

THE PLEASURE PIER OF
AMUSEMENTS
& CURIOS

by

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A THESIS

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THE TALE OF THE OWL

On those rare occasions when I need to put my work aside because the land's vastness leaves me feeling impotent and gray and because I can't muster up any old affection for those soft and rolling fields like I used to, I'll lay down my tiller, keep the dogs at bay and set off on my mule to the small goods-store a mile or so down the road. The road I travel on is winding, covered in gravel and shaded by many trees. Nothing to interrupt our jaunt except the neighbor's dog that chases my mule and me down the road until he tires and watches as we pass out of sight. Not even the low distant whirr of an approaching vehicle to disturb my mule's steady, untroubled path.

Once on similar afternoon's jaunt, while coming around a bend in the road, my mule and I snuck up on an owl attempting to catch a frog in the tall grasses along the roadside. My mule and I stood frozen in a mutual shared silence—my mule somehow understanding the momentousness of the occasion—and watched as the owl hovered a little off the ground in pursuit of its prey. Never before had I seen an owl in daylight or from such close proximity. Its thick talons were covered in white fur and seemed almost luminescent like frosted twigs in the sunlight. Its appearance seemed altogether unworldly, as if it had been presented to me as portent or premonition of something momentous that was about to occur, and I stood transfixed by its beauty.

When we stood long enough, when the owl turned its marvelous head and discovered our presence there, it abandoned its prey and flew off to the nearest branch to watch us safely from of the height of trees as we passed on our way.

It has always been these moments that have kept me captivated, that have taught me to live quietly for fear that I might miss something around me. Because without them all I have is the stretch of road, the trees, the power lines and cornfield to mark my short journey.

The small goods store rests at the corner of the road where the gravel meets the blacktop. Outside is a single gas pump where I tether my mule. When I walk inside the store, an elderly woman behind the register greets me. She stands up halfway from her stool before gravity pulls her back down. The store smells of damp wood. Along with a single light bulb, a small window behind her lets in a small stream of sunlight. Wasps fly in from the broken windowpane and hang threadlike above her head.

I rummage through the deep freezer storing game meat and see what she has stocked on her shelves—cornflakes, cans of condensed milk, candied yams and black-eyed peas. The woman asks if there is anything she can help me find, half-reluctantly, half out of obligation to be polite, but I tell her I'm not looking for anything in particular. She goes back to her counting her books. I'd like to ask her if the wasps bother her any, but she might stare at me blankly as if I had just asked her if she carried another brand of soap. Instead, I buy a bottle of the soda and she points over to the bottle opener.

I take my drink outside and wander over to the small cemetery across the street. All the gravestones have flowers near the headstones. All the dead are looked after. Through window of the convenience store, the old woman's flat expression stares back at me. The warped window makes her look as if she is under underwater.

I go back inside and place my empty glass bottle on the counter. The woman gives me back my five cents. I look into her eyes, and she looks into mine. Our gazes lock. There is so much I could tell her, so much that I could offer. I can tell her of all the beauty I've seen and tell her of the tale of the owl.

And It begins:

“Once there was a man who left everyday on his mule for an afternoon's jaunt. His mule was his mistress, his respite from the land he was meant to till. A man every now and then wants to feel pulsing muscle and sinew, the fibrous tendons and racing heart of a tame beast between his legs . . .”

WHO CAN RECALL?

“Who will find the chicken head?” I ask myself, as the bowl of chicken parts is passed around the table from person to person. This is a game we play with family and those we love, for the person who finds the chicken head will get to eat the chicken brain, and this is known as one of the finest delicacies afforded at the dinner table.

As children, my brothers and sisters and I used to jump around our father, begging for the chicken head so that we could have chicken memories. “Chicken memories?” asked my father, as he stroked the ends of his mustache. His hair was dark and oiled so that it reflected in the moonlight that poured in through the tall, expansive windows. “Who can recall chicken memories?” he asked us and gathered us around; the best answer would be rewarded with the chicken brain.

My older brother was the first to answer:

“As a chicken, my memories are brief glimpses, fragments of memories like pieces of a broken mirror dividing my life into an incomplete picture, and while I find it difficult to recall these memories, because my life as a chicken was so long ago, a hundred lives ago . . . perhaps even a hundred thousand lives ago, I will do my best to recall them now.

“I remember a blue earthenware pot with a crack running down the middle that mimicked the dry, packed earth of the farm suffering from a miserable dry spell. The pot was the color of the ocean and symbolized something of an oasis in the midst of this wasteland, but became only a reminder of the lack of rain, a sign of a failed harvest ahead.

“I remember the neighbor-children, a boy and a girl by the name of Geoffrey and Eleanor. How they used to torment me, throw rocks in my direction and chase me around endlessly as if they could never tire. They ran like furious cyclones, tempestuous and eager, until they would dizzy and run headlong into each other, collapsing under the weight of their energy and zeal. Then by some divine providence, their mother would come storming from the kitchen, brandishing a wooden rolling pin or some other pain inflicting device, and Geoffrey and Eleanor, still puffed full of glee and destructive fury, would heed their mother’s warnings to return home.

“The farmer, as I recall, spent those afternoons waist-deep in the stalks and leaves of his failing crop. Slowly, he would wade through the rows occasionally lifting up a wilting leaf as if trying to transmute some life-giving energy from his beleaguered body. He always returned late in the evenings, dead tired. A burst blood vessel in his left eye betrayed his growing desperation.

“The days grew hotter. The crops turned a shade of tawny under the sun. The air was still, but in the distance I could hear a soft monotonous drone. Everywhere, I searched for the source of this maddening sound and then happened upon the farmer, standing behind the shed, whetting an axe on a large grinding wheel that sent up sparks in every direction. Occasionally, the farmer would hold up the axe for closer inspection, turning it around in his calloused hand, the axe’s blade glinting under the sun.

“Here my fate lay before me. The axe’s image filled me with overwhelming dread. Yet as soon I came upon the realization, it was soon forgotten because my memory as a chicken was very poor. Life went on as usual. Then one day when I was scratching at the ground for insects, the farmer grabbed me by the neck and placed me on a wooden chopping block. The axe’s sharp blade loomed overhead. I lay stiff and immobile with fear. Before me, was the blue earthenware

pot, and I expected it to shake with feverish agitation, but it just stood there, solemn, as if it had seen before a great number of beheadings.

“Then the sky opened up. The rain began to fall. The sound of raindrops could be heard collecting in the bottom earthenware pot. The children ran from the backdoor, lifting their hands up to the heavens, and I danced underneath the rain, the bloody dance of the headless chicken.”

We all held our ears and screamed with delight as our brother narrated the gruesome details of the chicken’s death. As children, we often found pleasure in these stories, perhaps as a way of dealing with the grimness of reality, that one day we too would pass on from this world to the next. My brother, that master storyteller, that great crafter of words, would surely be awarded the prize, but my father continued onto the next story.

My sister was next to answer:

“I remember my life as a chicken quite well. It is like one of those stories you might read in a book of folklore or see depicted on stage with colorful scenery and set to the sound of the zither. It is a story that is perfectly crystallized in my mind, with little to no inconsistencies, and I can tell it to you now as if my life as a chicken happened just yesterday.

“As a chicken, I followed around a wise monk as he made his way to the market-place on his morning alms. Each morning he shuffled down the road, and I followed behind as he kicked up clouds of dust with his bare feet. In the marketplace, women and men would pass spoonfuls of rice, large quantities of meat and bags of condensed milk into the monk’s bowl, and in return, the monk would bless their stalls so that their businesses would prosper and the business owners would live plentifully. Nothing more did I want than to pay alms to this wise monk, to be blessed like those almsgivers who would be rewarded in their next lives, but as a chicken I had nothing to give. My body was meager and malnourished and not worth the sacrifice.

“So on those morning journeys, I began to eat the food that had fallen to the ground from the monk’s bowl, and ate until my feathers glistened like gold and my wattle and comb turned bright crimson. Then one morning as I was scavenging the monastery’s grounds, one of errand boys seeing me there unattended, took me back to his mother who praised the boy for his resourcefulness. The boy’s family was poor, his father ill, and they had nothing to give the monks on their morning rounds to receive the monks’ blessing to make him well.

“What happened next, I cannot say because I was thrown into a pot of scalding hot water, but I can imagine that the next morning I was served to the monks, and out of guilt, the boy confessed what he had done, and the monks forgave him because they were full and happy and what had been done had been done. There was no use in wasting precious food. My sacrifice was not in vain because I was rewarded in my next life by the higher station I occupy today.”

But my father found this story improbable. “Ah,” he said, “You know that monks are very mindful and would never let a grain of rice fall from their bowl.”

“And surely,” retorted one of my younger siblings, “the chicken would not want bad karma in its next life by stealing the food of the holy and wise.” With this, everyone became silent, and the younger one suddenly aware of his outburst bowed his head and blushed.

Then it was my turn to answer and up until that point, I had thought very hard and in great detail about it:

“As a chicken, I was like other chickens, no different from my kind and existed unaware of my nature as a chicken and of my purpose as food and nourishment. I thought nothing but remaining with the flock because as long as I remained with the other chickens, the farmer would provide and tend to me. So when I was finally put up for slaughter, it was without fear, or pain,

or thoughts of suffering because my brain could not handle such complex emotions. I accepted death as easily as I accepted feed from the farmer's hand.

“But it was the farmer that suffered and toiled for the land and his livestock, for each grain of harvest that in turn was fed to his animals that in turn were fed the people of the countryside, and it was the farmer's wife who contained her loneliness each morning as she watched farmer leave for the fields from the kitchen window, and it was the farmer's son who wept at the sight of white feathers after slaughter.”

And with this answer, my father bestowed on me the chicken brain. It was smooth and round like a marble, but yielded to my bite.

The chicken bowl had made its second journey around the dinner table, and I had almost forgotten about the game, when I was startled by Mrs. Whitmore's shrill cry from across the table. An easily excitable woman, she made no modest display of her prize, and her over excitement jostled the flames on the candlesticks. I clapped steadily along with the other guests as Mrs. Whitmore held the head aloft and handed it to her husband who promptly cracked the skull and fed her its contents. I breathed a sigh of relief and could properly enjoy my meal, because although I love the taste of chicken brain, I could no longer be encumbered by its memories. To eat chicken brain is to know a thousand points of suffering, and I myself, was becoming aged and frail and could only one day hope to escape my own.

MY NEW SHOES

Oh how painful my shoes are, how much they hurt my feet! I must stop somewhere where I can rest them, a small café perhaps where I can give my feet some brief respite. There up ahead, a charming café with three unoccupied tables under a wide canopy. Thank goodness I did not have to go too far. Yes waiter, please bring me a cup of coffee so I do not seem disobliging in taking up one of your coveted tables. You see, I have no interest in eating whatsoever. I only meant to stop here because my shoes are causing me so much pain, and if you don't mind, I will sit here until I feel I am able to continue. No, I do not know how long this will be, but now that I am sitting here, I fear it will be for a rather long while, for I don't think I can walk any further. Thank you and yes, please also bring along some cream.

The waiter goes to fetch my cup of coffee and leaves me to tend to my feet. If only I could pry off my shoes ever so indistinctly and keep them hidden ever so casually underneath the table, but this might be going too far. The day started out so promising. I had intentions of taking a long desired walk around the city. Outside the sun was shining and bathed me in its golden light. I had just the right amount of vigor, a certain spark to my step that made me confident in the day's possibilities. How could I have possibly foreseen this catastrophe?

These shoes are only new, and I purchased them just yesterday. Yet I feel the shoe salesman must have switched them for a smaller size when I wasn't looking because they fit perfectly well when I tried them on. I remember a certain clash of opinions: the first pair of shoes I tried on was much too big, and I told the salesman this with an earnest and direct look. "Where

is your big toe?" he asked me and pressed the top of my shoe in order to discern its location. "There, see? Plenty of room. Can you wiggle your toes?" he asked. "Yes, I can," I told him. "A little too well, perhaps," I said. "The way my toes wiggle around in my shoes disgusts me and to be honest, makes me a little queasy, as if any moment I could lose the remainder of my lunch right here on your carpet." And I further remarked: "It is as if a school a small fish are swimming around my shoes or a swarm of eels, as if something loathsome and vile is given free reign to do whatever it pleases." "This type of shoe has to be comfortable," he begged. "If you go a size smaller, your feet will suffocate and struggle for more space." "Nonsense," I said. "I don't want any slippage of the heels. A size smaller," I instructed, and he brought out a smaller pair. And after he no longer looked me in the eyes when he spoke to me, but rather focused on an area right underneath my right earlobe.

Now these new shoes I purchased yesterday are much smaller than the ones I tried on, and I would exchange them, but I've already done a good deal of walking in them. I fear the pain they cause me must show on my face and put the other passersby off. "Oh how sour he is, how unfriendly!" they must think. "Better cross the road to give that terrible man plenty of room." It is fortunate that I don't have an interview ahead or that I am not meeting company for lunch. How much we take for granted the importance of comfortable shoes!

So now as I sit I can only watch the passing of feet. How freely the other passersby move unimpeded by their shoes. One man walks by pulling two suitcases behind him and is so jolly his mustache twitches as he walks. Businessmen with seamless strides hurry off on their lunch breaks, but even if their shoes did cause them some discomfort, it would not show on their serious, impassive faces. Tourists walk down the road and stop, walk a little more and stop again, craning their necks to admire the architecture. They have a lot of sightseeing to do and their

shoes would surely be fit for the occasion. A young man bounces along with a beat in his head. He clearly enjoys strolling down this very street.

But look, just across the road, another fellow man severely crippled by the pain of feet. He walks as if he is descending on tiptoe, a steep flight of stairs. He can barely make it to the next block. But alas, this might not be from his shoes, but from a de-generative disease of the legs that have caused him to walk so. Here, a young woman mocks me wearing five-inch heels that appear like cages around her feet. She skips across the street to dodge the oncoming traffic. And another woman, with knee-high boots. She runs up and down the street breathlessly trying to hail a cab, but it is not her shoes that cause her distress, no not her shoes, but rather her desperate need to get somewhere and the lack of adequate transportation.

PLEASE TAKE CARE NEXT TIME

The most curious thing happened to me as I was returning to our hotel from the train station. A man stopped me on the way up the escalator and asked me if this was St. John's Wood Station.

And well?

I said, yes, yes this was St. John's Wood Station, I could say that clearly enough, for I saw the sign as I was exiting the train. But don't you think it's odd?

Odd how?

I mean wouldn't you know the station you were getting off at?

It's not that odd. Plenty of people get off not knowing what station they're at. He might have been distracted or confused.

Well the other odd thing was that he asked me, a foreigner of all people. I look nothing like the other women here. He looked genuinely surprised when he heard my voice.

You should have taken it as a compliment.

Yes, I did. Then, anyway he asked me if I was foreign. And I replied that I was. And he asked me if I was just visiting and I said yes, just for a few months. And he asked me if I worked here, and I said no, I'm just visiting the city for a few days, but I'm staying a few months in another part of the country, and he asked me where, and I said in the southern part, near the sea. He again asked me how long I was staying in the city, and I had to remind him that I was only staying for a few days. He was doing something odd with his hands.

That does sound a bit unusual. But why did you bother answering his questions? You should've just ignored him.

Oh, but I was very brief, just brief enough to not seem rattled by him, but brief to the point where I made it clear I didn't feel like talking. He asked me if I'd ever been to St. John's Wood and if I wouldn't mind going with him. He said the trees were particularly lush this time of the year.

Where was your bag at this time?

It was on the other side of me. I wasn't worried. If he tried to reach into it, I would have noticed.

What happened after that?

He slipped in line behind and that was the last I saw of him.

That was the last you saw of him?

Yes, I was rather worried he would follow me out of the station, but he was no-where to be seen.

He was nowhere to be seen? He just slipped in behind you and that's the last you saw of him?

Yes that's what I said.

I can't believe it. I mean, I know you've only been here for a short while, but I thought you would have at least have some common sense or least not be so careless.

Well, listen here. I'm no fool. Careless how?

So he just slipped in behind you and that's the last you saw of him. Let me see your bag. Right, just as I thought. Do you see this? Do you know what this is?

No, I've never seen anything like it in my life. It's rather strange. Tell me, what is it?

Well it's a charm or sort of talisman. The man you met is a fiddler. He finds the foreigners and banter with them, putting them on edge to make them feel uneasy. It's a gift these fiddlers have. Come and look here closely. Do you recognize this face?

Yes, it does look like the man I spoke to on the escalator. But why is he groping himself so obscenely.

I know it's sick, really. These fiddlers have no common decency. While you were sleeping, he would have expanded back to original size and stolen all your money, your passport, eaten all the chocolate you intended to take back home.

So what do we do with him?

Let's not do him any harm. Let's just place him outside on the windowsill. He'll get a good fright when he finds himself six floors up. Maybe housekeeping will let him in.

Right well, I'm glad we sorted that out. But now we must hurry. We're meant to be at the theater in less than an hour.

THE CUSTOM OF EATING FISH

1

In some cultures, a seemingly insignificant action can take on symbolic meaning and provide prophetic insight, for instance, the eating of fish, something that is often done without serious thought or consideration. You might slice into a cooked fish, sumptuously spread on a silver platter, garlanded with parsley and lemon slices, and not realize that someone among your party is watching where you will make your first cut, because it is in that first slice a whole wealth of information is revealed.

Mr. Nicolo knew nothing about the custom of eating fish, but he fell deeply in love with a girl he met while vacationing in her strange land. They met after a puppet show underneath the glow of the lamplight. The puppet show depicted scenes from cultural folklore, battles between the sun and the moon where the moon swallowed the sun causing darkness for many days and nights. He mentioned to the girl how impressed he was by the skills of puppeteers who unlike those who controlled their puppets by simple motions of the wrist (like many puppet shows he had seen before) became a dynamic part of the scene and moved along stage as if they were the puppet's shadow. How lithe and nimble their movements! How skilled their art of puppet manipulation! And the girl agreed.

2

When serving fish among a large company of dinner guests it is most common that the newest and least acquainted member of the group be the first to slice off a piece for himself, but out of the numerous places where he may slice into the fish, where he decides to make his initial cut reveals something about him: his status and monetary wealth, how and where he was raised, his father's profession and where his mother spent her burgeoning years, where he vacations on the weekends, his past lives and the sins of his ancestors, whether he is trustworthy and worthy of doing business with, or on the other hand, capable of stealing

Mr. Nicolo knew nothing about the custom of eating fish, but he fell in love with a girl while vacationing in her strange land. They stood near a fountain next to a pathway of trees strung with lights. He was delighted the girl understood his language and stood mesmerized by her dark hair and skin as pale as the moonlight. They went nearby for a meal. Previously, Mr. Nicolo won a good deal of money from a lucky hand of cards, so he ordered every dish from the menu. His plane was meant to leave the very next day, but after their wonderful meal, he could not dare part from her. He decided to extend his trip in order to win the girl over, but she was not so easily swayed and insisted that their courtship progress in the traditional manner. She told him, he must first be introduced to her aunts, three spinsters, who he was believed in many superstitions, existence of ghosts and the healing power of crystals.

3

Where you cut into a fish reveals your monetary status, the places you vacationed as a youth, your mother's education and father's profession, whether as a child your parents lingered after

dinner sipping on an aromatic brandy or whether dinners were prolonged well in the night picking over the last bits of meat—while you tucked in to your bed, wept with an insatiable hunger.

Where you cut into a fish reveals all those insecurities or seemingly insignificant details in which you wish to keep hidden and out of speculation, but cannot. For this reason, eating fish is commonly practiced among a large company of guests or during business meetings. It is generally the case that the least acquainted member of the party will be asked to serve himself the first portion of fish. Then the others will know exactly whether he is trustworthy and capable of doing business.

Her three aunts invited them over for dinner that evening where fish would be served as the main course. The girl instructed him that he mustn't be too picky, to try every plate that was passed around the table, to not take too much or too little, to finish everything on his plate (even the smallest grain of rice) and to always accept seconds when offered. "You must eat carefully," she said, "for they will be inspecting your manners. When they pass you the fish, this will be your greatest test. Where you cut into the fish, will help them determine whether or not you are good for me."

4

There are several ways to slice into a fish, all of which reveal your standing and successes in this world, whether you prefer sipping on an aromatic brandy in the evenings or whether your family sits for a length at the dinner table picking over the last bits of meats while your little one, never satisfied, cries with an insatiable hunger. Your childhood, where and how you were raised, your

schooling, your father's profession, whether you were punished cruelly or uplifted and adored like ruddy-cheeked cherub.

Mr. Nicolo could not decide if it was better to cut near the head of the fish or the tail, or if it was better to take the lesser part of the fish and allow his hosts the more flavorful part of the fish. And what were lesser and more flavorful parts of a fish?

“If they see that where you cut is good,” she said, “our love can float off forever like a paper lantern glowing softly into endless, indeterminable heights.”

5

The places your family vacations on the weekends, the types of aperitifs and spirits locked within your liquor cabinet, the sins of your ancestors, your past and future lives, your successes, the guilt and shame that is carried around with you in a stone valise, all of these can be revealed with the simple act of slicing into a fish.

He knew neither if it was proper to cut near the head or the tail, nor did he know if it was correct to take the lesser meat and allow the host the more savory part of the fish—and which were the lesser and more savory parts of the fish? Surely this was absurd, that this wealth of information could never be discerned from the simple act of cutting into a fish, but the dinner was closely approaching.

That evening, Mr. Nicolo walked with brisk steps to the girl's home. Her three aunts opened the door, helped him with his coat, brushed the stale night air that clung to the wool, and hung it in the hallway closet. They showed him to the parlor. He sat down next to the girl on the

leather sofa and accepted a glass of cognac offered by the youngest of the three aunts. He heard the ticking of the clock on the mantle piece as they all sat in silence. He looked down at his glass and wanted to nestle there like an unborn chick. He took a sip of the cognac. It went down warmly, settling comfortably in the bottom of his stomach.

“So I hear you’ve come for our blessing,” said the middle aunt, “but first let’s eat dinner. I always prefer discussion once my stomach is full.”

“There’s no rush,” said Mr. Nicolo.

“Nonsense,” said the middle aunt, “dinner is waiting on us and we don’t want it to turn cold.”

6

There are several ways to slice into a cooked fish, all of which reveal something about who you are. All those details which you once thought insignificant and beyond public speculation are now made common knowledge, will weave a garment around you, perhaps ill fitting, perhaps of poor quality.

“Of course,” said Mr. Nicolo and they made their way to the dining table spread with a vast array of dishes. Mr. Nicolo sat at the left of the girl and laid his napkin on his lap. Before him was a fried haddock. Its scales were like antique pewter, its eyes a dull, vacant abyss. The eldest aunt passed him the peas and Mr. Nicolo spooned them on to his plate.

“The fish,” said the middle aunt said. “Please by all means, help yourself the fish.”

“Oh yes,” said Mr. Nicolo and gazed into the fish not knowing where to cut.

“Please cut in,” she said. “We’re all very hungry. Please don’t keep us waiting.”

7

Where you slice into a fish is a window in which your dinner companions can come to know you by and see everything you desire to conceal, but cannot. It is through this window that many friendships are created and can sail on forever down calm, abated waters or dashed hopelessly against the rocks forever to be mended.

Nicolo thought of all the places he could cut into the fish, but not knowing the answer, he looked down at the fish as if he could find the answer in the fish's scales, but finding none, he cut into the middle portion of the fish where its meat was at it fullest and slowly lifted off a piece just below the head, steading it onto his plate. The middle aunt, watching him, nodded and with a smile began to speak:

“I see that you are very rich,” she said. The eldest aunt whispered something into her ear.

8

Where you chooses to cut into the fish is an unclouded window through which can be seen everything you wishes to conceal, but cannot. It is through this window that dinner companions will come to know and judge you. Many friendships are given light through the ritual of eating fish and sent up into the air like a paper lantern glowing softly into endless and indeterminable heights. Some friendships are never sent afloat.

“I see that you are very rich, but not always so. Your father was a wealthy man and your mother had a poor upbringing. Her father delivered packages across muck and swampland and his boots,

whenever he returned home, were always covered in mud and tracked muddy boot prints around the house. She married your father, desperate to leave the life of the swampland. Unused to the lavish lifestyle your father gave to her, she squandered all your father's money on knickknacks and baubles. Your home was crowded every inch with things, but no necessities. Many times you were forced to steal one of her precious objects, perhaps a glass octopus to sell on the street corner or to the market trader in exchange for a loaf of bread.

“When you returned home you prayed she would not find the glass octopus missing because she was attached to each object and discovering one missing would arouse terrible anger. But she never did discover the glass octopus' absence because there was a secret: whenever an object wasn't there, she never remembered owning it. So you lived many years under this guise: stealing from your mother and purchasing food that you explained a charitable old man had given it to you. When your father returned home from business seeing that everything in the house was in order, he returned to his affairs and after two or three days, and sent back money that would be used to purchase other useless objects, which in return would be sold for food and other household necessities.”

The youngest aunt whispered something into her ear.

“My sister here says that although you are very rich, you have never experienced loss.”

THE HONEYMOON

On a city's famous street, famous for its many neon signs and a certain fried grass-hopper sold along the street in pushcarts, Alexis and his new wife found themselves like mosquitoes, always going toward what is bright, always going toward where there is activity and life. The neon signs that lined the street filled the night sky with many bright geometric shapes, but did nothing to illuminate the dark alleyways and side streets, and so Alexis held his wife's hand as they made their way down the dim and crowded street.

They walked past stands selling cheap souvenirs, tourists picking through colorful scarves and silk tapestries. They passed an albino beggar along the curb with his wares set out before him and a blind man weaving his way through the crowd with a tin cup. The street seemed energized by the glow of the neon lights. Each passerby was tinged with unnatural hues of violet, pink and electric blue. Even the fried grasshoppers pushed along the street in carts shone with blue phosphorescence. Numerous vendors lining the streets, sending pale blue smoke up into the night sky. Alexis and his new wife were both hungry and considered stopping for something to eat, but thought better of it after they spied one of the vendor's sons washing bowls underneath a hose in back alley.

Instead they turned into an establishment that reminded them of home, with smell of roast meat and turnips lingering in the doorway. They took a seat nearest to the bar and ordered drinks and two roast dinners from the barmaid. Alexis scanned the room with his usual reserve and whispered into his wife's ear.

“You see that old man and that young boy next to us?” His wife turned around and nodded. “And that woman leaning across the bar?” he said slightly lifting of his chin in the direction the woman was standing. “Yes,” said his wife, “the one with the exaggerated femininity?” “Exactly,” said Alex. “They are all sexual deviants,” and he tickled, underneath the table, the outside of her knee where she let her hair grow freely.

Throughout the meal, Alexis gazed at his wife thoughtfully. He noticed the flush of her cheeks and the soft tendrils of hair that curled near her temples. He thought the heat suited her well, much more so than the other women from their country who vacationed here, stuffing themselves like sausages into too tight clothing revealing too much skin and places which had never before been exposed to the sun, causing their skin to blister and peel in the most unattractive way.

After finishing their roasts, Alexis felt the pains of indigestion and requested that they return back to their room sooner than they intended. Outside the restaurant, he placed a fizzy tablet underneath his tongue. He felt nauseated by the smell of sewage and rubbish and the flies that clung to the fluorescent lights in the storefronts. Thick bundles of wires were strung along the electric poles and looked like the scratching out of mistakes by a ballpoint pen. Corrugated metal, plastic, and rotten wood formed many of the stalls that lined the streets, building material that seemed inferior to his personal taste, but concluded with a certain amount of open-mindedness that this was a country that valued chaos over order, and a certain amount of grittiness and filth.

Then from the corner of his eye, he saw a young girl selling flowers. She had such a soft, precious face that Alexis decided to buy a flower from her. He urged his wife to continue on without him and hail a cab to take them back to their room, knowing that she could not be

displeased with him since it was for her that he intended to buy the flower. The girl looked up at him with dark, unblinking eyes. Her clothes were tattered, and she had long straight hair that cascaded like water down to the middle of her back. When Alexis smiled at her, she turned away coyly.

“What is a pretty young girl doing like yourself selling flowers along a dirty street filled with tourists and backpackers?” he asked her, but either the girl did not understand or hear his question and instead pointed to the cardboard sign indicating the price for each flower.

He took a bill from his wallet and held out to girl, but his hand retreated suddenly overwhelmed by a sense of generosity. The price for each flower was not very expensive and she had such a large bundle of them that he decided to relieve her of her bundle and purchase the entire bouquet. He wasn't sure how to communicate this desire, as his earlier attempts to speak with the girl proved fruitless, and so he made several wild motions with his hands trying to indicate something all encompassing. After several attempts, the girl finally understood and nodded her head agreeably. He was sure she was grateful to have sold all her flowers and that her mother would reward her for her good work.

With the flowers held languidly at his side, Alexis made his way back to his wife who waving her hand in air in a timid and pitiful manner. Hardly had he taken a few steps when he felt a small tug on his forearm. He turned around to find the same girl with the dark, unblinking eyes looking up at him. She lunged for the flowers and Alexis, pulled them beyond her reach. She made to grab for them again, but Alexis held them above her head just out of reach. He began to laugh, thinking that this was a game and he was the cruel uncle who had just stolen her favorite doll, but when the girl did not stop and her efforts become more persistent, Alexis' face began to grow red, and his neck began to perspire.

A policeman on the side of the road was filling out a ticket for an illegally parked car. The girl called out for help, but the policeman ignored her, finishing his business before driving away. Her powerlessness made Alexis feel sadistic. Under no circumstance could he relinquish the flowers. He paid for them fair and square and would not be swindled by such a young, crafty girl. Still, he could not understand why he didn't just give them back. She was beginning to draw attention from the other street-goers and managed to usher over two English gentlemen who had been watching the scene the entire time while eating skewered pork with sticky rice.

The larger of the two walked up to the young girl and asked her what was wrong. In the meantime, his wife had managed to pull over a cab. Her slip of her leg hung outside the cab's door and she waved out the door for him to hurry. From what the young man had gathered, he told Alexis that he had not paid for enough for the flowers.

"You think I have not paid for these flowers?" Alexis shouted, now belligerent, "I'm a like a king here. I can pay for anything. I can purchase this whole country!" and with that he threw the flowers on the ground, got into the cab and slammed the cab's door. The girl bent over to gather them and Alexis shouted from the window "You thieves! You bunch of crooks!"

Back at the hotel, Alexis ran a warm bath and eased his body into the water. He thought of multiple ways in which her could excite his wife. Was she not excited by the deviants at the bar? He thought perhaps that he could pretend he had drowned, and when his wife would call from the bathroom door and hear no answer, she find his lifeless body and scrotum floating like a lotus flower.

AN UNUSUAL PAIN

I'm off to see the doctor, not my doctor, but the doctor my wife referred me to, my wife's doctor. He's a nice sort of doctor, always checks the right places and places you might never think of. Has a way of making your arm shoot straight up in the air whenever he hits a particular nerve in your arm with his little rubber mallet. Then he tickles you under the arm. Not sure why he does this. Must have been something he retained from his pediatric practice.

My last doctor was a bit of a nut job. Inside his bottom desk drawer, he kept diagrams and maps that once unfurled across his large mahogany desk would explain in various colors and shadings, an epidemic's process across our globe that would eventually wipe out the face of the earth. He pinpointed for me the exact moment the epidemic would hit our coastal borders, our region, our state, the neighborhood street on which I live. Before I left, he wrote me out a prescription for some pills I was to take once every day for the rest of the week. Then he told me to save my piss in glass jars.

"When the epidemic hits," he told me, "and be sure that it will, the world as you know it will fall apart at the seams. You must take these jars to all your neighbors and have them drink it. Your piss is as good as gold," he said.

My wife didn't like it. Said I needed to go see another doctor, but I told her I didn't mind him. I liked it when he smoked cigars in front of my face. I liked his abrasive personality that bordered on aggression and made me a little on edge. He also had a gut, a veritable gut that was so hard and protuberant, I had to resist the urge to rest my head against it. "So what," I said, "If

the guy's a little out of his mind? He makes me feel like a guy, just a regular guy going to see the doctor."

When I arrive at the new doctor's office, the receptionist tells me to go right on back, the doctor is expecting me. Through the paneled glass window of the surgical theater, the doctors looks involved in what seems to be a curious and complex operation. He looks up and waves me in with his rubber glove. I walk in. The doctor pulls down his mask.

"Take a look at this," the doctor says. "I've never seen anything like it. This woman's filled with eggs, a foamy sea of frog eggs."

The woman lies supine on the doctor's operating table. Her legs are splayed to her sides, and her pupils, which are dilated, seem to have swallowed her irises. From the corner of my eye, I think I see her blink a couple of times. The doctor picks up a handful of the soupy mess and lets it drop in the bucket below.

"Can she feel anything Doc?" I ask him. "No not at all. She's completely under. She can't feel a thing or even tell that we're here. Well, what can I help you with?" he asks me.

"There was something I was hoping you could check out. You see, I've been feeling this pain in my stomach, a real crippling pain, and sometimes at night I can feel it kick."

PASSAGE TO THE AFTERLIFE

In a provincial village outside of V—, it was once thought that the body could reach the heavens through a body of water by the way the water's surface reflected the heavenly constellations. So the townspeople heaved their dead into a lake in the remotest part of the village as a way of easing the deceased's passage to the afterlife. But after many days, the body always resurfaced like a whale coming up for air and had to be fished out among the bulrushes and weeds. The perpetual rising of bodies was always a source of consternation for the village as their mausoleums were already overcrowded as they were.

When a body rose to the top of the lake, it was thought that the individual suffered a terrible rejection from God, and the family members had to pray for several nights and leave food next to the body so that their soul wouldn't be left wandering the earth hungry. Some argued that it was the spirit that completed the passage to the afterlife and that the body was simply a discarded remnant, a husk, an empty shell, but this was always a matter of controversy and such thoughts were rarely expressed aloud. Many in secret tried weighing down the dead body with family heirlooms, fireplace pokers, paperweights, sandbags, brick and heavy rope, even slipping a razor across the belly to empty the entrails and prevent the buildup of gaseous matter, a crime punishable by hanging and easily dissuaded by certain beliefs that weighing down the body would send the deceased straight to the pits of hell.

There was a watcher of the lake, an old man whose job was to ring the bell whenever a body resurfaced. His daughter had a gift for recognizing the heavy silence right before a body

would bubble to the top. When the old man died, he was dumped in the lake like all the others, and the young girl couldn't cope with the thought of life without him. So when the old man died, she watched the cycles of the moon from off the lake, and dove into the water when the moon was at its fullest. After months of waiting, the girl's body never resurfaced. It was then decided that the girl had reached the heavens and possessed the only pure soul among the village. A tapestry was woven to mark event and hung in the village's museum. Afterwards, the lake generated a layer of algae and slime. Matters of life and death had to be reconsidered.

WILLIAM'S FOLLY

William is a dapper young lad, but a bit of a high-maintenance and needy boy. With wavy blonde hair and crystal blue eyes, he could be said to be a good-looking boy with the exception of the extra weight he carries around the middle. During football scrimmages, he is often chosen last out of all of the boys, and after the game, he walks home alone while other boys, ahead of him, tease and prod each other in joyous mass singing songs of victory into the chill autumn air.

At school, William performs perfunctorily well, but often becomes flustered when the schoolteacher directs him a question, which causes a moment an unperturbed silence because so much as a whisper or a scoff will cause William to run from classroom and escape beyond the perimeter of the school.

When William runs, he finds a mossy stone to sit on. The land slopes gently down to a narrow road. There is a steep bend in the road that cars have to slow down to go around. So as the girls from class come to wrap their long arms around him and urge him to come inside, he can look past them and to cars passing by. His consciousness leaves with every car that goes by, so he can look back and see himself there, and it is a nice sort of picturesque scene: a lilywhite figure, with flushed cheeks, and stockings up to his bare knees among the unmolested foliage and a deep expanse of brown leaves.

“If you grew out your hair a little William, you would look like a young Jim Morrison.”
“Yes long hair would look lovely on you,” the girls tell him. And William recovers himself a little and struggles to his feet.

EASTER SUNDAY

It's Easter Sunday and all the eggs are tainted. Newspapers are scattered all along the streets and not one newspaper boy can be found. *The Easter Bunny must be leaving behind rotten eggs this year*, says the dispatcher over the taxicab's radio. *Can somebody get me a newspaper?* he asks. "Okay," says Adolfo the taxicab driver, "but in fifteen minutes."

"Hey," says Adolfo to the bellhop, "You have any newspapers here?" "No," says the bellhop, "No newspapers here. Better go rustle yourself up one. And while you're at it," he asks, "mind bringing a couple this way?" "Okay," says Adolfo, "In fifteen minutes. I have these people to take to the airport. These people need to get to the airport. It's hard been a cabbie in this city. Too many red lights to run."

Jilly knew this city was strange, the way the weather was cold but she couldn't feel the way that it was cold, the way the weather just hung there and absorbed her so she was in equilibrium with the cold so she couldn't really feel it. Or the way the rain seemed to skim off her, run off her head like it would a helmet; or maybe if she ran her fingers through her hair she might feel the drops of rain, but she wouldn't realize they were there at first. Like the way she bought a cup of coffee yesterday afternoon and didn't spill a single drop as she usually would, but even if she happened to spill her cup of coffee that afternoon she knew it wouldn't scald her hand the way hot coffee usually would because there was something strange about this city. But it was unusual anyway how she didn't spill a single drop.

There's an Easter get together in the early morning shift of the emergency ward and all are invited except the patients hooked up to monitors and bags of liquid. Mr. Morris is curled up on his gurney. From his metal tray his orange juice has spilled all over the floor.

"Your orange juice has spilled all over the floor," says the red haired nurse. "What are we going to do with you, Mr. Morris?" she asks.

"Don't worry," says Mr. Morris, "I'm getting out of here soon."

"Of course you are," she says as she checks his stats and monitors his fluid.

Meanwhile, one of the resident nurses walks by carrying a casserole backed in glassware and delivers it to the nurses' lounge where a group of nurses are gathered and busy chitchatting. The casserole's offensive odor wafts by, mixes with the hospital's stale odor of sickness and lingers up to Mr. Morris' half-closed partition.

Outside the streets are completely cleared of newspapers. Not one page remains hanging inside a gutter or suspended in mid-air by a gust of wind. The streets are empty as if hollowed out by a flood, and only a few early-morning stragglers are sitting outside the closed shop fronts, waiting from for them to open.

On the side of the road the street sweeper is pushing his broom and collecting up trash. "Hey," says Adolfo to the street sweeper, "you see any newspapers around here?" "No," says the street sweeper, "No newspapers here. Maybe go check the square. Saw a few clinging to the iron fence. And while you're at it," he asks, "my friend Harry sells paintings along that street corner and owes me ten dollars. Mind getting it from him and bringing it to me?" "Okay," says Adolfo,

“In fifteen minutes. I have these people to take to the airport. These people need to get to the airport. It’s hard being a cabbie in this city. Too many pedestrians to bypass.”

Jilly’s father is on the other line, telling her to come home, that she’s been away for far too long, and it’s time to come home at once. Jilly protests that she’s not ready to leave, that she’s in love and it’s much too early to come home.

Jilly’s father begins to weep and speaks through his mustache moist with tears: “Remember this day,” he says, “on this very day. When you were just a little girl. You went outside to show your grandfather the new swing set I had just built for you. He pushed you so high on that swing, so high that even your tiny head blocked the sun. You came back inside and sat down to your breakfast, finishing your slice of cinnamon toast, your pinky finger held ever so delicately in the air, before telling us that Grandpa wouldn’t come back inside.”

In the emergency waiting room, a boy in a gray hooded jacket fills in his information on a clipboard that rests on his knees. He stops what he is writing and turns around to the sound of breathing behind him.

“Do I know you?” he asks the old man breathing behind him. The old man looks back at him incredulously. “Then quit fucking looking at me,” says the boy and returns to his form. The boy sits hunched over, bites the end of the thumbnail, rocks against his chair. Underneath his hood his eyelashes flutter like two moths.

The other people in the waiting room stir uncomfortably in their seats and settle back into silence. The old man gets from up his seat and approaches the boy. Around his neck hangs a stethoscope that he attempts to place against the boy’s heart. The boy swipes it away.

“My name’s Dr. Love,” he tells the boy, “Just lemme check your heartbeat for a moment.” The boy’s teeth clench. His temples pulse.

“What can I do to make you happy?” says the old man. “If you want me to dance, I can dance.”

The boy gets up from his seat, takes his information to the nurse, and smacks the clipboard against the counter. The nurse, unperturbed, slides it across to herself.

The old man turns and whispers something into his stethoscope as if speaking into a two-way radio and walks through the emergency room’s double doors, dragging behind him a cape not unlike the fabric of a department store Santa.

He returns moments later wearing a football helmet and red leggings. He runs in place on the balls of his feet, jumps down to the floor and back up again. A woman in a zebra print dress walks in behind him and together they begin to dance. The old man claps a beat for her to dance along to.

The boy’s arms begin to swing at his side like a helicopter as he tries to steady a cup of water underneath the water cooler. Infuriated by all this dancing, he can’t keep his arms from swinging and he is thirsty.

It is so early the birds haven’t even begun chirping. The sound of a chair moving across the room. A stifled cough.

Girls in pastel dresses of various colors are lined along the street, waiting for rides to pick them up and whisk them off to church. Adolfo drives by the line of girls and each girl stomps her foot cascading down the line. They cross their arms. Their lips pucker and faces turn mean. The newspaper boys have been taken to heaven where they now work spreading news of a higher

importance. Their ethereal wings lift them from cloud to cloud as a cat lifts her young by the scruff of the neck. Through the openings of clouds, they look with awe and wonder at the earthly goings-on.

At the corner of the cemetery, a man leans against the fence with a stack of newspapers behind him. “Hey,” says Adolfo. “Mind giving me a few of those papers?” “What do I look like,” asks the man, “a street vendor?”

“How much?” asks Adolfo.

“Five dollars,” says the man.

“Five dollars for one paper?” asks Adolfo and the man turns away pretending not to hear and picks at something in his teeth. “Are you Harry?” ask Adolfo. “Yeah,” says the man. “I’m Harry. Why you want to know?” “Your friend says you owe him ten dollars.” “Well you can tell him I don’t have it,” he says and gives the bumper a swift kick as Adolfo drives off.

Jilly’s boyfriend is waiting for her back in the hotel room, wrapping his finger through the telephone coil and flipping through the channels on the TV. Hours earlier, he checked out of the hospital and took a cab back to his hotel. In the hotel lobby, he walked barefoot across the marble floors, wearing a pair of scrubs lent to him by the hospital, unabashed by the families congregating for Sunday brunch. He rode the elevator to the fifth floor and paused for a moment outside his room, remembering he placed his door key in the inner pocket of his tweed coat draped across his forearm.

On opening the door, he found the room empty, the bed still made, and so began packing his clothes, making sure to fold his sleeves of his collared shirts flat. He stacked them in his suitcase, leaving room for his socks, shoes, and other small belongings. His arms felt soft,

formless, scrubbed raw like a newborn infant, and he suddenly worried that the hospital did him a great detriment, remembering the chronic earaches as a child and his mother's liberal doling of antibiotics. He stopped what he was doing and rubbed his arms, forgetting what he was doing for a moment before reawakening to his task.

He walked toward the bathroom and flipped on the light. Everything was clean and in order, he noted. The hotel staff must have cleaned up the mess once he was wheeled away on the stretcher. He winced slightly in embarrassment as he remembered the incident. If only he had more time he could have put on a pair of trousers instead having to be wheeled away in only his underpants. He tried insisting that he was fine, that it was only something he ate, but the paramedics refused to listen and slid him into the back of the ambulance.

It was most likely the distress of the situation that did him in. He remembered leaving the restaurant unable to get his bearings and find their way back to the hotel. He remembered Jilly pressed herself tightly against the brick building and refused to go any further. Nothing he could do would budge her from that wall. After trying to tug on her arm, a police pulled over and told him to get a move on.

Nevertheless, he was grateful that hotel staff didn't politely pull him aside on his way up to his room or slide a note under his door asking him to leave immediately. It was polite of them to act as if nothing had happened.

The diner was dim, the glasses were plastic. Jilly sat eating a sandwich thinking about her childhood friend with a mushroom haircut and eating cookies on top of her blue slide. She left the diner and stood underneath an awning waiting for the rain to stop. In the shop's window was a sign for a lost canary, which she read with great care because she felt genuinely concerned

about the canary's whereabouts. She pondered where a lost canary might wander off. In a store window's reflection, she saw a man sitting on a bench in across from her. He was drinking from a mug and tapping his can along the asphalt. Even from her distance to the man, she could tell he wore a toupee and had a false set of teeth by the way he bared and grinned, not smiling, but simply adjusting them in his mouth. He sat watching her over the rim of his mug. Jilly hoped he wouldn't approach or attempt to speak to her as she had a terrible headache and wanted to be left alone.

She thought of writing to her old friend. How would she begin? "Dear friend, the girls here wear such beautiful pastel dresses . . ." but she stopped her thought process midway because the letter sounded too forced, too desperate to make a connection with someone from afar. Besides she had other things to do to keep her preoccupied, such as taking in all the details of the city, so the city became less strange and more familiar. But by doing so Jilly worried that she might become lost, forgetting what she was doing here or what she had been waiting for. But in the meantime, she allowed herself to become absorbed by all the details because it made time pass by quicker, and she had no intention of making any definite decisions yet.

The square is empty except for the coach driver and his mule drawn carriage. Not even the fortune-tellers or graffiti artists have set up their stands. The coach driver paces along the square. His steps echo off the stone cathedral and the adjacent buildings. Behind him, the wind rattles the cathedral's wooden doors and he turns to see if church has let out yet. Beyond the square, the sun begins to rise. The cathedral, the cemetery, and the adjacent palms create a type of symmetry in the landscape that is now magnified by the rose-tint of the sky. A man walks by pushing a bicycle that squeaks like a yelping dog and both the coach driver and the man stop to look at the

sky now pink and diaphanous. The coach driver checks his watch, anticipating the moment when parishioners will come bursting through the doors. He thinks it's about time to leave.

"This place is like a maze," says Adolfo to the dispatcher. "You turn down one street and it's closed. You go to make a left, but it's a one way going north. How the hell are you supposed to get around here?" *Any luck with the newspaper?* the dispatcher asks. "No, no luck," says Adolfo as he sits and waits for the light to change. Rain patters along the windshield. "Wind probably blew them all away by now." *Well, when you get a chance,* the dispatcher replies.

Jilly sits on the edge of the bed and tickles the top of her boyfriend's feet. Her boyfriend laughs and tucks his feet underneath him. He turns his face away, trying to maintain a look of seriousness and anguish.

"You know you slapped me last night," he tells her.

"I thought so," Jilly says and shrugs as if slapping a man is just another rite of passage.

"Why did you leave me last night?" he asks.

"I thought you were about to get us lost and I realized I could never follow a man who didn't know where he was going. Then I fell in love with the city. I couldn't bear to leave. I thought about starting all over again, a life sleeping on park benches."

"I thought you would have accompanied me in the ambulance last night," he says.

"I tried," says Jilly. "I told the paramedics about the eggs. That it must have been the eggs, but they seemed skeptical."

Jilly and her boyfriend huddle under the covers, touching noses and feet like eensy weensy bunnies, like two lovers returning from their night shift. It is now light out. They have one more hour before check out.

THE CANAL

Alex went behind the bush to have a wank and told me to wait on the rock ledge. So I sat on the rock ledge and waited and grabbed a pack of matches from Alex's bag. Above the yellow bridge that arched above the canal, the sun was beginning to rise, so I had to squint in order to look in its general direction. The day was getting hotter. It was one of those mornings I didn't think was going to get as hot as it was, and I had wished I had worn a cleaner shirt so I could take off my sweater

Just then, three girls were making their way down the canal path towards us. I figured they'd be able to see Alex behind the bush, especially with that yellow stripe on his jacket, but I couldn't be bothered to tell him. If he wanted privacy, he wouldn't be standing behind a bush in open path, that's what I figured. So as the girls came closer, I kept my head down, knocking my shoes against the rock ledge and lighting the matches, feeling for that rub and snap of the match between the papers.

The girls walked like giant birds, all knees and toes pointed inwards, and I thought they might pass by without noticing acting so unfazed as they were. They walked impenetrable, as if shielded by an iron egg, until one of the girls stops and tells her friends that there is someone behind the bush. Then all three girls get a good look before running down the canal path, making a sound more rodent-like than bird-like and this disappointed me. But I felt bad for them somewhat because I knew there were some things you couldn't help looking at even when you don't want to.

Alex finished behind the bush and grabbed the pack of matches. He told me I was lucky there were still a few left. Alex was part Egyptian and had a poor temperament, and sometimes he'd threaten to sell my sister for a thousand camels, and I would say, go on, go ahead and take her, just to be in on the joke, but sometimes I wasn't sure. He lit his cigarette and his lips puckered, disturbing the oblong symmetry of head. He had a massive head that he always kept shaved. We came down to the canal often to talk about music and watch the barges pass. Sometimes, he offered to take me to a few gigs down at Whitechapel. He liked to think I didn't know what he was up to when he went that bush, that I was too young to understand, even though I had my first one almost a year ago when my mom and sister were asleep and I was up late watching television.

The canal was littered with empty beer bottles, chicken bones from the chicken shops. Along the rock ledge, a guy and girl had appeared and were holding hands. The guy had a cleft lip and three gold chains around his neck and was running his fingers along the back of his girlfriend's shoulders. I thought it was real sweet, real Romeo and Juliet-like, how they'd come down to the canal to hide from their parents and be with one another.

A drunkard stumbled from behind a bush and threw a glass bottle in our direction. The glass shattered near our feet, and the drunkard walked off muttering to himself. Alex hit me on the back of the head, for attracting his attention. He always said I attracted all the loonies by the way I looked them in the eyes. But I couldn't help it because my own Gramps used to dress like a fourteen-year old girl with plastic barrettes and everything and take the Docklands line to do the shopping. My mother would always bring him back on the verge of tears and fingering his shopping list.

“Well, what do you want to do today?” Alex asked.

“I think I’d just like to watch the barges pass,” I said. “I’d like to just sit here and watch the barges pass and watch the lock open for the barges to pass.”

“I think I’m about ready to leave,” he said.

“But how can you leave?” I asked him. “How can you leave with that beautiful goddess standing near the canal?”

“You’re right,” says Alex, “She’s rather beautiful and I’d like to stay and watch.”

The Goddess stood near the canal and was wrapped in a light blue sheet that looked as if it just moments ago had been ripped from off a rumpled bed. With one hand she held the top of the sheet to keep the sheet from slipping and with the other, she reached into the canal, sending the water away in ripples. She stood there with her head tilted at an elegant angle as if she had just been dropped here from the sky and was wondering what to make of it all. Joggers stopped along the path to watch, mesmerized, and so did a Golden Labrador that tugged at the sheet insistently, but the joggers left and so did the Golden Labrador, and we did too, eventually. We left, bored.

CHARLES SQUARE

You couldn't tell there was anything good here, unless you were able to find the good in it yourself. It's about finding the good in where you live, about knowing where to eat.

There is little here but some industry, a roundabout and an underground walkway with a mural painted on its side depicting several of the local businesses: the butcher's, the florist, and the shoe repair shop. The walkway leads to a central square enclosed by two levels of shops. In the middle of the square, there is a famous fountain that tells the time by a number of water jets activated at a given hour and bandstand where the handicapped collect money for charity.

It would seem that there is so much deficiency here, only because there is so much freedom of movement, so many ramps and lifts.

For several years, the council has aimed to redesign the square, but hasn't procured the funding due to worries of leeching money away from the surrounding boroughs. But there is a sense of ease here, of boredom with leisure. There are flowerpots hanging on streetlamps and a set of escalators going from the bottom floor to the top. This is where those on the dole come to thumb through books in the bookstore and buy a pint of cider with pocket change.

At noon, the fountain sends up all its jets in unison, the hour when the square is at its busiest. Near the fountain, a two-year-old is either lost or abandoned. An older boy approaches the child, leans down to his face level and leads the toddler away. The child is bundled up, his hood is tied, his coat is clasped with silver fastenings. Mothers stop to light their cigarettes while their children push their own strollers and run them into people.

At the corner shop, a woman introduces her new girlfriend to the man working the register. The girl is letting her sleep on her couch so she wants to share her with every-body.

The two-year-old is led away and this is the last they see of him after he is caught on camera leaving the square, holding the older boy's hand.

Yesterday, the council approved a plan to start Phase 1 of reconstruction. The square will be covered, but will still feel open because the dome will be clear. More importantly, it will protect against the elements, especially against the rain.

If you want there's a place that serves good coffee where the girls who work are foreign and smile at you with big teeth, and sometimes they can make you feel like you are someplace else, except when it's raining. When it's raining and there's nothing else, then people begin to merge inside, shake their umbrellas in the doorways, bringing in their shopping, their children, everything they've procured, and so it's all out in the open for you to see.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER

No funeral or ritual of any kind may be performed without first contacting the grounds-keeper. No strolling the headstones, no shedding tears whether out of sadness, love, forgiveness, or guilt—not even for respite—without my permission. Let the dead rest peacefully underground, gazing into the dark while immersed in their reveries. Let them gently graze the cool satin lining of their coffins, run their fingers through their thinning and yet lengthening hair and turn, without disturbance, onto their side to find a position a bit more comfortable.

These rules are in place for a reason. It is not uncommon that someone should arrive at these cemetery gates dragging behind them their deceased and expect a proper burial, only because they have here with them the deceased, and this is, after all, a cemetery where the dead are buried. As the groundskeeper, I have had to keep careful watch over who is buried within these grounds, lest people begin arriving with shovels and spades, stealing in after hours, digging crude and careless shallow graves and leaving behind tasteless memorials.

Once a group of children came from the condemned apartment buildings nearby to bury their dead hamster underneath one of the cemetery's weeping willows. There was a procession trailing along the hill overlooking the site of gravestones. Such a sad and sorry procession. Behind them, the sun seeped its last ounce of color like a red ribbon across the sky. Solemnly, I approached these children and regretfully turned them away, explaining to them that a hamster would be happier buried in a backyard or thrown on top a garbage heap than buried amongst God's chosen. They understood, but hung their heads dejectedly. Out of curiosity, I had asked to

see the dear rodent, and it was fortunate I had. The hamster was just hibernating and very much alive. You should have seen the way their eyes alighted when I imparted on them this peculiarity of nature. And what a tragedy that would have been for the poor hamster to be buried alive! It wouldn't have taken long before a cat would get to it.

But, alas, you don't have time to hear any of this. You have come to see your mother, and I see you have brought a bouquet of roses, as well. I presume you intend to take her these flowers, your mother, departed long since. Please just leave them near the gate and I will see that they be given to her. You have driven a long way. You have searched the uniform headstones for over three hours and have yet to find where she is buried. I will find her for you, but you must return home. It's getting late. It's the holidays. You have left your wife and child at home. A child should not be without his father or a wife without her husband.

I have so much to do here, and the gates are about to be locked, so I beg of you, please leave and be gone. There is nothing left to say to your mother that you couldn't have said when she was alive, unless they be idle words. Believe me, your mother is not alone and not without mourners. I have seen the men lined up at the gates with panged expressions on their faces. Some come on rainy evenings, hanging onto the iron fence and weeping out loud. Some bring gifts and crouch down low to the ground, having long, quiet conversations with her. Some stand at a distance and cross their arms across their chest or rest their cheek in their hand, not saying a word, but looking on and looking on . . .

It is difficult to say where these men have come from and if they fell in love with her in life or after death, but they always come, in throngs and hordes even. The audacity of these men with your dead father lying nearby! But I have to admit I fell in love with her a little too. Her strange song woos me to sleep every night. I have often wanted to speak to her, to introduce

myself as the man who maintains these grounds and sees to it that all her needs are met, but I am terribly shy and besides, she has so many other admirers.

MY NEIGHBOR'S SADNESS

The night the bats came, the first one fell at my feet like a black leather glove carelessly tossed to the floor, and the other (I heard its birdlike chirping) flapped near the vicinity of my left ear. Startled, I fled down my stairwell and out the front door to see if I could find some kind soul who could lend me a broom or a net of some kind to help me get rid of the two intruders, but the street was empty except for an old man at the far end of the road who was too busy keeping his toy-sized dog out of a pile of brush for me to call out to him. The trees stood unconcerned by my predicament. All the lights in the homes were out, their windows reflecting the dense, inky blackness of the sky.

I tried ringing the bell of the house across the street from me just in case someone should answer. An old lazy Labrador greeted me, sniffed at the windowpane and turned back into the depths of the house. I felt terribly alone, realizing that everyone had left for the holidays.

Only my neighbor in the apartment next to me was in. I could see the light from his television blinking through his blinds like distant flashes of lightening, but I could not go for his help because it was his sadness that brought the bats here. I was certain.

Ever since my neighbor rented the place a few months ago, I've missed the woman who lived there previously, missed the tulip bulbs and herbs she tended to on her front porch, missed the scent of her undergarments and silk nightgowns that billowed on her clothesline, missed the sound of her steps as she limped down the back wooden steps each morning. She had one leg that was shorter than the other and this is what gave her that distinctive walk. She also had one

eye that protruded more than the other. The protruding eye would look at you intently in conversation, while the other would slink closed and wander off into the corner.

The man who lives there now arrives home late at night. He pulls in the driveway in his old beat up car with cigarette butts spilling over the ashtray. His hair is thinning near his forehead and he has sunspots on his hands. Recently, I have discovered holes in my kitchen cabinets that lead directly from my kitchen into his. I can smell what he's cooking, can hear the clanging of his pots and pans. I can smell his cigarette smoke, hear the creak of the wooden floor as he walks across the room and hear the groan from the pipes as he fills a glass of water underneath the tap. At night his sadness frequents my apartment and comes in through these holes like a bad radio frequency.

Now none of my doors and cabinets will latch closed. The paint has begun flaking from the wall. I've discovered a watermark in the disturbing shape of a large phallus on my living room ceiling. I cannot invite guests over without blushing or seeming flustered, knowing that they might notice the embarrassing stain as well. On warm days, I am virtually barricaded by a swarm of carpenter bees that careen into the glass windows and ravage holes in the outside the building. The kitchen faucet won't stop dripping. Every night the bats come in two from some unknown location, and all I can do is sit and wait complacently for their arrival, knowing there is nothing I can do, but let them fly in circles under the rotating ceiling fan until they expire and fall exhausted to the floor.

Just yesterday the landlord came by to check up on the plumbing and fix any leaks due to an unusually high water bill this month. He's also come to repair any places that the bats might be gaining access into the building, but I told him this wouldn't do. My neighbor, I assured him,

was the cause of all these problems; his sadness has created a series of small nuisances and inconveniences that have made it impossible to live comfortably.

“Can you talk to him?” I pleaded. “Can you get him to cheer up?”

The landlord said he would try speaking with him, but warned me there was probably nothing he could do.

RABENMUTTER

The white candle bends like a hooked finger and the Rabenmutter pours a thin pool of wax on the lid of the Mason jar to keep the candle steady. She affixes the candle to the lid and continues to light the other candles in this manner. It has happened before on similar nights that when lighting all the candles the electricity will come back on, but even so, the Rabenmutter will not blow them out for several hours in case the electricity cuts back off again, as it often does. Behind her, she hears the sound of footsteps, but there is no one there, and so she takes her dinner outside where there is still a few hours' light left. She sits upon the marble benches and cuts into her meat as the dogs weave in and out of her legs. Their hair is still wet from the evening showers.

On top of the roof, the peahen that has been roosting on her balcony now sits silhouetted by the sinking sun and makes a sound of painful hollowing. The dogs leave the woman's feet and sit below the peahen to bark up at her. The patio is covered in wet leaves. Briefly, the sheer curtain moves from the window of her son's bedroom, and the Rabenmutter sees her son's pale face behind the filigreed iron and trellises of climbing plants. She waves a knotted hand up at him and then to the dogs to keep them quiet, shushing them with a slight whistle. Bones click between her teeth.

Before entering the house, she empties her plate into the dog bowls where ants have already begun trailing. The dogs slide their bowls across the patio with their muzzles and stop to hack at the fish bones caught inside their throats. Inside the house, the candles illuminate the

stacked jars on the shelves, dried mushrooms and prawns, tins of smoked haddock, tamarind root, pickled cabbage, and sauces the color of crude oil. Portraits hang along the wall with the grainy quality of newspaper clippings. Yellow receipts are left moldering in drawers. Stacks of paper left in the office are mottled with spores of mold, and there are cabinets she hasn't opened in years.

She leaves the dishes in the sink and knocks on the girl's door, pointing to the dirty dishes in the sink for her to wash. The girl stands hunched, half-asleep, her matted ponytail resting in front of her shoulder, while she begins to scrub a plate with a pad of steel wool. The Rabenmutter prepares a bowl of rice porridge to bring to her son and steadies it on a plate. The girl drops her utensils to help, but the Rabenmutter shoos her away.

While making her way upstairs, a car drives by and its headlights scan the living room, giving the Rabenmutter some light as she ascends the wooden stairs. Outside, the guard rings his bell three times indicating the passing hour. Behind her son's door, she hears the sound of his heavy breathing. She enters his room quietly. The electricity turns back on and the roar of the air-conditioning startles her, causing the bowl to slide along the ceramic plate as she leaves it next to bedside. Her son stirs in his sleep.

He arrived three days ago, late one night and ever since he had taken ill. She stacked two mattresses for him to sleep on and for the past three days he has locked himself away in his room. She was still uncertain of the occasion for his return.

The next morning she finds him at the kitchen table turning the lazy Susan around with his index finger. He has already fixed for himself a ham and butter sandwich and a glass of milk.

"I don't like your maid's cooking much," he says as Rabenmutter sits down next to him.

“And what are all these clothes doing around?” he asks.

“What do you mean?” the Rabenmutter replies.

“I mean the clothes on these racks. Whom do they belong to?”

She doesn't respond and chooses to ignore him in order to curb his streak of meanness.

She pats the top of his hand and he shakes with agitation.

As a child, he suffered from febrile seizures. Whenever he began to convulse the Rabenmutter would reach into his mouth and hold onto his tongue to keep him from swallowing it. Out of love, she risked her fingers, enduring the pain as his teeth drew blood. He was always such a crass, stubborn boy. Yet how needy he was, always hugging his younger brother who tottered around the house on fresh legs.

“How long have the eggs been on the balcony?” he asks.

“Three or four weeks.”

“Then the they must be unfertilized. I should take and hammer and smash them so the peahen will leave.”

“No, don't do that,” the Rabenmutter says.

That afternoon they leave for the country club and eat poolside. Her son is wrapped in a towel, shivering and dripping wet. They don't speak a word to each other during the entire lunch.

The girl sits on the floor of the living room and rests her arms across the ottoman. On the television, she is watching the soap operas. Her broom rests against the door handle and the mop is left dripping the bathroom tub. On the screen, a love scene is acted out between a handsome man and a young woman. The man grabs the woman and kisses her passionately. The girl watches and whispers to herself, her secret longing for the man on the screen. She runs her

fingers along the twisted ends of the Oriental rug. The sound of the peahens disturbs her reverie, and she gets up to change the peahen's water dishes and bring her a bundle of longan fruit. As she leaves the fruit next the four tan speckled eggs, she hears the door open behind her. She says hello, but there is no one there.

The woman pulls into the driveway. The girl leaves the room making sure the door closes behind her.

Her son takes a taxi that night to meet up with his cousin who is celebrating his birthday at a bar down the street. He finds an empty seat near the bartender and orders a drink. His cousin and some of his friends circulate around him. He has not seen his cousin in years. His pursed lips and moon-shaped eyes still look the same. Only his head is a bit bigger, finally growing into his ears. His cousin pats him on the back. They are close in age, but never got along growing up. His cousin always vied for the attention of his two older brothers who treated him more as a brother than himself. His cousin frequently joined his two older brothers in taunting him and getting him to cry outside on patio, which was not very hard to do. So in response, he always turned to his younger brother and hugged him frequently.

His cousin introduces him to the girl whose arm is slipped around his waist. She is an airhostess and leaves every other week for work. When the girl leaves their company, his cousin tells him about different girls he sees while the airhostess is away. He cousin walks away to talk to his friends.

He feigns the pleasure of company.

A boy in sleeveless shirt and enormous back stands next him. The immensity of his size is almost mythological, as if he crawled up from the Underworld. But even with his size, his face is smooth and looks just like a young child.

After several fitful drinks, he takes a taxi back home.

Along the patio he walks in wide zigzags, knocking over the flowers pots lined along the marble benches. A cacophony of sounds surrounds him, and he begins to imitate these noises. His mother stands at the doorway.

“What is it Tim? Why are you making that awful noise?”

“It’s a duck mother, a duck”

“It’s not a duck Tim. Those are toads. Now get inside.”

He follows his mother inside and falls asleep in the recliner chair. He wakes up the next morning in the guest bathroom that smells of mothballs, his body pressed flat against the cool olive-colored tile. Small fly carcasses float atop the toilet water and line the bathroom sink.

MY LITTLE DOG

My little dog comes up to greet me, ringing her head from side to side like a little bell, and I am so pleased to see her. Her nose is so wet, her eyes shine like two black marbles, and the tip of her tail curls like the flourish of an ink pen. When I roam about the house, she follows me at my heels, and when I pause to think of something I meant to do, she sits and looks up at me, waiting for me to reach down and stroke the top of her head. As I read, she lies beside me, resting her muzzle on top of her little paws and tilts her head to the side whenever I ask her a question. There is no limit to the amount of joy she brings me.

This morning, a horrid, emaciated fox was found sniffing around my bushes and azaleas. Its flesh was sunken around its ribs and it appeared to have had a case of the mange, as it had no hair at all except for on the tip of its tail. I soon recognized this fox as one who came stumbling by my backdoor early one winter morning, searching for food, but I gave it nothing. Much like dogs, I've heard that foxes are easily domesticated, and I couldn't have it always lurking about. But how different it looked back then, how much healthier and livelier, and how especially ghastly it looks in contrast with the deep bloom of spring!

Without thinking, definitely without thinking, I left the backdoor ajar, and my little dog, knowing no fear or danger, pelted across the lawn with incessant barks. I could hardly bare to watch as the fox opened wide his jaws and carried my little dog far-off into the depths of the woods.

SUNNY

My mother gave me a stuffed bear that she won from the claw machine at the bowling alley. After a week, the bear got a hole its leg that she said she would sew up, but never did. On rainy days, I would walk along the windowsills with the bear stuffed up my collar, spilling cotton stuffing across the floor. Near the windows, my mother kept a three-foot tall cactus that pricked needles into my stomach whenever I came too close. Most of the time I lay in bed. I didn't have many friends, except my dog Phoenix who lived under my bed. Phoenix was on his last legs, so I never reached under there unless it was to recover something important because Phoenix would growl and snap his teeth at me like a bear trap. My mother said that dogs like to die in private, but Phoenix had been there ever since I could remember, until one morning he was gone, and I could swear he dug a tunnel out of here. I spent an entire afternoon looking for it. My mother occasionally would peek her head into my room and ask me what I was up to and I would tell her nothing. Eventually she would leave to make sure my little sister hadn't tumbled down the stairs again.

During that time I spent searching for Phoenix, my uncle would show for breakfast. One morning, he asked me where Phoenix had gone as he shoveled a forkful of pancakes into mouth and let the maple syrup dribble onto his chin. The way he asked me about Phoenix. The way he asked me made me suspicious, as if he knew where Phoenix was. He smelled my pancakes and said they smelled so good. After his nose had been so close to my food, I lost my appetite.

Without Phoenix, I got used to doing other things like jumping on the bed and poking at the ash in the fireplace with the fire poker. I named my bear Sunny because he had a shirt with a picture of a sunset. I stopped carrying him around my shirt though, but that was okay because I loved that bear. Sunny was coming to the grave with me.

THREE VARIATIONS ON A DOORNAIL

1

Miss Molloy walked out of her house one morning and caught her hair on the doornail just outside the front entrance to her home. Her hair twisted in such a way that she could not free herself from the doornail and could not move her head more than three inches to either side. So she remained there, unable to move, until a barber came by and offered to cut the lock of hair that held her captive. But no, she would have not one lock cut from hair that grew as wild as prairie grass and was the color of wheat just before harvest. So Miss Molloy remained there, while her hair continued to grow and her body withered like a husk set out to dry.

2

That morning, when walking out her front door, Miss Molloy caught her hair on the doornail. She could neither move her head to the left nor to the right nor more than a few inches in front of her. The carpenter came by and offered to pry off the bent doornail, but an old wicked woman had cursed the doornail, so that it ever were removed, Miss Molloy would meet her fate. But before she could protest, the carpenter pried the doornail loose, and Miss Molloy fell down dead, dead as a doornail.

Miss Molloy caught her hair on a doornail, but nobody seemed to care or think much about it. Her predicament didn't seem to matter too much to herself either. For a while her friends came to visit her and fed her tea and biscuits and made sure to wipe away any stray crumb from her face. These meetings became less frequent and ceased altogether. Days turned into weeks and weeks into months and still she remained stuck to the doornail. Her hair grew some, allowing her some movement, but for the most part, she enjoyed her spot on the front porch, watching the seasons pass and the children playing outdoors.

MYSTERY SODA

Long ago lost in the back corridors of MacDougal's Grocers, left among the dust and accumulated cobwebs from several generations, a soda machine. If you place your ear to the outside unit, you can still hear the soft drone of the cooling fan, and you can trace the wire back along the wall where it is plugged into a single electrical socket. Down the list of options, you find your basic, generic choices, lemon-lime, orange, grape, root beer, and cola, but at the bottom of the list one choice stands out from the others, a button hand-scrawled in a felt tip pen that reads "Mystery Soda."

Many have conjectured that Mystery Soda is a random selecting of one of the choices above. Others says that it is a soda not included in this list of options, but perhaps something better, a black cherry cola, a cream soda, a ginger beer. Or perhaps it is something not wanted at all, for instance, a juice cocktail or bitter red fizzy drink. But the hypothesis best preferred, is that Mystery Soda is something else entirely, something in this world that no one else has ever tried, a different taste altogether, a titillating concoction of flavors that fills its indulger with enlightenment and leaves one's tongue the colors of an exotic bird's plumage.

And so it is said that those who choose Mystery Soda must be prepared threefold: to be given something they do not prefer (to be given lemon-lime when they wanted orange), to receive either extreme of something most desired or desired not at all, and ultimately, to be let in on one of the universe's hidden secrets.

No one has discovered the mysteries behind Mystery Soda because those who find themselves in these back corridors and have stumbled upon this very vending machine realize they lack the adequate change and must turn around and go back from where they came, and if they go out searching once again with the adequate change in pocket, they will soon find themselves lost among the hallway's endless twists and turns, confounded by the soda machine's disappearance.

THE PORCELAIN HAND

Inexplicably, during the course of the night, at a late hour rife with black magic and the mysterious awakenings of inanimate things, a hand reached under Harold's bed sheets and gripping him forcefully, caused Harold to fall into one of those night seizures he was so used to having. Thereafter, the hand proceeded to caress and stroke him longingly, to brush the hair away from his forehead as Harold fell asleep.

The next morning, while brushing his teeth, Harold noticed a white porcelain hand next to the edge of his bathroom sink. In its hand, it held out a bar of jade-colored soap. Nothing could explain why his mother left it there or why she would purchase such a hideous thing, but the hand stood there with an air of smug intimacy, goading him into further illicit meetings.

MY MOTHER, IN MINIATURE

After my sister's death from a fatal illness that cost her the simple joys of childhood, my mother inhabited her grief in a forgotten snow globe, tucked away on the back shelf in the gloomy unlit hallway leading to my parents' bedroom. She found it one afternoon while dusting and brought it down, restoring it to it to new life, and placed it on the coffee table as a centerpiece for her to admire. It was amazing what value an object could gain after many years of being forgotten, after being tidied and polished.

My mother began to study the globe day and night. Eventually, she kept it next to her bedside where she could stare into the plasticized scene of a New England coastline as she fell asleep. I found it strange she could find solace in such dreary and desolate a place.

It soon began that my mother neglected her real life and duties as wife and mother and imagined a life purely inside the globe. So often was her attention cast inside that glass ball, that one day she shrunk herself inside it. It wasn't difficult to find her. When my father and I found the house empty late one afternoon, we both knew where to look. There she was wearing yellow rain slicker, a miniscule proportion of her original size, rigging one of the boat's canvas sails. She looked busy at work, busy, but happy.

My father and I took to watching her in our spare time, and my father grew increasingly jealous of mother's life inside the globe, grew jealous of her contentment and even those moments when my mother, overcome with sadness, would hold onto her knees and stare off into the choppy water. Then one day my father managed to shrink himself into the globe as well, and

their life was like it was before: my mother never slept with my father when he wasn't furniture-making, and my father could never get on with his furniture-making when my mother would never sleep with him.

I made sure to keep the globe under my desk lamp so the sun would always shine on them day and night.

THE BAKERS

For Cristiana Baik

They're making something spongiform, like something built up from the sand, built up from the sand at the bottom of the sea, and when placed in the oven, will take form, will gain edifice and detail, will be topped with a flag. But in the meantime, the bakers are turning the dough, turning dough that is so unmanageable, it spreads across the metal table with nothing to conform to, nothing like their skin underneath their white uniforms that maneuvers around the body, encases their body to prevent their insides from emptying out of themselves and onto the parquet floor. So unmanageable is the spreading of the dough that one must unsheathe a knife to cut off a piece to work with and knead one's palms and fingers into, dust off with some flour to be made more manageable.

If everything were made this easy, we might think of cutting off our own legs and hands when they ache too much and cause us pain, hanging them on a hook for later use. We might think of cutting down the hours into minutes and the minutes into seconds until time slows down into eternity.

Well through the night the baker's work kneading the dough, and when they return home, they take off their shirts and see the day's imprints.

THE DEAD SAILOR BY THE SEA

When I woke that morning my shoes were not under my bed where I usually kept them, so I began to believe I hid them unconsciously for respite, dragged as I was from my bed every morning and sent on my way to work. My mother, seeing me without my shoes, asked me where they had gone and when I told her I could not find them, she said a pair of shoes does not just disappear and that we must hurry and find them before I was late for work.

My mother searched the obvious hiding places until exhausted of all options she began to tug at the fridge from against the wall. She grabbed it like a large bear and after several forceful tugs, the fridge gave way, there were my shoes and still tidy and polished and surprisingly, unharmed. My mother wrung her hands and laughed with delight until tears formed in the corner of her eyes. She wiped them away and replaced the loose strands of gray hair that had fallen from her bun.

“Now, how do you suppose they got back there?” she asked, but I could not answer because even if I happened to hide them unconsciously, I would never have thought of such a clever hiding spot as behind the fridge. My eldest sister, Moira, poked her head outside her room and asked what was all the commotion.

“Tricia lost her shoes,” my mother said “and here we have unearthed them right behind the fridge. It took a great deal of effort. Yes it did. I can’t imagine trying to move that fridge was when I was your girls’ age. My arms were as skinny as pipe cleaners. I think with the onset of age comes also an onset of masculinity. Yes, I think so,” she said.

“Mother, if you couldn’t have found the shoes, you could have sent me,” said Moira. “I have a pair of new shoes that haven’t been used in months.”

“Nonsense,” said my mother, “You have two legs on you like a calf. And besides you have to look after Wilma.”

So I put on my shoes, and my mother ushered me out the door. The sky was gray and overcast and I walked with slow steps to the home where I worked as a caretaker for a young boy named Felix Bowles. I arrived a few minutes late and knocked on the door as lightly as the wind to seem nonchalant and unassuming by the fact that I was late, but not even the smallest rapping could have been left unnoticed as the house inside was silent.

The mother greeted me coldly as she opened the door. She had a day’s worth of errands to run and could not, as she told me, be left waiting for my arrival, to endure the empty vacuum that existed between her and her son and filled the room like a giant red balloon. I told her that sun for forested for today in order mollify her, but she had no time to listen and went off in the direction her errands were to be done.

When I greeted the boy he was, he stared at me with his dull, empty eyes, and we left shortly for the sea as we did every morning, where we would collect dried seaweed left of rocks and make out the faces in the cliff formations. The boy led me by the hand as we scrambled along the rocks, the boy stopping every now and then to crouch down low and peer underneath to rocks, to see if there was anything hidden there: a stagnant pool of with sea spiders, weather beaten canvas, a fisherman’s rusty hook. Lately, I had become impatient of the boy’s whims. I was young and virginal, but I had begun to feel as if I were growing ancient and that my bones would soon calcify into the cliffs.

As the boy and I approached the shore, we found a man sunning himself on large border. His shirt was splayed open, and his hair was wet from a morning swim that boy and I must have been too late to encounter, but as I came closer I realized by his uniform that he was a young, drowned sailor who washed up on shore. He was not yet bloated and his skin still retained some color. The boy ran out into the water chasing a tangle of seaweed that floated out into the water like a wire-haired dog, and I sat dreaming of the man.

When I arrived home that evening, I let the door slam behind me. My father was already in his robe for the night and my mother was at her desk catching up on correspondences. I warmed myself by the fire and wrung the rain from my hair. My dinner was left warming in the oven, and I took my plate to my room. In the hallway, I stopped to listen to the sounds behind my sisters' door. My sisters always moving so little, always breathing into their own hands. I continued onto my room and behind me, heard their door latch open. My sister Wilma crept from her room and down the hallway to her budgies' gilded cage lined with mirrors and shrouded with silk. She unlatched the door and eased the budgie from its cage, holding it to her breast while stroking its iridescent feathers. She caressed its pivoting head, and when she saw me standing at the end of the hall, she beckoned me to quiet.

I followed her back into her room and where I sat next to her on the bed. Moira my eldest sister was arranging the books on her shelves. Her hair looked almost silver from the moonlight that glowed through the window.

“Wilma,” I said and patted the top of her hand. “Do you remember when we were young and our uncle would give a coin every time he cursed?”

She laughed out loud and then held her mouth to muffle her laughter, then moistened her bottom lip with her tongue. She lowered her chin and looked back at me, her mind gone elsewhere.

“Wilma, do you remember that?” I asked. “How long has it been since you’ve been out of the house?”

“Almost two months,” she replied.

“Well, why doesn’t Moira take you out for a nice walk tomorrow?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “Wouldn’t you take me for a walk Moira?”

“I would,” Moira said “but she can hardly walk as it is. She took a great tumble last night trying to get a glass of water. I found her the next morning on the floor, and she had forgotten why she had gotten up.”

“Yes, I was getting a glass of water. I was thirsty and I wanted to get a drink,” said Wilma and laughed a pitch too loud. She wiped the spittle from her lip. Her face looked long and gaunt.

“Today, I met a man,” I told my sisters. “A very handsome man down by the sea who promised to marry me and take me away.”

“You met no such man,” said Moira, “You are only fibbing.”

“I did so,” I replied.

“Do you think you could leave with a man as you might leave with a man on a horse?” asked Wilma.

“Yes, I think I could,” I said.

“Oh don’t do that,” Wilma said. “I didn’t mean that . . . “

The next morning my mother came knocking on my door. The pallor of her face was stricken white. “Tricia, there’s a man here for you. He must be a foreigner, for he hasn’t said a single word. He’s very polite though, very polite. Always stands up when I exit the room.”

I gathered with my family in the living room and expressed my intentions to leave with the dead sailor. My mother fled to kitchen and I followed her. I held her by the shoulders as she wept over the counter, spreading jam on a piece of toast, her tears falling like strawberry seeds from her cheeks.

“Aren’t you even sad, Tricia?” she asked over her sobs.

“Yes mother,” I said. “It’s like crying without the tears.”

She turned around to grab my face and kissed my forehead and saw that my attention was diverted to the large amount of jam she had spread across the toast. She quickly composed herself and wiped the tears from her face.

“I like jam,” she said. “Now please go.”

The dead sailor and I left and mounted his horse. My father never shed a tear at my departure. Wilma laughed as she watched us leave, filling the house with unceasing roars. My mother wound like an errant alarm clock burst into her room and fell weeping into her feather pillow.

THE PLEASURE PIER OF AMUSEMENTS & CURIOS

1

That summer our town's benefactor funded the building of a pier for the purposes of leisure and recreation. Stretching 1400 feet into sea, the pier opened up to our small provincial town, new amusements and spectacles that filled one's idle time otherwise spent in boredom. On mist-filled mornings, the pier spread across the horizon, a fata morgana, confusing and blurring our eyes' line of vision, so that the town woke thinking that our eyes had deceived us. Yes, the pier was really there. No, it was not some magician's clever illusion or some dreamlike void blanketed by clouds. Our eyes had not deceived us. It was only that the pier's magnificence so far exceeded our expectations, so contrasted with our daily life, that one failed to believe in its actuality. Then on those mist-filled mornings, as the haze would lift imperceptibly into the azure dome of the sky and the pier's impressive architecture began to be revealed, one would feel an anxious stirring at the thought of partaking in many of the entertainments proffered by pier's seaward-end pavilion.

The pavilion, ostentatiously designed in the oriental style, contained numerous forms of entertainment: a stage for touring musical acts and theater performances, coin-operated machines, games of chance and traveling fairground exhibitions. Families dressed for the occasion would go see Smithwick's "Follies," Agatha's "Modern Follies," Samantha Bernadette's "Evening Follies," David's Dastardly Drolleries, The Smith Trio, and Buster and his Magical Flute. There was a pantomime about a lady's excursion to the sea, who was

humorously unaware of her butler's improprieties and practical jokes made at the her expense; a comic opera entitled *Madam Coco's Pinafores* among many others.

Games and coin-operated machines lit up the pavilion's semi-dark interior with their fanatical blinking lights and entangled one for hours in their complex mechanisms, their whistles and bells and promising enticements.

Temporary exhibits displayed in the pavilion's various wings, intended to shock and awe the spectator with mysteries of the unknown, rarities of nature and insight into barbaric cultures that at one time existed beyond the bounds of human thought and imagination.

One felt as if in a daze, intoxicated and sugar-induced by dizzying spectacles and the manipulation of passive amusements. One wore on their face a permanent expression of awe and wonder. The concept of leisure and entertainment was being introduced to us for the time. New legislation enforced paid holidays and regulated the standard hour workday so that whole gaps of time were opened up just waiting to be filled. One wanted to fill these gaps with the best time, time sifted through a great colander, so that mundane time, idle time, time spent with nothing to do, was rejected and discarded in favor of time purified and refined that glistened in heaps and spoonfuls to flavor our bland, sodden tea and sweeten the day's possibilities.

There was always something to do, and if one walked about town lachrymose, laden with ennui and ready to throw oneself in front of any noblemen's carriage and face the onslaught of hooves and wheels, the horrifying death of trampling underfoot, then one simply had to turn one's eyes to the sea, to that artificial promontory reaching into the midst of the water. There, one would find oneself as if in a dream, a collective dream, which was in fact only an investment in the times, an overzealous ambition, on part of our town's benefactor, to enter into the architectural realm of large-scale iron construction.

This was the pier-building era, an era that saw to the popularity of the seaside holiday, and seaside towns eager to invest in the lucrative tourism industry, built piers to attract the pleasure seeking population. These piers, formally named pleasure piers, were erected as if seemingly overnight; it was as if the country was gripped by a seaside mania; every town with the means to build one did so, each claiming that their pier surpassed the others in terms of its length, architecture, and views out into sea.

But before we continue, we must first initiate ourselves into this era and delve into the historical archives of this time, bringing before us like cards dealt from a pack, colored lithographs in historically accurate representations of the evolution of the pleasure pier and arranged them in front of us in a way a peacock might spread his impressive plumage.

It was an era that went through several different phases and successions, all beginning with the concept of the seaside watering place.

Qualified experts in the field of medicine expounded the virtues of the sea, claiming that the sea possessed certain emollient qualities and curative effects; just taking a dip in the sea's water or drinking its contents was said to ease all kinds of bodily ailments. These coastal resorts, as they were called, rivaled the fashionable spas of Bath, Harrogate and Tunbridge Wells, and the leisured and wealthy holidaymaker, those claiming real or make-believe illnesses, would make the long, difficult journey by stagecoach or sailing passenger vessel and arrive to these watering spots to bathe in the medicinal waters, stroll the promenade, breathe the sea's fresh air and look off into nothingness, into the sea's empty expanse (a novelty when considering that in the city, one's gaze was often partitioned by the adjoining walls of the room, obstructed by the street and adjacent buildings or the skyscrapers forming the urban cityscape). The piers built

during the early stage of the pier-building era were used as landing stages to greet the arriving passenger vessel and allow for a civilized mode of disembarkation.

Then came the advances of the iron rail, which opened access to the sea and provided the population with a convenient mode of mass transportation. Released from the shackles of the workplace and domestic duties, the masses arrived in throngs and hordes to spend a weekend by the sea and use their emancipated time that overflowed and spilled from their pockets like jingling silver coins. Not content to partake in the past-times of the leisured and wealthy holidaymaker, they arrived demanding ever-new forms of amusements, new ways of escaping from the drudgeries and vicissitudes of everyday life, and the piers catered to these demands: extended the pier's length, added platforms, extensions, built atop the pier so that the pier was in itself an architectural seaside attraction, as well as included provisions for refreshment bars and pavilions ensuring the visitor with hours of aimless, stupefying entertainment.

Iron had its further uses too in replacing those piers previously built with timber that were susceptible to wave erosion and attack by the shipworm *teredo navalis*, a small burrowing creature that destroyed the pier's structural integrity. The replacement of timber with screw piles and iron castings; wrought iron columns, struts, and lattice girders, enforced the pier's overall rigidity and eased people's fears over a pier's possible collapse that might leave one stranded and adrift into sea.

So used was our town to feeling our way along the old walls of the town, walking up and down the high street far away from the contours of the sea, that we turned our eyes from the water and all its potentialities.

The erection of our town's pleasure pier opened a friendly gateway to the sea, displacing all those notions and misconceptions of the sea as a pitiless place belonging to the docking of

ships and the unloading of goods; to seafarers and fishermen who grew their beards to their waists and fell into battle with the sea almost every night, rolling and tumbling along her swells, only to be spit up on shore and made to return to their nightly abodes, the local taverns, where by the glow of red candles set in wine bottles, they would tell the stories about their midnight rendezvous, their mad love affair with the sea, while the candles burned down to their stumps and the wine bottles dripped with accumulated wax.

Our benefactor, our compass of the times, of progress, and technical innovation, the man who possessed the wherewithal to bestow on our town the gift of this magnificent structure, thus entered us into this era replete with metropolitan splendor and an aspect of the fantastical and surreal.

And so now, dear reader, that you have allowed me, although I do take liberty in saying, this small detour in time, we can now continue onto the crux of the story. Although it has nothing to do with the matter at hand, it was necessary and instructive for me to do so in order to lead up to the mystery behind our town's pleasure pier and what led to its downfall.

It is enough for some of us to scream out "That's it!" for our better judgment to get the better of us and cause us to turn back around or to be blinded by the phantasmagoria that one is presented with while on the pleasure pier and side-track us in pursuit of our goal. But this is where we must not falter. It is in our interest to continue.

2

The opening of the pier marked an important moment in our town's history, written in gold leaf in our history books and celebrated with a grand and pompous ceremony. Crowds formed at the neck of the pier. Men, women and children brushed past each other with a mutual sense of

excitement and camaraderie. Women lavishly adorned in shifts and voluminous dresses, moved through the crowds, simultaneously rubbing elbows with the gentlemen next to them. Men in bowler hats and swallowtail coats bowed and donned their hats to every passing lady shaded underneath a parasol. The ladies would return their obsequious greetings with a flattering smile. People scrambled to take their turn to look in through the camera obscura. Pierrots performed on the pier's platform. A brass band set up on the bandstand began playing at jubilant tune. Everyone arrived in a joyous mood.

From afar, the benefactor waved to the forming crowds and everyone yelled "Hurrah!" over the chorus of music. From his profile, he looked regal in his top hat and gold pince-nez that rested atop his prominent nose.

An avid traveler and collector of rare and unusual items gathered from his travels to far-off, exotic locales, he was rarely seen except on certain special occasions. One could see him mincing about town, would up like an automaton, making public appearances in taverns and inns, holding conversations with the patrons, smiling, shaking people's hands, making congratulatory remarks referring to people, incidences, or events, in which the person whom he was speaking to would have no clue or recollection of.

Caught within his captivating, irregular presence, one would find oneself turned into moldable, mushy-like substance, baring one's teeth uncontrollably, raising one's finger in rebuttal or making concessions, refusals and renunciations over nothing at all. Some fervent energy would rise deep from within one's bowels, some companionable emotion that otherwise did not exist in one's drawn-out sympathetic system, and if a person found himself equal to the situation and would say something in earnest, then the benefactor would turn away as if distracted—or as if he was hard of hearing and did not catch what the other was saying—and

then with some sudden brusque impulse, would walk away and approach another unsuspecting individual blowing over spoonful of soup or leafing through the pages of the weekly.

Like the objects in his vast collection, we all became part of his ardent interest to be taken out of our original contexts, placed on a shelf and made void of all usefulness.

After the ceremony, a banquet was held. The only unfortunate incident to have occurred on the day was when Professor Wells, a respected scholar, gave a celebratory toast and performed an unexpected stunt by diving off the pier. Due to low tide, he suffered a minor contusion to his shoulder, but luckily he did not injure himself further. His wife, draped in marten furs, who missed everything because she was engaged in conversation with the stranger next to her, paled when she heard the news and revealed that her husband was unable to swim.

While my mother and I joined in the festivities of that day, my father remained in bed. He treated all mention of the pier with scorn. Flyers announcing the pier's opening and that floated in through our open windows, he tore up with rage and defiance. My father possessed a loathing for the benefactor. He refused to be part of any of his schemes. His hatred was irascible. The benefactor was his sworn archenemy and vowed that one day he would enact his revenge.

My father undeclared rivalry with the town's benefactor began after a shipload of bananas that threatened my father's trade in fruit. The benefactor had them sent in from the tropics. It was the first time anyone had seen a banana. Bundles of them were thrown overboard, and children caught them in their grubby hands, biting straight into the peel, knowing no other way to eat this strange, miraculous fruit. Everyone forgot about the ripe juicy plums and winterberries, the strawberries, gooseberries, and black currents, tart and sour tasting. No one much cared for the apples stacked lifelessly in their crates.

But my father like an addict who represses ones' vices and compulsions, soon succumbed to the temptations and the hypnotic sway of the pleasure pier. His defenses had fallen away. The complicated machinery of his resistance had exhausted itself. He became like many others, prey to the intoxication and pleasurable stupor the pier's amusements.

At one point, my father didn't return home for many days on end and my mother sent me out to go look for him. I found myself in front of the octagonal kiosk with wide overhanging eaves and a red flag waving on top and paid for my ticket from the short, squat woman working behind the booth. Through the turnstile and down the wooden-planked decking, I walked past the spires and minarets that periodically lined the pier. The seagulls hovered above as if dropped by an invisible string and hung there immobile, finding no other air current in which to pass. Walking down the pier's linear trajectory, felt as if I were ascending into some vertiginous space, a clock tower's raftered garret or leaning out a top story window, and I felt the same effects caused by vertigo: the dizzying headaches, the swirling stomach, the quacking knees, the need to clutch onto the pier's ornamental railings for support.

But I recovered myself and continued on and soon before me was the domed pavilion, ostentatiously designed in the oriental style and stacked just like a giant wedding cake. Painted snow-white, the finer details, the turrets, the trellised balcony, the balustrades with intricate ironwork scrolls and cartouches could be seen subtle undertones and shadings. Eight stone lions sat atop the structure, two on each corner. A coat of arms resting underneath each of their forepaws gave the pier an air of heraldry and dignity. They looked down disinterestedly on the comings and goings of passersby.

I walk in through the pavilion's entrance and down the red-carpeted stairs that opened up into the vast foyer lit by crystal chandeliers. Not far from the entrance, grouped around the table

with other men, was my father watching a spinning wheel. These men were the other market traders who set up stalls on weekends and calling out the prices of cauliflower and potatoes with their sharp voices that had the ability to cut through the crowded throngs of the marketplace. Their loud voices added so much character to the purchasing of produce on those weekends. They all stood in tense anticipation watching the progress of an ivory ball around the spinning wheel and waiting to see what red or black square the ball would fall into. My father turned and saw me standing there at a distance. He gave me a brief compulsory look of recognition, almost disconcerting and culpable, and turned back to the spinning wheel, holding on to his meager winnings and blinded by fate's caprice's and cruel treacheries.

Before I could reach him, I saw from the corner of my eye the stereoscope and became distracted. Shrouded in a dark corner, that shiny wooden box with a peephole held so much in store for the eyes. Rarely, I had the chance look into this lacquered box, as my mother would always pull me away from the stereoscope, and pull me away forever from my eager curiosity and importuning eyes. But now I was alone and had change in my pocket, and could not resist the temptation to look in through its forbidden aperture.

I walked to the machine and put in my coin. There through the peephole was a story told in three-dimensional cards. Each push of the lever advanced to the next scene of the story.

Before me was a modest country home in whose window, three women were playing a game of dress up. There was one woman in a black bodice, another in a dress with a ruffle at the hem and gloves that reached to her elbows, and another, half nude, reclined on the couch, her exposed breast just obscured behind the mullioned window. The room is crowded with their presence, with the abundance of plants, heavy furniture and voluminous garments, and it would

seem these women have enticed me here, their shutters unlatched, their curtains drawn to the side.

As I advanced to the next card, the woman in the black bodice is stepping into a pair of men's trousers while the woman in the dress with the ruffle at the hem adjusts a lady's hat on her head and tilts it at a subtle angle. The nude woman, draped along the couch, is admiring her nails, tucked away in her own amusement.

Now the woman in the black bodice is buttoning with great care, a white collared shirt while the nude woman slides up to her thigh, a silk stocking as fine and sheer as Spanish moss. The woman in the dress with the ruffle at the hem assists the woman in the black bodice with the tying of her necktie and the placement of a false mustache on her upper lip.

A bottle of champagne has been uncorked and overflows onto the floor before being poured into three glasses. The nude woman mimes her pleasure and delight.

The woman now in the likeness of a man and the woman in the dress with the ruffle at the hem begin to dance. Together they glide and spin across the room. Mirrors are hung haphazardly on the wall behind them. So as they dance, their image is duplicated from every angle and you can see every expression, to see if their expressions betray their enjoyment and fancy. Only the nude woman looks off disinterestedly into a far corner of the room where my partial view obstructs you from where she is gazing.

I would feel almost ill at ease peering into the privacy of these ladies' parlor room, if it wasn't for their knowing smiles over their presence of voyeur and the comfort in which they move about the room in their immodesty.

When the show is over and the light blinks off, I looked up see that my father has eluded me. He is no longer at the gambling table with the other men. Where could he have gone?

I set out to search for him once again and walk under the glass arcades and past the potted plants and palms that spread their fronds underneath the bright skylights.

I turned into a room in which I discovered to the benefactor's collection. Through the glass display were hooks, knives, saws, forceps, dentists' pliers, tribal masks, shrunken heads, talismans, amulets, Japanese sex aides, and anti-onanism rings. There were prosthetic limbs, bleeding bowls, false teeth, and a giant horn in the shape of a giant lily used for the hearing impaired. Many of these items held special historical interest—lock of King George the III's hair, which contained traces of arsenic, and Napoleon's toothbrush—but for the most part they seemed to be acquired based on personal appeal with no specified pattern or scheme; one could also not forget the thousands of glass jar that were randomly stacked along the entire expanse of the wall.

Then after leaving the benefactor's collection, I turned into an exhibition room filled with wax models. The room was crowded with people looking with awe at the dreadful effects of imprudence and diseases of promiscuity. There were the faces displaying signs of syphilis, faces with syphilitic rash, decaying noses and cheeks. There was the small face of a child with the characteristic teeth, the small, notched incisors, of a child with congenital syphilis. Doctors donated them to educate the public on the manifold benefits of hygiene and advances made in they way medicine. The anti-quackery campaigns deemed them too obscene for the museums and their place was in the fairground.

I looked with wonder at the dissectible Venus whose stomach could be removed revealing a tiny embryo, and the other anatomical models showing the various stages of the human fetus. I stared aghast at the arm riddled with small pox and the face of a leper. They were rendered with such lifelikeness that it look as if they have come from the cadavers themselves.

You would look almost expect them to come alive, to flutter open their eyelids and open their mouths to babble on about their pain. The man who created these wax figures must have had a touch of genius in art of the replication of the human anatomy. He must have hid the secret to his art by working behind twenty locked doors with ten locks each and plugged all apertures with putty and plastered every window with newspaper and worked underneath a white sheet with only the glow of a candle to guide his divine hand.

The people have cleared out of the room and only one man had remained. His head was hidden behind a velvet curtain. His jacket was the same material as my father's. I touch his arm and I was shocked to find that this man was not my father. He was a ghastly man with a terrifying growth on his nose. He left the room muttering to himself. Behind the curtain there were whole rows of genitalia with open sores and chancres.

I then go into the game room. My father is there in front a bagatelle, surrounded by the weight machines, the animatronic marionettes, the mechanical fortune-tellers, and the electric shocker. Over and over he pulls the spring loaded plunger, his face contorting in grimaces and pain and he watches the metal ball's parabolic path, tenses as the ball bounces off the obstructing pin and agonizing pulls to the plunger again, desperately trying to get the metal ball into one of the holes.

These were how the days went by on the pier, its effects seeping over into our everyday lives. The pier attracted so much tourism that people swelled with inward sense of importance and pride. It was all very well for these tourists to come filling up our boarding houses and occupying the tables of our Sunday eating establishments, only to leave within a matter of days.

For them the sea was a temporary arrangement, a feature or facet of their lives that they could leave behind with a quick parting. Leisure, to them, amounted to short weekends and

holidays. Our town on the other hand was, was lost forever and given over into another sphere entirely.

Gestures became more animated. Conversations soared to unascertainable heights, attempting to pierce the inner-fabric of everything. People would try to instill in their listener, a certain amount shock-value, where the listener would listen with a steady gaze as if following the harrowing tale of a ghost story, enraptured yet frightened, intrigued yet full of apprehension. Time, like a prism, reflected all the rainbow's colors and felt compact and full, without excess or slack. Everything felt temporary and brief. Everything glided along an invisible skein.

Those days marched on with firm resolve, without apprehension, never-minding the provocations, the furtive whisperings that a new age was soon to replace the old. Then a series of catastrophes happened: the collision of *The Princess Victoria* after a terrible storm and the fire that damaged the pavilion and part of the pier that made it too costly to repair. The catastrophes heralded an end to a series of unimpeachable days, revealing their exploitations. The age of the pleasure pier seemed hopeless, as if belonging to a generations of peasant laborers.

Our mechanism broke down. Those amusements could only amuse us for so long before they failed to be amusing. The pier now looked like ghastly, thousand-legged creature, creeping its way into the murky waters. There it waded, dejected and forlorn, driven despairingly by the distrust and skepticism of the ages. Its girders were draped with seaweed and flotsam, its supports mottled with slippery barnacles. It looked as if it had been there for years, heaving under the constant battering of waves. Yet who could fault it from transmogrifying itself?

The opening of the pleasure pier marked an important occasion written in our history books, written in gold leaf, and placed between the moldering books of our library. And this is where our story leaves us. We depart from this slow buildup right at this shift of time. The

benefactor, late one night, left on a clandestine boat that waited for him in the middle of the water. The rower was shrouded by a cloak and did not say a word.