then I'll give the signal.*

“Look, I mean, this is too weird—”

*Do you want to help yourself or not?* The fish sounds angry, even a little disappointed, in me. *I’ll be jacking into the network at the same time, which runs parallel with the plumbing lines. Believe it or not. They’re like roads. I’m not going to force you, but...* It trails off.

I breathe deep, pick up the goldfish bowl, and head toward the bathroom. The cashier is doing her best to ignore me, and I know I can’t enter the Dresden again for another year or two.

The toilet is dingy, small, and brown on the inside.

*All rightey. Dump me in.*

I slowly pour, and the goldfish whirls out, almost spinning.

*Now flush. And like I said, I’ll give you the signal. Just wait.*

Dutifully, I flush. I almost hear the goldfish laughing as it spirals down the pipes and disappears, but then I realize it’s the cashier.

So what do I do, when I find my life confused beyond description? I paint. Off the street, just in front of the gated Yale commons, I peel off a newspaper from the back of a vendor boy. I lay out the snake-skin foil in my studio and dash off four quick Juan Juan portraits, the head only, all nearly exactly alike. I am my own forgery. The airbrushes have good pressure, and the paint flows well from the tubes. A very productive morning. I look down at the newspaper, which I didn’t buy to read, just to cover the ground. *Queen Abierta Mysteriously Sick—or Detained? Analysts Are Confused.* A flickering image of her, her lashes long as butterflies. *Three Guerillas Hanged in São Paulo. Government Accuses Bolivia of Sanctioning Terrorism.* I weld the paint onto the canvas all morning. Paula drifts in and out occasionally, grunting, but agreeing to leave my member alone, at least for a while. Twice, though, I have to escape to the toilet room, doubled over in pain. *A Dozen Keepers Killed in Illegal Black Mass,* another column says. *Court Geneticists Still Hope to Retrieve Keeper Fluid for Reuse.*

I don’t go home that night; I order out a gyro, eat at my canvas,

curl asleep there, counting goldfish leaping over a fence instead of sheep.

The night passes slowly, like an argument. I wonder whether Clown Man has returned home. Most likely. I foggily realize that, most likely, I will die by the end of the week.

I wake up at about six. Peering at the painting, I notice something that wasn't there when I finished the painting and drifted off.

King Juan Juan's face is rubbed out, scumbled. There are enough lines of flesh to let the viewer know that it was a *deliberate* act. I must have arisen in the middle of my sleep and done this, somnambulant terrorism against the state. If nothing else, this would finish me quick. King Juan Juan is a punisher. He funds the keepers.

*Hey.*

I start, turn around; I'm suddenly heaving for air, as if my lungs are wounded by breath. "What?" I say.

*No, look, it's me. I found her. I found your keeper.*

I pause, on all fours. "Where are you?"

*You'll never believe me.*

"Where? Where?" I don't need a goldfish playing games with me.

*The palace of the king! Can you believe it?*

"No. I can't. There's no way I'll get in."

*Now, keep your pants on. Let's say you get three wishes from me, overall. Let's pretend. The first was, of course, finding the queen—*

"What did you say?"

*Let's say you get three wishes from me—*

"You said the queen. Oh no." I get up and begin pacing the studio.

*Look, stop your whining. It's covered. Covered. Just follow my directions and I'll get you to her.*

"You?" It stops talking—thinking—for about thirty seconds, and I think, perhaps he has gone away.

*Are you done complaining?* it says at last. *Are you?*

"Fine," I sigh.

*Good. I've jacked into the royal schedule. There's a way to intercept her.*

*"Inside the palace?"*

*No, not really. She goes to the Oleanders. Pack up. Bring a knife.*

Three kilometers squared, gardens that never close, public bowling greens, hedge mazes, ice sculptures, kitty corners. The pleasure-servicing park the king has given to Brasilia on the west end of town, where I can see the edges of the Rainforest Preserve, and the dull orange of cooking fires beyond that. I have taken the rail to the gate of the Oleanders. No vehicles inside, so I begin walking. Very early in the morning, so there are few strollers, revelers. A jogger or two and a couple stragglers from the night before, splayed in each other's arms, trying to hide from passersby but not really hidden.

So I stroll.

Aside from the trash here and there, the park sparkles clean, like teeth. The sidewalks point in many directions, so I take the western one. Walk. The trees, upon further inspection, are glazed. *Just keep walking west*, a tiny voice says inside of me. *That's it.*

The moon is so large I feel it can bend down and lick my face. Of course, at this point, I might be becoming delirious from the illness. I see someone ahead of me on the serpentine path, ambling slowly. In a tattered but somehow jewelled cloak. The words of the doctor flash into me. That this is, perhaps, a sensible fairy tale. I rush up to her and spin her around. She doesn't resist or run. Merely puzzled. A grotto of United States elms circle to the left and suddenly remind me of home. A pond within the ring of trees.

Her lips flush. Yes, the same as the pictures I have always, always seen of her. Her image is second to that of the king, and in fact on many state occasions when she can not attend, Juan Juan carries an animated panel of her, attendant by his side, sometimes worn around his neck.

I suppose he loves her. Her roan eyes look at me.

“Hi, it’s you,” she says. As if I’m meeting her for a wine and I’m five minutes late.

“Yes, and I don’t remember—”

“You don’t really understand, do you? I mean, the world is too wordy. People take up too many words to talk about the most trivial things.”

“What should I say then?”

She shuffles her feet and kisses me.

“Yes, but,” I say, trying to calm myself. “That has gotten me into trouble.”

The queen laughs. She must be twenty years older than me and must be trained not to show it. “That’s the trouble with trouble. Once you feel you’ve got it licked, it goes off and jigs off with another. And you miss it.” It occurs to me that Juan Juan must have given her the keeper codes, the titanium injections, as a game, to see what might occur, how she would react, whom she could snare.

“Look, I’ve something important to ask you,” I say, trying to soothe, soothe myself most of all. “I can’t remember you from before. I can’t. What happened?”

“What happened,” she says, trailing off. “I met your painting, remember? You painted dearie one. I’m sure you had his look. I met you here.” She points to the pool and the grotto. “There.” She takes my hands and I’m trembling. “Then I cast you so you fell asleep and don’t remember a thing. And now you’ve found me again.”

“I’m sick,” I say in a low voice. “Something inside of you has made me sick.”

“You *are* sick,” she says.

I consider biting her and drawing the blood I need. How long do keepers usually last? Most times they resume normal life within weeks. Some, years, and some, never.

“Look,” I say, feeling desperate, “*I’m* the cross between a beggar and an arctangent. I am a parallel line about to intersect with a point which has no height, width, or depth.”

And the thing is, I believe it. I do. I never listened to keepers until

now. Maybe the scrambling words and the sexing isn't such a curse to listen to.

She looks at me, understanding somehow, with a glint in her face, even though I do not completely understand.

"I will see you again," she says.

My queen offers her arm.

The guards, I'm sure, are looking for me, combing out from the Center for the Arts. Not as much for the escapades with the queen, as for the defacing of the painting. I have left the queen to think and bandage her arm in the grotto, where she will return, I suppose, and eventually dekeep herself. What she will say to the king at that point? Who can say?

At this point, though, I'm running, hard, toward the West Gates.

*Hey, wow.* I wonder if the goldfish's body is dead, if it is just a presence now. *You did well.*

"Well, I have to find a doctor and hope I don't die." I don't know if it catches the double meaning, but it kind of laughs to itself and thinks to me, *No worries. One is meeting you at the gate.*

"Come again?" A unicyclist careens down the opposite way and nearly kills me, which, I suppose, wouldn't have been ironic, only moronic.

*I'm saying, a doctor is there to take your blood sample, and there'll be some other people, too. To protect you, give you a new job.*

I nearly stop, just then and there, from both exhaustion and disbelief. "Why? How is a goldfish arranging all of this? I don't know—"

At this point, it may be used to, or sick of commenting on, my complaining. *All right, think. You go to the dog market to find an animal to find a keeper. I have been bred and engineered specifically for that purpose. Do you think we grow on trees like oranges?* I can see the gate, vaguely, ahead of me, meandering closer. *There are those who would like to make all the keepers return to normal, every one of them. People—who you don't need to know—who want to exile the king.*

*These are the people at the gate. Ah. Who are seeing you now. Do you see them now?*

“I see them,” I say, and nearly lean and collapse against the hull of an armored truck, just past the open gate. A hand touches my shoulder, lightly. A man about half my height with darting eyes, leaning from the insides of the truck. “Get in,” he says, in a voice slightly deeper than that of the goldfish. I am ushered into the dark hull. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to adjust to the light; there are several others besides me. I am not too much surprised to find the woman in the sari, from the dog market. On her lap is a wide, ceramic bowl with about a dozen goldfish, flailing in the shallow water, the shallow space of water.

“All right,” the short man says, leaning over me, as the truck chortles into life and begins to move west. “We’ll get you fixed right up.” I only realize at that moment that I have been broken all along. I mean, from more than just a keeper virus. More broadly broken.

Juggling took a long time to learn, even with the skill injections, but I’m getting better at it. I can keep four objects in the air now—and they don’t have to be plain round balls, either. Sometimes one or two knives, although not four. I don’t want too much with knives anymore. One time a child gave me three gravity balls, and they veered and veered when I threw them up. But I caught them and cycled them into the air. The boy was maybe awed, in a six-year-old kind of way.

The makeup and costume make my skin itch, but that just means I have to take cold baths in the morning and evening. And I get to stay in the city—the goldfish people make sure of that. Granted, I work on the opposite end of town from the King Juan Juan Center for the Arts, but maybe it’s better that way. The queen, despite her promise, has never come to check up on me, though she probably would have a hard time finding me.

“Pass the cup, goodfolk, pass the cup.” I have a minor circle around me. I have them enthralled. But probably not for long. They

will go home, forget about me, the juggler. They will suffer amnesia and live their lives, never knowing about my secret history or my identity. Which, in the end, isn't so much of an affliction.

A man passes by me, with a briefcase, dressed in nearly identical costume to mine (though with a clown's nose, and a strange pointed hat that I wouldn't care to wear). As I juggle, feeling my heart taut with all the secrets kept inside there, the Clown Man pauses for a moment and nods at me.

I have no idea whether he recognizes me.

Then he sets up shop on the other side of the block. From his briefcase, he pulls out a few tiny objects—which I can't make out, from this distance—and swallows them. Ten seconds later he tips his head back and breathes fire, wide into the air in a fan. The Clown Man stops and bows, and already the crowd starts throwing hard-earned coins at him.

## HOME OF THE

1.

Cleo was completely happy and devoid of hope. At night she dreamed of photocopiers left on in an office building overnight. On Sunday she walked to her church and prayed outside of it, for those not inside. Bullet trains passed by. She always waved. They didn't stop. She contemplated what steps she would have to take to make the trains stop. By the time Erie's churches let out, she was back home, watching the minister on TV. No one called on her. Her house was red stucco, painted blue. Which defeated the purpose of stucco. Her mother had painted the house blue in her late middle ages. Her mother bequeathed the house to Cleo. Cleo relented. She was penitent without exactly knowing why. The house was on a cul de sac on the East Side, Dunn Boulevard, between Saint Anne's and the bay. Behind Cleo's lot was a cemetery, and across the street from her lot was the black cat factory. Of the two, the cemetery was by far the most interesting. For starters, Cleo had been conceived there, in the groundskeeper's shed, which didn't exist anymore. Her mother had had an affair with the groundskeeper, who was from western Kansas. Nearly all care had abandoned the cemetery and the headstones inside. There were a few Revolutionary War veterans buried there. Cleo would have loved to celebrate this. Few people left flowers or wreaths. Obelisks tilted. People in general were leaving Erie at a fast clip. There were fewer dying people left. Faithful people often were left behind. The church, which had fed the cemetery for a century,

had burned to the ground a decade before. The congregation didn't reconvene, for lack of funds and municipal edicts. No one caught the arsonists. The members joined other churches, more theocratic churches, or turned their faces from God entirely and took up drag races on Saturday nights and hunting on Sunday mornings. Or they died, which didn't have anything to do with church. Even in winter, Cleo would visit the foundations, the ash square set in the ground jutting against the railroad tracks. There were no deer to hunt anymore, and few small mammals and birds. Generally there were only people left.

She was the only one left alive on her block, aside from the cats and the foreman, who didn't count. Her hair was black with a few gray strands. She resisted dyes. She resisted many things, including the need to smile or laugh at comedic movies at the theater. Movies were small hearted and easy to coast through, like fog puffs. Movies ended with a public service announcement from a tribunal. Of some sort. A tribunal was a collection of citizens on the lookout for citizens' interests. They declared these interests, which usually involved enemies. Everybody always left right after the shiny heads stopped talking—cameras in the projection room watched the viewing—and right before the credits rolled. People were tired. But Cleo liked to stay and watch the references to gaffer, puppet master, and key grip. She thought that befriending a key grip might have been interesting fodder. She would take the bus to the failure mall downtown. She knew her worth. The bus had issues. Groaning escalators leading to empty shop fronts on the second floor. Abandoned kiosks with Scotch tape half-torn off the counters. Huffer cans in the corners. The only open establishments, besides the dollar theater, were the adult bookstore, the tobacconist, and the store that sold nothing but pewter figurines. The store was called Pewter There. That last store made her sad. No one ever entered. Cleo was like the train passing by a strange woman making waving motions. The proprietor wore a white, tight-fitting mask and fretted with his hands. As noted previously, she didn't stop to inquire. She wasn't in the mood for small,

pewter figurines of dragons and unicorns. Miniatures were not powerful. The house wouldn't have approved. The house was mindful and resisted paraphernalia. Knickknacks that Cleo bought would disappear shortly after acquisition. Paintings of burning barns she purchased from starving artists' sales, a smiley-face clock she resuscitated from the break room, all gone. So she gave up. She didn't like giving up. She took the bus back. Its hood usually smoked.

On rain days, which came often in the summer, spring, and autumn, she liked to walk the East Side. Umbrellas could conceal cylindrical bombs and were thus frowned upon. Tribunals warned against bomblike people, who required eagle eyes at all times. Evil truly was wicked and could quiver to life after any misstep. That was what her betters said. The dealers on the corner of Buffalo and Downing didn't bother Cleo, nor the gyrovagues parading on Tenth and Parade. She knew the hoarse ghosts of those boulevards were more terrifying than sixteen-year-olds with post-heroin and .44s. Most sidewalks resembled narrow gravel roads from the despair. She wore beautiful galoshes. They were black with small fleur-de-Frenches along the upper trim. Her mother gave her the boots before she died. Before her mother died, not Cleo. After Cleo tried them on, her mother noted that she pulled them off a dead woman, a homeless woman with no hair in the bus station. Before Cleo could recoil, her mother said, no, sorry, I was only joking. It was a good story, though, wasn't it? Cleo liked the boots anyway. They made her look taller. The litter and wind would collaborate on sculptures along chain-link fences. Some of the plastic litter was positively antique. Rivulets roared into drains underneath. The drains emptied into sewer tunnels, which coursed toward the bay. The water carried delirium. Mercury could also be called quicksilver. Stray cats died underground. In chain-link fields, cranes built to hoist up rusted cars with magnetic forces rusted. Art was everywhere. It wasn't good art. The city was a nonmuseum. These were not stories in their entirety, but rather stories that a person might be reading out loud to friends in a bar, and then the bartender would tap the reader's

shoulder and say, Your house is on fire. Your mother's dead. No one loves you, not really. One of those types of responses. No one read anymore, out loud or silently. Heliotropes flew overhead, shouting bulletins (all points) to precinct commandantes who might have been listening. Hand signals projected onto the cloud banks. Heliotropes lived in milder climes. Cleo covered her ears. Once there was a boy who had loved her, her age, but he fought in California and she never heard from him again. He had delicate fingers and ankles. He was an apostate, though neither of them really *felt* what that meant. She imagined him in prison—a converted gymnasium holding thousands of bunks, snipers in every nook, spies and assassins enforcing second amendment zones, itching to penknife livers. Cleo wondered if it was better to hope he was alive, or dead. His emails were in a banker's box somewhere in the cellar, amid a tangle of potato roots. She'd often wondered what his penmanship was like but had never had the chance to ask. She was thirty-five years of age in the thirteenth year of our Lord.

When it was sunny and she didn't have to wear her containment mask (red, like the stucco underneath her blue house), she worked at Wal-Mart. There was one five blocks from her. People shopped indoors when it was sunny. This, too, was encouraged. Retractable roofs, unless they were broken. Nearly everyone who worked worked in a Wal-Mart. Her Wal-Mart was a bowling alley. The greeter always snarled at her, even though they were on the same team. He'd lost his heart in one of the wars. Because her bowling alley was a Wal-Mart, it was a nonfailure establishment. She cleaned the robots that cleaned the lanes and stocked the shoes. Her blue smock smelled like burnt hot dogs. Nearly everyone bowled in solitary fashion. Bowling in duos or trios wasn't banned, *per se*, but it was certainly frowned upon, and there was an extra tariff per head. The robots usually didn't complain, but they belched silicates. They were already old-ish. She loved them, in her fashion, even though she couldn't tell them apart. That happened a lot. They were both blond. The TVs in the snack bar fixated on victories, which were hard to tell apart from

failures. The greeter would tap his plastic chest, where his bonobo heart beat. Personalities tended to be unfortunate, even on sunny days. She worked hard. Her smock had one yellow smiling face and one red, white, and blue smiling face. The robots didn't like the buttons. It sounded crazy, even to her, but she could just sense this. Every month the regional heresiarch would visit and play a frame or two. The lanes had to be calibrated to ensure he bowled at least a 250. But he didn't want a 300 either, for that would have been hubris. Her mother hated bowling because the sport could not exist solely in one's mind. Those visits were horrible for Cleo. She would have nightmares in the days leading up to the inspection, involving her robots defecating on the well-oiled lanes, prompting her quick termination. After the heresiarch's frames, there was usually Bible study. Cleo would sit quietly through Corinthians, sipping lukewarm tea. Revelations scared her. After shaking everyone's hand too firmly, the heresiarch would depart for the damask domes of Cambridge Springs, where the wife would just be returning from the market with their children, Abercrombie and Fitch, and she would offer a towel to her demonstrative, balding husband, a God-shepherd, and he would wash his hands of the helots' stench. That was how Cleo thought, at least. Once when he bowled a 248 he shook everyone's hand except Cleo's. She cried all that night, though she did not want to. On her ten-minute lunch breaks, the sun would play on her face in the break room and the ether from above would settle on the vending machines in a fine film. The break room was a tent outside the bowling alley. She had to be alert to the possibility of white phosphorus falling, in which case there was a plastic tarp for extra protection. Enemy manna. Her shoulders didn't sag. No one would talk to her ever. She wanted to be an action gardener, garden in one of the sky fortresses. Peonies on the battlements. She heard about that job when watching the Sky Fortress Channel. There was one gardener for the entire fortress system. Let luck work! the public service announcements told her. On occasion she contemplated emigrating to India. She couldn't afford passage. She also wanted to keep an eye

on the house and cemetery, and she didn't like traveling too far too often. Once in high school her class took a trip to Antarctica. At the South Pole, they didn't stray out of the Super 8 much, except to go to the penguin wax museum. The vending machines down their hall had a brand of Burmese cola they'd never seen before. That kind of local color excited her classmates. The South Pole bored her, except for their flight away from it, when she saw two service workers make out behind the McDonald's on the Ross Ice Shelf—what was left of it—their mouths frozen to each other. She could see what the attraction was. Their fiber-optic mittens touched, and no doubt they sent love mail to each other. No doubt. Cleo's plane kept flying, over glaciers, over floes. The lovers kept getting smaller. The plane flew over the greenhouses larger than Rhode Island, where workers harvested kelp and krill inside. When Cleo was home again she wanted nothing more than a kiss like that. A year later her mother died. Her graduation ceremony came in a box. College was out of the question. Her grades were Erie good but not actually good. Her few girlfriends saw marriage and conversion as a proper and just path. Her guidance counselor wanted her to become a Baptist. The complexes on upper Peach had excellent career placement networks. She declined. The guidance counselor never communicated with her again. The mayor was assistant pastor at Church of Christworld. He complied.

She wondered sometimes if the world was flammable. She tried to think of her father's face. He had loved crocuses and jumbo puzzle variety books. Invisible ink puzzles. Her face was thin, like pictures of him. No one was perfect. He left for the moon with the furies when he found out about her mother's affair with the gardener. He won the lottery. How lucky was that. Cleo hid underneath the garbage disposal to hear his teary farewell. It smelled like disposed garbage. She remembered her mother's burgundy silence. Her mother was a failed chess champion and didn't like to talk about it. Her father milled around the house to say good-bye to Cleo, looking without really looking. He gave up after five minutes or so. She didn't want to reveal her hiding place. He was wearing his fluffy skunk costume. Her

parents had met when her mother dialed the wrong number. Cleo imagined life in space. She would land on the station. She was in the deep for six months, orbiting Triton. She needed supplies or else!

What do you want, the general store manager on the station would ask her. He wore an old-time bowler hat.

A view of Earth, a great view of Earth, she said. The greatest demand she could think of.

You have it! Look portside! She looked portside, and it was there. She could see America underneath cumulus. She knew it was just a hologram of Earth, but she wasn't going to spoil her own illusions.

What else, the proprietor would ask.

Carrots, raisins straight from the vine, pumpkins.

We have those!

Great, said Cleo, lay them on me!

The fruits floated to her.

Eat these.

Okay, Cleo said. Wow, these are great!

They give superhuman strength and fertility.

Why do you think I need fertility. And where are you hiding my father.

Then she awoke from waking, a can of wrench spray in her hand. It was time to go home. The clock told her this. The clock worked; it smiled; it had a job. The robots brayed as they were shepherded into their pens. They, too, could see the futile machinations of the clock. To keep time. Clocks had agendas all right. On her way home the sun obscured itself. Winds began to stir from Presque Isle Bay, carrying danders and debris. The wind held her still for a few seconds in front of the black cat factory. The foreman steeped his tea in the tower office, as he tended to. He waved. He didn't live there. Cleo didn't wave back. The man turned back to his tea and shook his head. The wind let her go. She ran away from the manufacturing unit, as fast as she could. The sky turned teak. She passed the laughter inside the factory, the bullhorns far away. Everything was far away. In her book, the less thought about the foreman, the better.

She entered the house and locked the door, to prevent October from entering. From the kitchen window she saw an entire copse of trees sway. A few of them were sick, but she didn't trust tree doctors. Talk about agendas. No one was hanging around or hanging there. On the To Do notepad on her Frigidaire she had written: *I am proofing the book of the living against the book of the dead. They are concurrent, for the most part. Sort of. A few typos.* Cleo used a permanent marker. The paper had butterflies. She hadn't seen a butterfly in thirteen years. The ukulele fixed to the wall fell down. Her mother had won the ukulele in a tournament. Her mother's admonition: never touch the ukulele under any circumstances. She left it where it fell. In fact she really didn't want to look at it. Sirens and klaxons rose a few blocks away. Which didn't really mean anything.

She then drew a bath. She slept in the tub. She heard the cats opening their books across the street, though that couldn't be. She dreamed this time of the photocopier display reading: TONE LOW. A red light blinked, illuminating the entire copy room with emergency. Cleo cried and then floated through the rest of the dream without complications nor reproductions. The absences were pleasurable. She awoke at dawn in a cold sweat, still in the tub. There was a knock on the door. Cleo had no idea who she could be.

2.

Erie was founded in 1697 by French Cathars. Religious persecution was rampant at the time. Seven canoes launched from Quebec City in September, when water was most tumultuous. Lake Erie was the shallowest of the Great Lakes and the one most likely to storm. The boats were the Asphodel, the Asphaedel, the Asfodel, the Aesphadel, the Asfaedel, the Aesfodel, and the Asfaedel. They were named as such to confuse the shipwrights and dockmasters of New France. No one really noticed their departure; if anyone did, they probably would have been pleased. They landed on what would later become Beach 11, the swimmer killer. Sleeping under constellations, the twenty-one colonists all wondered what fateful wind had brought them to those

finely sanded beaches. There were no breakwalls to prevent beach erosion at that time. Clearly, their kingdom was at hand.

Yvain led them, but he was quiet for a long time. His wife, Nicollette, was also quiet. On the first morning when the Cathars woke, they sacrificed a goat specifically brought for this purpose. They broke fast over organs. Gulls fought over the red sand. When they moved inland, to construct their city of black brass—the city that some of them, at least, wanted to construct—they found themselves at another body of water, a bay. They reasoned that a city either could be found or founded. Their landing place was actually part of a peninsula, an almost island, jutting out from the mainland like an ichor finger. They walked the *presque isle*, discovered several deadened marshes and ponds, tidepools, hardwood forests. A little of everything. On the peninsula, the world was a pocket-sized encyclopedia; every step was a catalogue. They felt bountiful. They slew butterflies and foxes. They looked for caves in which to consecrate themselves to God. To become perfect. Finding none, they decided to move inland and utilize the bay as the natural harbor for a city. If there were no grottoes or caves, they would have to be built. They brought their boats through the channel and landed on what would later become the foot of East Avenue. They missed State Street, which was the center of the American town for many decades, by a good mile or two. They built huts using thatch and smooth antler-shaped driftwood. They dug sandy holes that filled with water after a few feet. So much for the caves. To pass the time, they wrote long letters to their compatriots around the globe: France, of course, and also England, Paraguay, Belgium, Guinea. There was no means of delivery, but few would have answered anyway. The letters were hard-to-read exhortations. They dreamed of panthers and leopards, which didn't make sense.

After fall's leaves dying, their first winter came. Snow so cold it felt hot against the skin. They caught rabbits. Some they kept as pets. They prayed, not only for food, but also that the French would not find them. Particularly the Jesuits and Dominicans. The Cathars

remembered what had happened to their spiritual ancestors. In the first year a few children were born. None were sacrificed. Lost bears wandered to the lake shores, onto Presque Isle, wandered back. Frostbite clarified thought. In spring, construction began on a temple. French voyageurs were killed. The women lured them, hoisting high their dresses on the shores. The canoes slowed. The women had muskets tucked in their sleeves. They were not against eating human flesh, as a matter of principle, but they didn't feel that the times called for it. They realized cannibalism was against Cathar edicts, but then again all flesh was abject, unworthy of long contemplation and self-treaty. The women were skilled with guns. The Iroquois, who had exterminated the Eriez Indians a few decades before, left the colony alone for the most part. The Cathars cared not. Hearing what had happened to their brethren, a few trappers asked to join in the first summer. These trappers later were revealed to be a troupe of Russian jugglers who had lost favor with the czarina. They were initiated and received perfection. A few in their ranks were born many times over. The Eriez were also known as the Cat People. For them, the cat was a skunk. Three hundred years before, eight thousand Cathars had been slaughtered in one day by one of their former protectors. They actually didn't call themselves Cathars to begin with, which was a name designed by a mad German prince. Many Christians thought the Cathar initiation ceremony involved kissing a cat's ass. The branding and identity campaign against the Cathars, as evidenced by their near-extirmination, was a well-received success.

Berries came in summer, in thickets. They built a lookout tower on the tip of Presque Isle, where the Coast Guard station would later appear. Lashing logs together. They wanted to build a giant chain across the channel into the bay, as was done in Constantinople. That had protected the Byzantines for a time. They didn't have the funds or the smelting proficiency for such a project. They had a master woodworker and bone lather in their company. Babies ate magnanimous berries. Streets were laid, sloping up from the shore. Straight lines and grids. What was once a morass of bodies, indistinguishable

from each other, began to take on hierarchy. For a few months they felt they didn't have to have any single person deciding anything for the rest. That it lasted so long was remarkable. Yvain, before his expulsion from the University of Paris, had taken a class in classical geometry. He plumbed sight lines. He began courting allies. His wife, Nicollette, wasn't content with discretion and quietude. Everything they were taught in school turned out to be true: Yvain ended up leading because he financed the colony. Still, France seemed a long way away. The surf had no conch shells, no naiad bones. Zebra mussels would not be introduced into the ecosystem for almost three hundred years. They all except for Yvain came from the yeomanry. They were adrift from the small villages of their birth, always among wolves. They wanted to stumble to their own village, as one would from a tavern toward home late at night. The night was late in their minds. The wolves were at the door. Don't open the door! No court, nor *mare liberum*, could weave heraldics close enough to ensnare. Griffin, bull, bulldogs, kings—all mythologies, glad tidings on bloody ears. The summer wheat was not successful. Waterspouts touched down on the lake, and they prayed to be spared. The berries turned black in soups and cremes. Yvain wanted to build a cathedral, of sorts, on Presque Isle, inside the dead marshes. A contemplative building made of local stone. At times, he really did seem peaceful. This in addition to the temple on the mainland. More converts came, this time from Saint Augustine. The irony was lost on no one. Yvain wanted the second temple in the marshes to demonstrate a mind as wide as thought. Nicollette disagreed. She was a kleptomaniac, which was a hard compulsion to honor on the edge of God's world. She played chess. She always beat Yvain. She always played white and Yvain black. Yvain took a few builders to the swamps in the center of Presque Isle and started to cut down cottonwood trees. To clear a space. Then he changed his mind and decided that the marsh wasn't an ideal location. They painted the stumps black. The bog didn't help. The temple's foundation kept sinking.

Actually Nicollette was quite beautiful. She had long black hair.

She excelled at writing sestinas. No training or schooling could account for this. End words to the lines came to her with succinct ease. Most of the time they rhymed. She would rarely show her compositions to her husband. Paper was precious. She took to carving sestinas on trees. Yvain didn't approve of poetry or lending his knife. The summer heat came. The eldest colonist swore he saw, while scything hay, a giant panther charging from the south. The panther had six eyes! And a tongue like a cat-o'-nine-tails! And had constellation markings on its fur! And spoke Basque! This was corroborated by others, although the language was debated. Fissures crept into the colony. Centipede-slow spoilings of their bread stores occurred. They were hungry but not thirsty. They prayed together less. An English caravel wandered close to their lookout. The English were only in transit. The Union Jack shone. The Cathars wished they had cannons. Two weeks later, a French caravel landed on the point of the peninsula closest to the mainland. The thinnest land. Two Jesuits, several marines. The Cathars lost three. Five were wounded. Yvain lost a pinky. But they gained many supplies and weapons. They dropped the weighted soldiers into the moors. The priests they kept with the rabbits. Nicollette slept with a sixteen-year-old boy. No one remembered his name, not even Nicollette.

Yvain had a dream about this involving those pesky panthers. The panthers had some worthwhile pillow talk. They dragged him by the collar to their cave with their teeth. But they also had hands with opposable thumbs. Yvain was not afraid. Inside the cave was a glass box, human-sized, with a star inside it. The star was too bright to look at; he asked them to cover it, and remarkably, they covered the box with a purple cloth. They told him everything. From inside the box—Yvain covered his eyes—the cats pulled out paintings of his wife's transgressions, in glades. They told him that God's work would emanate from him long after he died. When he woke, he didn't know how long he could keep up his façade, his scaffolding. It turned out to be approximately three days, and then he killed the boy, Nicollette's lover. He used his favorite knife and took the corpse,

along with the captured priests and ten colonists, to the peninsula. A splinter. Two colonies, two architectures. Nicollette wondered how the quickness happened so quickly. How she came to this. She reasoned that she was sacrificing the great for the greater good. Or maybe it was the good for the greater great. It was hard to tell. Yvain began plans for a lighter-than-air craft as August and its skies came upon them. Skies arrived on the tips of Nicollette's fingers. She started drinking coffee, stolen from the French soldiers. Most, including all of the Russians, stayed close to her. They guarded her sleep. In fact, Yvain and his cohorts did eat the sixteen-year-old boy and saved his bones. Yvain had realized at a young age that he was named after a famous epic, one important to French natural identity. The unit of French poetry is not the accent but the syllable. Yvain and the settlers weren't able to get the balloon off the ground, but they certainly tried. They tried the fumes of quicksilver, the smoke of burning foxes. They didn't possess profound amounts of scientific acumen. Except for geometry. And theology, which was considered a science in those days. As it would later be.

With Yvain on the peninsula, the city planning on the mainland floundered. Little huts became the norm again. Dreams died, thrown against the rocks and burned in fire pits. The peninsula temple was completed as the fall colors turned. Nicollette didn't grieve. Yvain's temple was consecrated with a lacquer made of blackberries and Jesuit blood. One of the Russians, of his own accord, secreted to Presque Isle and humbly asked for a little of that blood. Just a dollop for the mainland village. Yvain told him that it didn't work like that. The Russian was allowed to return. These sudden kindnesses made Nicollette angry. She wasn't sure why she had slept with the boy after all. Maybe it was a sense of sorrow. Love stories lay around in the furs next to the campfire. Belief that the world was ephemera necessitated a belief in God's permanence and justice, kind of. Most of the Cathars really didn't see it that way. However, the two hundred French soldiers who pushed toward the settlement from the newly founded Fort LeBoeuf did see it that way. Fort LeBoeuf

was about twenty miles south. It was on French Creek, which flowed into the Allegheny, which flowed into the Ohio, which flowed into the Mississippi. A road from LeBoeuf to Lake Erie would allow for powerful movements. The soldiers came across Nicollette bathing outside. The Cathars didn't expect trouble from the thicketed south. Nicollette regularly bathed with the other colonists. They were all naked. The wind was Indian summer. Yvain called his temple *Usine de Chat Noirs*. Nicollette and the others had a few minutes to flee. Everyone was rather startled. The Cathars crammed into boats. A few were killed. The dead were pushed overboard. The French horses buckled. The Jesuit in the soldiers' party forbade them from pursuit until the temple was destroyed and the ground reconsecrated. They did so. The smoke alerted an English sloop docking along the shore about ten miles away. Yvain didn't welcome Nicollette and the others with open arms, exactly. But close enough. They gathered on the lookout tower and the temple roof with their arquebuses and muskets. They waited. The soldiers didn't come until vespers. The French had engaged in a tough firefight with the English sloop. The Jesuit was killed. The Jesuits couldn't seem to get any luck. The sloop burned, eventually. Bayonets blazed. The hotter-than-air balloon wasn't invented until one hundred fifty years later.

The Cathars watched and prayed. They had kept quiet for centuries in Toulouse and its highlands, becoming perfect in secret. They saw the New World as their *tabula rasa*. Waiting, they played chess and cards. Yvain held Nicollette's hand. The French battalion came toward the temple slowly. They looked for traps, blinds, snipers, and feints. There were none. When they came upon the temple, arquebuses recoiled. The Cathars, with a sense of *déjà vu*, pounced, rapt in dark curtains of gunfire.

When reinforcements came in the spring, there were no signs of a previous human settlement. The French were confused, to say the least, but nevertheless began establishment of a fort at the tip of Presque Isle. Garrison commanders over time assumed that reports of a previous colony were fabricated. The year was 1699. Skunks

found egg nests. Deer ate crops. There were absolutely no panther sightings. Cathars would not come to Erie for another two hundred years. In a way they weren't even really Cathars. No one important ever came from Erie for the most part. Rain clouds were not considered people by most people. The peninsula shifted eastward every year by a few inches. At a few points in its history, the land bridge flooded, making it an actual island and not an almost island. Burnt firmaments settled but did not rest. Before dawn, Yvain dug a hole in the sandy loam and placed the chess pieces in a moleskin bag. He filled the hole and smoothed it over. He hurried back to his tiny black temple, which was only wood painted black and mostly a dream. He could hear the French soldiers braying, approaching the heretics. No one could have pinpointed the exact moment when things started getting out of hand and small. It was better, Yvain reasoned, not to even try. Seeing him return, Nicollette thought: words about this ought to be put down, like strays.

3.

Then one day, the woman who always gawked and dawdled at his storefront came in. She wore a red mask and carried a burlap bag. She cradled it like someone else's child. At first she stayed near the vestibule, eyeing the crystal unicorns in their dusty case. Business could have used some work. The lease was rising. Some of his most loyal customers were in custody. Their collections were deemed terrorist threats. Mostly they collected books, with the occasional purchase of figurines "tied in" to those books. The woman had smooth, pale hands and wore tall black galoshes that neither fit nor become her, in his opinion. But then again it was raining. She could have just thrown them on. She was agitated. The failure mall—he hated the term, which was written into his lien—was built on the site of the old Union Station. Once, he had cracked open the plasterboard covering a door in the back of his establishment, revealing most of the station intact, albeit unused. He had fallen asleep in the old waiting room, on a hard bench. It reminded him of childhood.

When he woke up he hadn't known where he was. The next week the plasterboard had been sealed again. An inside job. He never figured out how.

Can I help you? he asked the woman.

She was sheepish. She didn't acknowledge that he had said anything at first, but instead fingered a synthetic jade Buddha on a shelf in the middle of the store. On the bottom of the Buddha was a disclaimer from the mayor's office: the statuette should not be used or construed as an actual deity. Federal compliance. He waited with his arms behind his back. He was hungry. The nearest non-Wal-Mart restaurant was two miles away. He had a hot plate behind the counter that was currently cold. Suddenly she approached the counter and took off her mask. Her eyes were blue and empirical.

Yes, she said, coming to, I'm wondering if you make purchases of collections.

It depends on the collection, he said. While he was thinking: I am wasting my time and dishonoring my lack of cash by even speaking to her. Is there a reason for this? Aside from the fact that she is the first person I've talked to today? Why are her eyes like that.

Well, I'll show you what I have, then, she said. She set the bur-lap bag on the counter. Dust rabbits arose. She opened the bag and with care she took out a chess board. And then each piece, the white pieces first.

The black queen is missing, she said. I apologize for that. I never had it. I inherited this from my mother. I'm sure the lack of a valuable piece will depreciate the entire ensemble.

Shocked, he wanted to sit down. Instead he said, Let me look at this more closely.

Do you play, the woman said.

The man shook his head. Once, but... She was clearly disappointed. He swallowed and opened a combination safe behind the counter and took out a magnifying glass, one he had used for his insect collection, before entomology had become obsolete. He took the white queen in his hand and peered at her. The queen's features

were iconic but nuanced. A little pouty and come-hither. The piece was heavy, even though the material suggested lightness.

May I ask why you're selling this? he asked.

It's that—

She coughed.

The factory near my house is expanding operations. Claiming the rest of my block in a seizure. I need something for a bribe.

He knew she meant the black cat factory. No other factory was experiencing a boom. He had visited it once as a teenager, when looking for a summer job, but didn't remember much about it. He fell into seeing the pieces. Sight made real things seem less realistic. The pieces were made of bone. The white pieces were a natural off-white. The black pieces were lacquered with a deep red stain. It might as well have been black. She raised her eyebrows at him when he didn't say anything for a long time. He hadn't played chess in years. Decades. Do you play, he asked her.

She shook her head. I never learned how. Other people learned around me. Her fingers twitched.

What's your name, he asked her.

Pepin, she said. He startled without exactly knowing why.

Well, Pepin, considering the craftsmanship, and the age of the pieces, I'm thinking that not only would this set make a handsome bribe, it might very well allow you to *buy* a factory.

She was breathless and said, Oh, I had hoped and hoped that this was the case!

However, I can't buy it myself.

She was crestfallen. Why not?

It's worth more than the entire store, Pepin. I can try to find a buyer for you. Out of the city, most likely.

She shuffled her feet. How do you know how old it is? And how old is it?

Early eighteenth century, late seventeenth. The pieces are in the French regency style. The flumes with the stylized heads at the top. They often used this style with ceramic. It was rare that someone

could lathe and carve bone in such fine detail.

It must have been quite rare, Pepin said, folding her hands and pursing her lips. She was offended so easily!

He took one of the pawns and squinted at it. He didn't want to fetishize dead bone. The pawns had tiny child heads. Their eyes were wide.

And there's the fact, he added, pressing his word luck, that all of these faces look so *angry*.

Anger's an emotion, Pepin said. Her face grew red.

The man held out his hands. It was no criticism. I swear.

Pepin's shoulders sagged. I apologize, she said. Of course. If you could find a buyer ... She trailed off.

I can certainly try, he said, setting the pawn down. He had forgotten many of his favorite openings. Not the moves themselves, which were easy enough to memorize, but their temperaments. I'd like to borrow the set overnight, he said. To take photographs for potential buyers. It's standard.

Her eyes grew dim. Out of the question, she said. Pepin scooped the pieces back into the bag. She left the board. They both knew it was probably worthless.

Call on me if you find anyone. She gave her number and turned away. He was too stunned by her departure to say anything, except, If you want a truer sale, then try to find the black queen. She didn't appear to hear him. The black queen might have been irretrievable. He locked the front door and retreated to the cot in the back room. He lay there for a few hours, saying Pepin, Pepin. He imagined her hovering over him. He couldn't make himself come all the same. Erotic satisfaction could not be achieved by looking at a blurry photocopy of a photograph of a naked woman. He rose eventually. He unlocked the door again. Open for business. Not that it mattered. In a few hours, business hours were over. He could hear the cold drag races down on lower Sassafras. The drag races were free. The failure mall locked him in for the evening. He was supposed to have access codes for free passage, but the lords changed the codes with

great ease and regularity. Even if he could leave, where could he go. He didn't have martial papers. He wondered what it must have been like to raise a family in the Assyrian empire. Surely someone in the Assyrian empire had felt love, it wasn't 24/7 beheadings. Maybe it was. Children had to work or die. What love must have been like when no one would remember you and no one would write about love. Because almost no one could read or write. He had once been Catholic until the church changed their mass back to Latin, cosponsored the drag races with the Pentecostals, and founded the Benevolent Union of Saint Antonin. Any one of those changes pushed him. He didn't know any way to push back. Figurines never pushed.

Every other Thursday they would have an execution at the drag race. Or an excommunication. A killing-one-bird-with-two-stones kind of deal. He remembered how youth used to be different. Races were different. There were no sensory cowls to follow the coverage and feel crashes. He had gone to a drag race with his uncle when he was nine or ten. In some ways things were not much better then. His uncle had worked at Hammermill and had lost two fingers and a thumb in a paper cutter. The noise was noisy. Few had jobs. He, young, had bought a button of his favorite car, number eight. A black car with red trim. He hadn't known why this was his favorite. It made as much sense to him as driving so fast that one needed a parachute to slow down. His uncle died of a brain tumor ten years later, before everything started happening. That didn't make much sense either. He went to high school in the basement of Erie's cathedral. On the way to the cafeteria he could pass by the dead bishop crypt. A windowless, pious room filled with minor diocesan relics. The school had excelled at football and extolling football players. Academics had been a distant third. He wore his clip-on tie on the first day of school. His mother had picked it out for him. Their family eschewed vacations so that they could earn enough indulgence for the cathedral school. That first day, the clouds from the paper mill took a wrong turn and the city smelled like broken-down fish. Within ten minutes of school a senior ripped off his tie. He joined

the chess club, which provided him a small measure of exquisite carnage. They would hide in the boiler room and play.

As he slept that night, night slept next to him. He could hear the sound of worms eating books. He ate ramen that night, which didn't sit well. He would have been old enough for Social Security if there had been such a thing as security, for his nonwinning ilk. He didn't know where the worms or the books came from. Before sleeping he encrypted a description of the chess set, through a Senegalese server. Precautions had to be made. In the morning, one prospect was insistent. He double-checked his library and made sure there were no worms there. He called Pepin and arranged a meeting. She didn't want to meet at the store again. He entertained the thought that perhaps she was a spy. Ridiculous. But then again he was desperate. She had to work that day. Presque Isle, she suggested. The last remaining public beach. All right. Tomorrow. Wonderful. See you then. See you. That night he dreamed of vomiting chess pieces. The tiny faces of the chess pieces also vomited out smaller chess pieces. And so on. At the appointed time, he met with Pepin at the appointed place. Old Lighthouse Beach. The lighthouse had been uprooted some time ago. The hole was covered. Tall walls separated this beach from the others, which were used for either private residential and/or military purposes. He wore a sky-blue tie. She had no way of seeing the tie because of the containment suit, but it made him feel better. Egyptian peacekeepers had landed here less than five years before. They didn't get far. The gun towers towered over them. They gleamed even though there was no sunlight. War kites soared above them. The winds lacerated. The beach was empty. Past the breakwalls, the flotillas held guard on the lake. People who wanted supreme protection lived there. One had to have means to live there, of course. The flotillas had no libraries. On the beach, Pepin was pensive. She said things to imply that she was pensive.

For example, she said, Don't worry, the turrets can't hear us. On account of the wind.

And: Even if someone accosts us, and I'm not saying they will, we

can pretend we're lovers. Having an affair. We might have to pay a fine, but we won't be stoned.

Wonderful, he replied. He tried not to think of their meeting as a date. He couldn't help it, though. He thought, Maybe she's the black queen.

I work at a Wal-Mart, she said.

Who doesn't, he said, suddenly sullen. It was hard, with the wind, smoke, and sand, to actually complete words.

She grabbed his hand. No, what I mean is, I know how to cut corners, squirrel away, range free without persecution. But listen. At the bowling alley, I'm trying to teach one of the robots to play chess. How great is that. I have two robots, but one is slightly newer and therefore smarter than the other. It has potential. I've taken it home.

He didn't know tedium could be so thrilling. He couldn't feel her skin on account of their mittens, which were retrofitted oven mitts.

Let me tell you about the potential buyer, he said. It's a woman not far from here. Cambridge Springs. Thirty miles south of here.

He knew that the greatest tournament ever on American soil took place in Cambridge Springs. 1904. A long time ago. Many grand masters played at that tournament. He didn't want to bore Pepin, who only inherited chess, with the details. A recessive gene. Cambridge Springs was halfway between New York and Chicago. A refueling stop for the bullet trains. None of the sulfuric springs were left. His handling fee would be worth the entire inventory of his store.

Who is this woman?

She is a collector of chess sets. I've dealt with her in the past. Incredibly reliable, A plus plus plus.

The woman in question—he wasn't really even sure whether she was a woman—had demanded that he tell Pepin this.

How much will she offer?

Like I said, enough to buy a factory. Anything. Live in the flotilla if you want. A sky fortress. Health insurance. Fairy dust money.

Pepin moved toward the green surf. Salamander water danced along her galoshes. I worry about what's inside me sometimes, she said. Whether I'm a dachshund in a world of giraffes. She stopped and stared at a point in the sand. As if she wanted to turn it into glass. He stood next to her.

Pepin?

No, she said. I've changed my mind! I won't!

It wasn't entirely clear who she was speaking to. She ran up the beachhead back to the road, toward his kidney-bean car. A far cry from black number eight. Town criers told him it was his own fault for not succeeding. She didn't have a car. Buses were infrequent. He'd still give her a lift if she wanted one. They could smooth over their differences. He could moor her. He tried to follow. She was fast. He smelled cinder and powder keg. At the road, she turned around to say, I'm sorry, but the chess set is not for sale.

What? Why?

I want to learn how to play. She crossed the road and entered a trailhead opposite the beach shore that he hadn't noticed before. A thicket with a narrow sidewalk running through it. A straight line into the peninsula. He tried to remember the trail—he had lived in Erie his entire life—and couldn't for the life of him. He was about to follow her when he started laughing and said to himself, Fuck it, she's a loon, she's a dachshund. He sat down on a mossy picnic table, shaking his head. He was a little sad at how—when his life was in danger of rupturing with change—softly and quickly everything turned back to the way it already was. He would never talk to her again. He remembered watching videos in science class about African animals, how when a person had an infection, that person would let maggots crawl into the wound and eat the infected tissue. Then, once flies, they would fly away. The table collapsed. Pepin disappeared, toward marshes and miseries. The trees were leafless and scarred with knives' marks and acid initials. She had never asked for his name, not once.



4.

Pepin's floating. He's floating about them. Their time is now, but his is not. He puts his finger into the marmalade sky and doesn't feel any wind. It's windy. He's a lighter-than-air aircraft. Of sorts. They're playing. They don't know the time. They don't know the proximity of adversaries. One chanced a glance at the other. Neither has touched the board. Which means it's white's turn. Soon they will meander. He's not sure what is sensory information and what is realism. On his farm, once, he milked cows and learned to like it. Hills were called mountains in his childhood. He hates chess even more, after what has happened to him. He loves God! However, that is unimportant. His mother's name is Marguerite. She is still farming. She has farming stories that he will never hear. White moves finally. C4. The English Opening. White has made him laugh. Lieutenant Carve—that isn't his name, it has to be Carver—is close. Carver's floating, but in a boat. He will be woken. The English opening lends itself to positional play. Jockeying, and not swift tactics. At least at first. The English Opening can lead to brutal retributions eventually. Pepin sees Black's knife next to the board. Pepin's cold somehow. More than usual. To disavow knowledge of the game, he holds his breath. He came to New France because of a girl. The girl was sixteen. Somewhere she is. She died of smallpox on the Atlantic crossing. He can't hold his breath long enough to reach her. He's forgotten her face. They threw her into the Sargasso. Other women have resembled her, all the same. He lets out his breath. A sulfur trace streaming over the peninsula. No one's living there. Black king and white queen are dead. He didn't see their ashes deposited into Misery Bay. That's what the commodore later calls it. But it fit. It fits. He's deposited, too. Part of him. A safety deposit in a sand bank. He doesn't hate White with all of his heart. Pepin knows he is young. She was not. The young are interruptible. After what has happened to White and Black and the others, he thinks he came away easy. He's floating, after all. He hasn't found anyone else floating. The French fort is ephemeral. They who think they are more than footnotes. So they share the

same language. Big deal. Everyone is a footnote. Entrapment isn't so bad. It nourishes broken things and makes them grow big and strong. He would like, at some point, to see one of his loves again. Unlikely. The French fort passes. LeBoeuf lasts a little longer, though he can't see that. The factory has slid into the marshes. It's hard to talk about in the open. No one can see this, as no one can directly see a black hole. Pepin can only see the absences around the factory. There are tricky currents and tide pools within the peninsula's many nooks and moors. It's a good place to hide and hide things. We have met the enemy, and they are ours. The factory continues its production unbeknownst to the Pennsylvanians. Underneath the duckweed. The state buys the lake port when he inhales again. The state needs access. A safe harbor. He sees odd speculative bubbles. America has plans. America, he wants to say, you are one clumsy girl. You are so obvious about your schemes. Winters remind him of past frostbite. He lost a pinky tip on the farm. He was a hard worker in Quebec. He gutted fish. They mixed the fish with potatoes and put it in tins. Meal alchemy. The Cathars, he realizes, weren't quite so fearsome as he had feared or even hoped. Even after all they did to him. They weren't even really Cathars. They liked thought costumes. America would have done them good. A declaration of independence and constitution. The city arrives, sloping to the bay. Burghers want to build a profit fleet. War with the English makes this possible. Pepin thinks of the English Opening again. There is no American Opening. There ought to be. He's contemplated mating with clouds. Albino gulls dive. He has time for historiography. The American fleet sinks an English fleet. *Niagara* monster. The remainders of the American fleet are sunk in Misery Bay. The land bridge floods. Recedes. He doesn't want to mewl over his predicament. The hardest part was when they opened his chest cavity. That's when he fled. That's when holding his breath became more than a way to conquer hiccups. Civil war brought actual factories. He applied for a cabin boy position in Quebec City. He milled around the docks. He was hungry. He didn't know they had only canoes and no cabins for boys. He

could read. He was the only applicant. He was on the canoe with the goat, which shit everywhere. No wonder they wanted to kill it when they landed. Once in a while a chips wrapper swirls by, and that's it. He's grateful for litter and nutritional statements. Food pyramids printed on trash. Of course there are always the Erietz to consider. The skunk people. Maybe if they hadn't been eradicated by the Iroquois, things would have been different for him. Or a beheading on the spot, upon landing on the peninsula. Hard to say. Ironworks cast dies, meanwhile. A long era when trains stopped in Erie. The depth's factory felt competition. This was no doubt natural. A kiss is a technology aimed to achieve a desired effect. A kiss is an opening. It's difficult to consider his belly button. He can't look. He first kissed the White Queen while gathering berries with her. Eventually she crushed the berries against her thighs. The passage of their mutual seduction. She would wander through the nascent city nude. Poles, Germans, Irish homing-pigeoned to the city. The gem city, it's called for a while. No one finds gems limning the streets, but at least there's work. Presque Isle is inaccessible except by boat. Mosquitoes hate tourists. There is a lakeside lighthouse. A house attaches to it. Children live there. Pepin watches them get older. They build a trail cutting across the peninsula to the bay side. Dead fish are a language. They gather near the docks as a grammarian's convention. A sidewalk trail past the marshes. Oh, they tore that up. But not for a long time. They use the trail to go to school, to the bay on the other side. A ferry to Erie. The trail seems straight. The children die. The factory's migrating, underwater. Sledging on the bottom, upturning mercury boots and nonrefundable cola bottles on the bay's bottom. He imagines cats in diving bells hauling the factory underwater. He observes pesticides and tourist arrivals and bathhouses and children drowning in undertows. Or straying off the sidewalk trail. Deer shy away. Ticks pounce. Grand masters joust thirty miles away in a tourney. In the early history of chess, the queen used to be a limited piece and could not move far. Anonymous Europeans made technological enchantments to accelerate the game. The queen became the most

powerful piece. Aside from the king. Even that was questionable. The king's power rests in his vulnerability. His bones tremble. He sees her at last—and himself—in the eighties. Building a sand castle next to her mother. Her mother stares at the sand. They're both on a beach towel. Her mother cocks her head and starts digging. He's unsure of her dowsing—not of its accuracy but whether he wants to be found. She puts her hand flat on the sand. She tells her daughter to wade. The sand castle's spires remind him of home. Rain ruins and wolves skirting the crop edges. He never understood Cathars and never would.

Wade? the daughter says. A pigeon flies past, out of its habitat.

Practice your doggy paddle, Cleo. Don't swallow the water, it's filthy. Keep your chin up.

This last command, even he can tell, is tactical advice and not encouragement.

He enjoys the linear progression of time. Even though he knows it's kind of a farce. It turns out that the colonists on the peninsula had been kicked out of the Cathar establishment. Loose as it was. For violence and malfeasance. The White Queen told him this a few days before their separation. The girl is dutiful and splashes into the waves. The mother scoops up the bag. He mimics spitting sand out of his mouth.

Much later, the factory comes ashore in a foggy night. Sets up shop in an abandoned warehouse, of which there are plenty. Zebra mussels invade in its wake and win. Much later, Pepin floats above the stucco house and sees recalcitrant spires, gangplanks, chained vats inside the factory. Tractor-sized photocopiers where the cats are penned. Inner ichors. The mother loses the Black Queen! Or rather, the Black Queen escapes. Hard to say which is true. He is over the house. A good view. The mother gives up chess. Cleo senses she should never discuss this. House turned up top to bottom. Arguments over who lost the queen. It's useless, he hears. It's useless. The remaining pieces are squirreled away in storage, and the mother dies. And then everyone is filled with the Lord, and a few people

design systems to save and consolidate other, less fortunate people. Much later, he whispers to the girl—now much older—that he will give his breath and breadth, and that she will never have to be alone unless she wants to be. She opens her mouth in the bath. She doesn't move to open the door when she hears knocking.

That's the factory representative, he tells her. He's offering you an eviction notice. Don't read it. That's why I'm here for you now. I'm hearing you.

She doesn't read it. I love you, she says. He sees through the foreman's window the knife. He can shift back, at any time, to feeling Black's knees on his chest and the first fluttering cut across the neck. He doesn't. The churches sadden the streets in bright crosses. Migratory species are shot down with antiaircraft guns. Icarus solutions mean losing track of extinctions. Selling the horns as unicorn horns. Ground to a powder. Satan is a better chess player than God. It doesn't mean he wins. But he has nothing to lose. Operators on abandoned blocks on Eighteenth try to contact like-minded psyches through telepathy and ham radio. Signals bounce off him because they don't reach anyone else. Pepin doesn't correct her. Now go sharpen your teeth, he says, and find the rest of me. I'm in the attic, in a banker's box. Your mother painted it blue.

5.

The foreman went to the failure mall and killed the fence, which wasn't hard. The foreman had been on a business trip. Every trip was a business trip. Afterward, it put the "security" system to sleep and rifled through the fence's possessions. Most of which were poor and worthless. It bit its fingernails in boredom until it found Cleo's dossier in the secret library. The library was in a compartment behind the fence's desk. How original. It was heartless. The secret library was mostly twentieth-century porn and chess books. Bestiality and endgame strategy, mostly. Your boat is floated, motherfucker, it said, standing on the fence's windpipe and providing a small benediction that it thought tender, though it was not. Chess was a way to convince

itself not to self-destruct. Between two horse copulation magazines was a slender, stapled volume of anonymous sestinas. It smiled. It had once lent the book to the fence as collateral. The compartment smelled like gobstoppers and semen. It secreted the sestinas into its pouch and left the mall. It needed pieces. Crossing Thirteenth, it started walking to the East Side, toward home. The streets were empty except for police pretending to be homeless. But their ragged jackets were too clean and had too many iron-on sponsorships. The homeless had no sponsors. They didn't bother the foreman. They might have even winked. In the failure mall, it had memorized the sestinas, poems about picking blackberries for the untenable Lord and effervescent failure. Its cogs creaked. It truly had been in Cambridge Springs yesterday, surveying the ruins of the old grand master's hotel. For future development. At some point, no property would be too far away. However, the foreman was not arrogant and was more than willing to admit its own shortcomings. It had thought that Cleo would merely confuse yearning with confusion and let the tensions settle into her. Her ordinary life. And she had, for a long time. But people weren't solvable, unfortunately. Not that it didn't try. The old set had to be acquired. The friendly takeover, however, had broken the deal. Cleo's reluctance couldn't be anything else. This made the foreman faux sad. Crossing State Street, it began whistling the old national anthem. Its favorite song. The one-hundred-year-old peanut and macadamia nut shop was closed. Most recently the store had sold circus peanuts and only that. Circus peanuts were the undead of the candy world and were in a strong market position. The foreman heard waves crashing over Dobbins Landing, half sunk and tilted. Upon reaching East and Tenth it crossed itself at Saint Anne's as a lark. Novenas were held there for a long time. The trick was: go to the church nine days in a row and one would receive a plenary indulgence. One had to appreciate the psychosis needed to perpetuate that worldview. However inelegant an exchange of spiritual capital it was. Much simpler to declare Jesus as savior, enter a Christworld nexus, and invest your annuities in the war futures in paraclete funds.

It speculated on such strategies in the factory. It reached the factory. The lights were turned on at the silent gates, but it kept walking, toward Cleo's house. It could hear the copiers caterwaul. The eviction notice hadn't moved her in the ways it had intended. It needed compliance. The house was empty and lightless. After letting itself in and finding no one, it sat on the elliptical couch. It appreciated, in a way, the venomous quirks of the mother. The gardener had drowned himself. So easy to drown when living next to a lake! It heard patters from the balustrades of the factory. It saw the ukulele on the floor. It stood and took it. It started to pluck at it. A string broke. It smashed the ukulele against the television, shattering the instrument. Inside the ukulele was the skeleton of a small bird. A passenger pigeon. It laughed and plucked the bird out by the wingtip. It could tell the bird was a passenger pigeon by the bone structure and beak size. Poor bird, it said. Where are your children. Where is your flock. The last of your kind died in a zoo. It placed the bird in its pocket with the sestinas and went outside. From the backyard it saw the robot, a classic Walbot, sitting in the cemetery behind the stucco house. The cemetery had a slope and an emptiness. The foreman opened the unhinged gate and walked toward the robot. The robot was nursing a small campfire. Campfires were illegal. The robot was male-like, with beach-blond hair and a Wal-Bowl identification plate on its chest. Anyone with beach blond, finely tuned hair in Erie could easily be recognized as an android. The robot didn't look up and rubbed its hands. The foreman liked to brew tea from black cat blood.

What's your name, son, the foreman said, crouching on one knee.

Nicollette, the robot said. With a French accent.

The foreman smirked. It had learned how to smirk at board meetings of the godly and unimpaired. Do you know you're trespassing on private property, Nicollette? Do you want me to cite code?

The robot shivered and crossed its arms. It knew not sadness in its face, its Ken Zen eyes.

Cleo said I could live here, it said.

And where is Cleo?

Nicollette didn't respond at first. It stared into the fire and its features became blurry, somnambulant.

How about this, Nicollette said. I have an offer for you. A game of chess. I win, and you leave Cleo alone. You win, and I'll deliver her to you. And her possessions.

The foreman could not lose. It had had many years of study for such a competition. It had once carried on a correspondence game with a Maori grand master—a used car salesman in Wellington—for several years. Won handily.

I accept, it said.

The robot produced a board and pieces. *The* board and pieces. Not a cheap plastic set one would buy at Wal-Mart, cardboard board, plastic pieces light enough to float in water. The foreman was nearly struck dumb.

Play here? it said.

The robot pointed to a revolutionary's tombstone that had been flattened by time. It placed the board there.

There's no black queen, Nicollette said.

Of course there is, the foreman said, cracking its knuckles. It's just not *present*.

What do you propose we do, then, the robot said. Your call.

Pretend as if it's there.

Invisible, you mean.

Sure. Why not.

All right, the robot said. If I want to move her, then, I will indicate the proper square.

The foreman stiffened. Unacceptable, the foreman said. I always play black.

Black always moves second. It is not an advantageous addiction.

It is for me.

You misunderstand me. I always play white. The arrangement will ensure that neither one of us will trust our gift too much.

You're not Nicollette, the foreman said.

It doesn't matter, Nicollette said, turning the board so that the

foreman was white. Move. The foreman looked up at the moon, spider-webbed with cities. It could call for the tree doctors, its special spies, any second. Or summon white phosphorus from the secret kites, down to end Nicollette. But it didn't. It tried to contemplate an opening. Across the street, it tried to cue up its database of every chess game ever played and recorded. There was a silence. It set its mind to dreaming solutions but only found considerable terror. It wanted to step away, overturn the board. Move, Nicollette said.

The foreman—which wasn't really a foreman any longer, as much as a compilation of inert, powerful ideas trapped in a body—reluctantly moved F4. An oddity.

Bird's Opening? Nicollette said. My. Very brave of you. Very brave.

It remembered her face as she was pulled from the temple roof, how she kept trying to laugh when the captain put a musket in her mouth. The captain refused to let her laugh when he pulled the trigger. He had killed himself a few years later at LeBoeuf.

Does chess have to be about winning and losing, though? the foreman asked, trying to squirm. So single-minded?

Nicollette squinted at the board. Well, there is the draw.

It became exasperated and said, That's not what I mean.

Across the street, noises. It wanted to turn its head. Its memories were caught in a sphere akin to a soap bubble. The foreman had never gone to high school, never kissed anyone, never became moved by anything except other people's capital. Its existence lent credence to the idea that children with medieval ideas of right and wrong ran the show. They grew up. They ran an economy or two. A fiefdom. They never died. They became imaginary. It heard cats escaping from the front gates. Thousands of them. The cats' brains were used as processing power. Which was not to be confused with process and power. It wanted to close the gates. It wanted to sleep. It could never sleep. Cleo must have let them go. Cleo could sleep. The cats scampered onto Dunn Boulevard. Some were as large as elephants, some were as small as field mice. Some had eight legs,

and some dragged themselves away on two. Some had cancer, some had bubonic plague, some had dementia, some had agoraphobia but managed to escape somehow. Some could speak French, some could speak Mayan, some could speak Basque, some could think in every language but not speak any. Some could give lectures on industrialism and living wages, some could teach Go. Some had napalm tails, some had rope tails, some had switchblade tails. Some had diamond claws, some had lapis lazuli claws, some had hardened corn syrup claws, some had no claws. The only traits they shared was their catness. And in a way, they weren't even really cats; much as the first Cathars in Erie weren't really Cathars. Whatever their state, the cats turned a hairpin turn and headed south, away from the bay, toward upper Peach, toward the mayoral domes and Christworld. They ran away from their history, which resembled a sestina. They would not have to repeat their well-groomed epitaphs anymore.

6.

Most chess games are casual and therefore too unimportant to record; this one was not, but still no one knows who won or lost. Or who played in the first place, for that matter, or what happened to the pieces placed on a tombstone of the American Revolution. A hand—not at all parental—picked them up and set them down outside the field of play. Outside the confines of the medieval army. Lost or sacrificed, the pieces cannot do anything but fathom their disposability. Which is no small task. Because, at some point, white or black checkmates the other and all of the pieces must be cleared, and the board set again, like a wolf trap. There were no survivors. There are only winners and losers.

Desperately, people try to show others that their lives are not, in fact, desperate. That they aren't spoilt children. And to keep a straight, nonlachrymose face while doing so. One has no choice but to reconstruct everything lost, as if blindfolded. To try, at least, even if the memories are gossamer thin, almost islands, a map unrelated to any territory. This often involves touching amusements. Touching

a sweater made in Antarctica. Touching a soldier boy's limbless arm. Touching a chess set missing the black queen—the Cathars ran out of bone, in a way it was that simple—thinking of the mother who gives up what she loves. And yet, the state cannot concede anything, any soft intent. The state takes and makes people happy, despite themselves. The state plays incandescent anthems, ruins stolen kisses and love, and obeys the rules it makes. Which is a small task. Someone in the office turned off its photocopier and its story was no longer copied nor illuminated for others. Someone unauthorized in the factory entered the break room—which had a roof—and left the refrigerator door ajar. For the hell of it. The foreman was happy, in a way. It closed its eyes and felt the passenger's skeleton stir.

No one can say whether anyone lived in Erie or not after the cats were freed. It is inconclusive. The city becomes unimportant to most purposes. Lost in the footnotes of the sun's fog and the moon's fog. Even the fog's fog. It is not its story anymore. The story becomes smaller and smaller. Nicollette—the robot calling itself Nicollette—is lost, and the foreman is lost, and Cleo is certainly lost. They might have existed ever after, but they are still lost. So many stories are lost every day without really anyone trying, and no one is able to dredge them back. But, listen, there are footsteps in the city. The black queen weaves a path through the streets of fog, looking for an opening, looking for a way out and home.