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Mythology Redefined: A Creative Thesis

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Mythology Redefined: A Creative Thesis

By Tracy Carlin

A departmental senior thesis submitted to the Department of English at Trinity University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with departmental honors.

DATE April 20th, 2010

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Introduction: A Definition

“Myth” is a broad term, utilized in modern English for a multitude of different stories from the religion of our ancestors to the modern epics that depend on an imagined world. Because the term is thrown around so often, with both established and new fantasies, it becomes difficult to attach a strict definition to the term without missing some of the newer uses of the word.

Consider the Oxford English Dictionary. This dictionary defines a myth as “a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.” I find the dictionary definition incomplete for my own emotional experiences with mythology. As a child, these myths—Norse, Celtic, and above all Greek and Roman—engrossed me. I collected books on the Greek versions, reading the stories over and over. I loved the fantastical stories, the struggles between good and evil, and especially images of strong, uncompromising goddesses. Athena was a personal hero. As I grew older, the “age-appropriate” anthologies were replaced with more morally ambiguous tales, and then after that the original texts in all their gruesome glory. Yet even as the myths I thought I knew as a child took on a more dangerous edge, with stories like Zeus and Europa going from mere love stories and explanation into adultery, I did not lose my abiding interest. In fact, I found myself seeing myths everywhere. The more I looked, the more cynical I became. Not about myths, but about this definition.

It is with this thesis that I attempt to explore the idea of the modern myth and its implications. Does the story need to be a “traditional” story to be a myth, and what does that mean? Or is it this idea of “justifying” the unexplainable that is more important? Or is the magic that charmed me as a child that takes precedence? Using creative writing, both prose and poetry,

I hope to create my own definition of the modern myth, and thus deepen my own understanding of why myths, from monsters to epic quests, and all the stories in between, continue to excite me.

First, a personal example. Around the same time I was transitioning into my teenage years, my family became avid fans of the Boston Red Sox. Every summer we would make our annual trek to a ball park that had stood before my grandparents were ever born, to pour our emotions and energy into cheering. Personally, this ritual had very little to do with the game. I had obstructed view seats directly behind a pole, and would tend to bring a book to read once craning my head around the metal scaffolding became too tiresome. However, I was charmed by this sensation that, every time we went to see these young, talented men, ever hungry for a championship, I was seeing something rare and slightly supernatural—the constant meddling of a curse at work. “The Curse of the Bambino,” Babe Ruth’s final gift to the team that traded him was in full effect, and would be until the summer I left New England for Texas. No matter your religion, the idea that the team had brought some type of mystical judgment upon itself coursed through people’s minds. More than that, some reveled in it; as miserable as the devoted followers were, there was certain comfort in the fact that the team would be special even in its spectacular failures. The story was “justification,” as the OED puts it, for the yearly collapse the team fell into. When the “curse” was proven wrong, the celebrations were raucous, but the loss of this special characteristic (admittedly, one shared with two other teams from Chicago, one of which still has its “curse” hanging over it) became more problematic, years after the fact and another championship both for the Sox and their longtime rivals. The need for this justification for decades of failure transformed into a spectacular, ridiculous, and yet oddly plausible story of Babe Ruth’s voodoo magic. What is this story then if not a modern myth? It’s at least worth a poem.

Re-Definition

While keeping the Oxford English Dictionary's definition in mind, I immediately found my works on myth separating into three distinct "readings" or reinterpretations of what myth is about. The first is also most simple, if anything about myth can be considered simple: appropriation. Partially inspired by a class on Antiquity and Modernity taught at Trinity, these works deliberately take an established myth and twist it in order to create a new reading, and perhaps a new moral, one most likely to take on the ideological beliefs of the author rather than the Greeks and Romans that created these stories. My story on "Ganymede" probably is most clearly molded in this way, with the kidnapped protagonist taking on a personality and viewpoint that has little to do with traditional Greek views of pederasty. These works are characterized by a close adherence to established mythological plot and characterization, though twists and anachronisms exist. The story "Mourning Athena" is probably the one that deviates farthest from its mythological inspiration, as the location has moved to an island off the coast of the United States and the main characters' names are changed to better fit its modern setting. However, some of the metaphorical detail as well as the story's title mean to inform the reader of its direct inspiration, the myth of Zeus, Athena, and her mother Metis.

The second type of piece moves away from direct inspiration and instead uses the expectations of "myth" rather than its plots in order to generate prose and poetry. These works are based on structural analogies, with existing mythology slowly separating from the plotline. I try to investigate the mythological implications of modern stories (such as in the poem "To the Red Sox on the Anniversary of their 2004 Championship"), personal experience (the collection of short form works known as "Odyssey"), and even the stories we depend on for day-to-day living, such as commonly accepted scientific theory and the rules of English language (the poem

“Shards”). The dictionary definition of mythology is discarded at this point—I believe that myths do not necessarily need to be untrue to influence our daily lives and understanding of the universe. We cannot see an atom and it may not necessarily adhere to its theoretical depiction, yet to understand how our world forms we use the classic image of the atom to explain things.

The third and final type of piece in this thesis takes the most creative liberties with the textbook mythological definition. Within this section, new myths are created, keeping in mind the previous two sections of deliberate appropriation and redefinition. Here the myths may be fantastical stories, or they may not. “The Red Saxophone” has similarities to mythic talismans, like the Sword of Perseus, but the saxophone does not necessarily need to be magic to take on importance in the protagonists’ lives. “Elementals” uses the four elements as inspiration for four new stories, one of which is based on actual events (the fiery burning of St. Pierre). “Osmosis” uses poetic form to create another whimsical narrative, one which ties into real world events and places it in the realm of possibility, similar to my modern retelling of a Greek myth in “Mourning Athena.” In this section I reinforce my thesis, that all stories can be myths. As long as the story touches on the unexplained, and leads the reader to see it as possible, no matter how uncanny, it becomes a myth for a reader. I would argue that the stories that resonate most strongly, whether obvious fantasy as in *Harry Potter*, or plausible fiction as in *The DaVinci Code*, will be mythologies that will inform our generation, as well as future readers.

Sources

Two main types of resources inform these selections. First, I used classical sources, primarily in the “appropriation” section of the thesis, and emulated authors who inspired me either with their own appropriations or structures. In the first case, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was a constant guide. Before writing works such as “Ganymede” and “Aubade, Or Elegy to Phaeton” I

would look up Ovid's version in order to get what I considered to be an authoritative Roman version. Ovid's work focuses on the elements of change or transfiguration within Greek and Roman mythology; thus his own theme influenced some of my work, particularly in the appropriation section but elsewhere in the thesis as well. Change can be terrifying, even more so when you don't know the scientific principles behind it; myths can either allegorically or literally attempt to explain why changes must occur, whether it's from a boy to a man as in "Ganymede" or the creation of the Sahara desert as referred to in the "Aubade." Other classical resources include Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer. In the case of "Alpha & Omega," I used the Genesis chapter from the King James Bible.

My personal inspirations are far more difficult to catalogue. As an author, I consider every work one reads to influence one's writing in some way, whether through theme, structure or simple mechanics. An accurate and complete list of those whose writing has inspired me would be too long and inevitably incomplete. I can only tell you the authors whose writings particularly resonated with me enough to deliberately take their work into account. Within my short fiction I discern Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Anne Carson, Sei Shonagon (the "Odyssey" series starts with a paragraph that attempts to capture her particular writing style, with its emphasis on natural images and balance of long sentences of detail with short declarative statements), and Donald Barthelme. Borges in particular held a great deal of sway over me as he seemingly entered in and out of my life over the course of my composing this thesis, from its very beginnings while studying in England to now. Perhaps because of this he inspired his own poem, "An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges," which is literally composed of his own words in the tradition of a found poem. The poetry of Carol Anne Duffy's *The World's Wife* inspired some of my other poetic works, in particular the "Aubade," with its twists on the traditional point

of view and behavior of the mythological characters. My traditional prose stories have too long a history to accurately report their inspirations, although “The Red Saxophone” originated after reading the magic realist works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez.

Forms

I used three different forms within this collection. Because of the enormity of the underlying theme, changing forms allowed me different perspectives with which to consider the concept of mythology, much like turning a kaleidoscope uses the same essential elements but the changes create a new and equally beautiful picture each time. I used poetry, short stories and a sort of hybrid alternatively referred to as prose poetry or flash fiction, depending on the focus on lyrical language or narrative, respectively. While I tried to use all three forms in my three “definitions,” I found that certain forms seemed naturally to fit with certain classifications. The appropriation of myth easily lent itself to longer forms; because the story is already established, to create something new out of it new twists or elaborations were required. There are two short stories within this section, “Ganymede” and “Mourning Athena,” as well as a combination of two short form pieces known collectively as “Alpha and Omega.” Even in its shorter form pieces and poetry, such as the “Aubade, Or Elegy for Phaeton,” a turn from the original myth crates individual spaces or meanings.

Within the second definition, the echoing of structure is all that is important; therefore, shorter forms take greater prominence. The longest piece in this section, “Odyssey,” is in fact a collection of short parables, some barely a few sentences. There is also plenty of poetry in this section; in fact, I would consider it my most philosophical section. Both “To the Red Sox, on the Anniversary of their 2004 Championship” and “Shards” consider “modern myths” outside of the Greek and Judeo-Christian roots I have used in the first definition; in the first poem, a local

superstition takes on the shape of a myth. The latter poem goes even further, taking on the English language as a potential myth. The third and final section, which writes original myth, was also easiest in short forms. Only “The Red Saxophone” ended up a fairly long short story; “Elementals” is composed of four flash fiction pieces, and “Osmosis” came out as a poem.

Composing & Organizing

The poetry in this collection was the most difficult to compose. While narration comes naturally to me, I have to revise constantly to work towards poetic language and strong imagery. The flash fiction requires an interesting balance, as the short length minimizes the options for detail, but these “short shorts” still use prosaic language that can be studded with stronger imagery over the editing process. In writing poetry, I find that the language takes priority over any kind of plot. While I still have the tendency to move into narration (such as in “To the Red Sox” and “Osmosis”) I become preoccupied with the strength of lack thereof of the language. Ironically, I find my poetic voice strongest in minimal pieces such as “Fragments,” where carefully constructed images act more striking in their solidarity. The rhythm is also easier to control in smaller pieces. Each of my short stories depends on different types of language; this is partly due to different influences, and partly due to self-prescribed restrictions. “Mourning Athena,” which focuses on the relationship between a father and a daughter, concentrates on their dialogue and the tiny details and movements of the characters (which I felt that the daughter protagonist would notice, more than anyone). “The Red Saxophone” came out of a desire to create a magical object—to properly convey the main character’s obsession, I depended on tactile descriptions. “Ganymede,” in comparison to the other two pieces, is far more internal. The language, therefore, needs to be completely different in many respects. Depicting this internal struggle was a priority. When I write the short form pieces I give especial attention to the balance

between the plot and the language, which can be more vague and ambiguous than the short fiction but requires more tight narration than the poetry. In writing short forms I found myself utilizing exercises, either from class or elsewhere, and developing off of that—the water section of “Elementals,” for example, came from a periodic sentence exercise, while “Alpha & Omega” was developed from a Hemingway imitation paradigm created by another student.

In the case of the “Aubade,” the myth of Helios and Phaeton is looked at from a more sadistic, less forgiving fatherly perspective. The destruction Phaeton has wrought is treated not with solemnity but strange delight; in this way his characterization plays with the traditional paradigm of the reckless son/doting father dichotomy. It could have just as easily been about Daedalus and Icarus. “Ganymede” also examines the love story between Ganymede and Zeus in a more cynical, modern light. Because Greek pederasty worked as a teaching method, knowledge is taken as a greater overlying theme, its transfer goes further for the child Ganymede than expected or desired. In the case of “Mourning Athena,” one of the longest works collected, the myth of Zeus, Metis and Athena is mapped upon a modern domestic context. While their relationships and the basic premise remains (Metis having been “consumed” by her husband) the context is once again from a modern perspective; the story tries to answer the question of why an intelligent, powerful and war-like deity acts in consistent and complete submission to a fatherly deity that may not always have her best interests at heart.

“Alpha & Omega” is a bit of an anomaly in this section—it is the only piece that comes not from Greek myth but Christian dogma, which for my own purposes I classify as myth; I do not side with the Oxford English Dictionary’s insistence that a myth must be entirely fictional. The two short form pieces came out of a class exercise which attempts to hint at a conflict without expressly stating it; ironically I started with the “Omega” or annihilation side (perhaps

naturally being attracted to as enormous a source of conflict as possible). While the outer struggles are spectacular, the dialogues are meant to show the rising tensions between the two brothers and the very familiar story of sibling rivalry. The “Alpha” side can also be seen as a story of “sibling” rivalry, although the characters are more outwardly mature and their relationship less traditional. I had difficulty classifying this particular piece; I feel that it might fit in all three. While I made heavy use of Genesis to capture the setting of the “Alpha” side, the “Omega” side came out of my own personal sense of what “apocalypse” mythology looks like; thus it straddles the line between myth appropriating and myth making. I decided to place it in its current position due to the deliberate references I used to Christian mythology, which could not be there without appropriating Christian text. I also considered separating the two pieces and bookending the whole thesis, starting with the beginning and ending with the end so to speak. However, in the end I felt the last sentence of the “Alpha” side would take on a metafictional stand that I did not necessarily intend, and the heavy irony of immediately following with the apocalypse would be eliminated.

“Odyssey” is a semi-autobiographical piece focusing on finding oneself through traveling. Like the *Odyssey* of Homer, “Odyssey” jumps from place to place in recalling the local “legends.” Instead of sticking strictly with the adventures of Odysseus, this piece only takes inspiration and few cues from the epic poem. “To the Red Sox, on the Anniversary of their 2004 Championship” is an epistolary poem and an elegy, celebrating the accomplishments of the baseball team while mourning the loss of the “myth;” the superstition of the “Curse of the Bambino,” which at once both caused great consternation for fans of the Red Sox and made them special at the same time. “Shards” on the other hand hints at the type of mythology that I believe assists in the very functions of daily life. Within this poem I compare science and the English language, both of

which tell a “traditional story” on how to run our lives which may not always make sense or hold absolute truth. We trust in signifiers such as words and divide them into letters, which other than historical roots have no reason to signify certain sounds. In a way, words and letters are themselves myths; our whole world functions on the idea that the word “dog” indicates a dog, and that “s” indicates an “s” sound. But there is no indicator in the English language for something smaller than an “s;” within the confines of our language it’s as imaginary as the Hydra. The poem proposes a solution, an even dividing of the “s” into fourths to create a new signifier for a new sound. Finally “An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges,” as discussed earlier in the essay, comes directly out of the tradition of found poems. By manipulating Borges’ words about labyrinths (itself a mythological image) I tried to instill within the poem the authority his short stories work with, using him as a sort of “prophet” or scientific lecturer to explain the universe. We begin to hope, from his warnings, that the universe is a labyrinth even as we know that the labyrinth’s center must contain a sort of Minotaur. Thus, Borges becomes a modern philosophic voice, even a kind of Homer who provides us with insight on the greater universe.

“The Red Saxophone” is a magic realist piece, inspired by the idea of the magic item that mythological heroes receive both outwardly shows of their heroic identity and help in their quests. The myth of Perseus probably had the most obvious example, although the mythic shields of Achilles and Aeneas come from the same tradition. Though the main character senses the mystical properties of this saxophone—or perhaps deludes herself into imagining them; there is no right or wrong answer—the tension comes from the fact that she believes the “hero” her piano teacher is unworthy of the talents that she believes the saxophone helps him to achieve. She schemes to take the saxophone, and thus its mystic power. The four short pieces that complete the “Elementals” set act as four modern myths, with each one slowly separating from truth and

plausibility. The fire story is based on the true story of the volcano on St. Pierre, with the narrator embellishing agency onto the dangerous magma. The wind story that follows, like “The Red Saxophone,” can be read alternatively as a mystery or a delusion, where the narrator begins to hear winds that don’t exist. The earth story is similar, although agency switches from the listener to the watcher, an older sister figure far more quizzical about the mysterious hobby of her sister. The final piece, based on the theme of water, is the only one that explicitly shows supernatural events taking place, with water chasing the main character and flooding every location she walks into. The stories are meant to unite the four girls in their imaginations and their odd, quasi-mystical circumstances. “Osmosis” started as an elegy to an already existing fictional character but evolved into its own plot. As with the water part of “Elements” the magical elements are deliberate. In this poem I explore, as with “The Red Saxophone,” the implications of a mythological story coming into play within the modern world. This poem, unlike any other piece in the series, uses current politics to characterize the female protagonist’s world.

Conclusion

A reader might prefer one of my “definitions” over another. My intention in breaking my thesis down so thoroughly is to explore many aspects of what make myths into “myths.” If I have proven anything about mythology with this essay, I hope it is that mythology constantly changes and morphs. It lives. Though we don’t believe in Zeus or Athena anymore, we all have personal myths to justify the mysteries that still exist in the universe, whether complex as a religion, or just some vague sense that *something* is taking the socks from your laundry. Whether facing monsters or mystical forces, it is with these myths that we cope with the eccentricities of daily life, charmed if not convinced.

Part I

Ganymede

Horses. There were two of them, shining chestnut horses with short, soft fur and long black manes that flew out like halos behind their long faces. They must have smelled like sweat and freshly trampled grass, the grass that even then clung to their creamy hooves, staining the edges. These horses, they probably even breathed better than their mortal cousins, letting the air leave their lungs in steady streams rather than in common grunts or whinnies. The boy would never know. As these horses rushed across the grassy field the boy was hoisted thirty feet in the air above them. He could make out their coloring; the rest was his imagination.

The horses which raced across the plains of Troy below were a sort of gift. The more cynical of the Trojans would call it a payment for the boy who flew above them, but the child himself was more forthright in his thinking. They were a gift. The god Zeus, the one who had ripped the boy from his home was ruler of the skies and king of the gods. Such a powerful figure was not usually expected to pay for any of the earthly trinkets he decided to play with. The horses were for Ganymede's father, a generous gesture from the god king to one of his subjects. The definition of a gift.

This god was not in his usual form. One could mistake him for an eagle or another bird of prey, so enormous was his wingspan and so focused on his purpose. One of his claws encircled the boy's wrists, holding him aloft. The other was twisted in his hair. The grip was actually a friendly gesture—and an overly familiar one. The child understood it as a statement of ownership, a signal as much to the boy himself as to his father, who was below them in vain trying to drive the horses back down the hillsides.

How small and weak the boy's father looked from up above. The godly horses were far more impressive, striking their hooves against the tender Trojan earth, making deep marks in the dirt with their tremendous hooves. His father was as commanding and kingly as a comedy, unable to see Ganymede's bird's eye view of the cosmic joke. Here he was throwing himself into capturing the godly beasts, when the last glimpses of his most beautiful son were shrinking into the distance.

Ganymede was young, incredibly so, his height rising only to match the hip of his current owner in man form. His face was handsome to the point of magnificent, with long blond hair falling in curls around his delicate face, as fresh as a young girl's with none of the naivety. In fact, at some point during their encounter on Mount Ida the God had blessed this boy with a keen and irrevocable intelligence. It gave him an understanding of his situation beyond that which his young years should have allowed him to comprehend. Why shouldn't he? As he thought bitterly to himself, he had been "educated" by a God in the strictest Greek sense. If his thoughtfulness was unnatural for his years, so was his situation. His eyes were hardened green; they lacked a cheerful brightness and for this reason were the only part of him that looked less than perfect.

He wasn't looking up at the God who had taken him. His eyes were steady on the stream of fur and hair, the horses rushing in the direction of Mount Ida where the abduction had occurred. It was the last place the steeds had seen the god in his real form; therefore, it was worth searching it for a way back home. For the child it was a point of connection between the two properties. In Ganymede's mind there too was a desire to return home, an inescapable desire to thrash himself out of the God's talons and plummet to the earth below.

However, the child's inclination for self-slaughter wasn't in exactly those terms, or at least not yet. There was a piece of him that let the illusions of youth yet thrive. He dreamed of the

possibility that upon alighting he would fall upon one of these immortal horses, and they would ride together past his father, past Mount Ida and run for the vast reaches of land outside the God's reach. Asia perhaps, or even across the water southwards.

But this youthful invention was temporary. He bit down on his lip as another vision paraded before him, with the likely result: himself laying on the knolls crumpled, trampled, and lifeless. So much for him.

Yet even with this grim vision, the child could not help but compare it with his other fate. Zeus had already promised him immortality. He would be cup-bearer of the gods, eternal child, never to know hunger. To be on the top of Fortune's wheel, and yet still on the bottom. Forever and always, which was a cliché even in those days. Yet he would never grow old, never grow up. Purchased and used like a slave. All right, there was a bit of cynicism left in him yet.

As a mortal the child had never been one for prophecy, but that was changing. The God had taught him many things during their first encounter, when he was still in the form of a man. Ganymede could see before him the whole of the future laid out below them. It was a picture as clear as that of the horses below, who were still half rushing for the high peak and half zigzagging around the exhausted shape of his father. Ganymede would be remembered. He was an example. But an example of what? He shook his head, trying to avoid understanding, but the claw in his hair kept his gaze forwards at the vision. He would be an example to others of desire. Eros would teach on it; whole armies would be built off it. He would be one of many, the story that generations of boys would follow. He held himself responsible. Perhaps if he had been a little less beautiful and a bit smarter in his mortal days, he could have avoided this situation entirely. Yet, on the other hand there was a taste of inevitability to it. The god had been searching for a lover, at the same time the boy was waiting on the mountain. He had been sent

there by his father, and to disappoint the king would have meant death. So there it was again, was it? Broken cogs are thrown out; refuse to take your place on Fortune's wheel and risk being crushed underneath. There was no reason to think he couldn't have been replaced. He already knew the story of Hyacinthus.

His eyes broke from the horses briefly. He looked up at the eagle's face, all he could see of the god that possessed him. He too was an example to the men below. Perhaps the kidnapping was not by design; perhaps the rape of Ganymede wasn't base lust but a matter of course. Cogs upon cogs. He was beginning to feel sorry for the God that had captured him.

Yet he could not keep himself from reflecting on escape. One way, and then another. He inclined his head downward, pulling at the hair the God held. There were the fields outside Troy's walls, so distant and small now. The horses had slowed their gait, allowed his father to wrap a rope around their necks, permitted him to lead them back in the direction of his kingdom. Ganymede could see now how thin and weak those walls might be. He could see now that the horses might outlast the city that owned them. They would certainly outlast his father. Such princely horses were not meant for plowing and grazing. War would follow them, many wars, until they met their right and proper conclusion.

So there it was. He had his options: a quick death against the green landscape or an eternity in this body, from prince to servant. The choice had to be made now, before the lands of Troy transitioned to the seas of Poseidon. He could not trust that God wouldn't save him.

Ganymede reflected, paused, licked his lips, and stared down. A thousand arguments rattled through his head either way.

But all the same, he was still just twelve.

His whole body slackened and he gave himself to the future that lay in front of him.

Mourning Athena

Anna had that kind of father; the one that could enter a room filled with strangers and leave with the whole room whispering about his looks. Even in elementary school parents referred to her as “Zed’s kid;” the only thing her age had changed was that her peers referred to her by the same ignoble title when he drove her to school or waited for her in her friends’ driveways. Though he had long stopped pushing 40, her father looked like he could be skipping college classes or hosting frat parties. She didn’t like to dwell on what her less tactful friends called “the details,” but she knew that he was handsome, tall and powerful. It wasn’t surprising when he caused a stir. He liked to tie his long blonde hair in a ponytail, keep light stubble creeping across his tanned face, and strategically unbutton his shirts at the neck. Anna knew that wherever he went, electricity followed—no matter what he was doing, there was an unexplainable excitement and an uncontrollable urge to make him like you. She liked to pretend that she, alone, was immune.

But the appreciation others felt for her father was starting to weigh down on her. Anna was seventeen, when most girls were starting to look to their futures. Yet Anna felt the tightening of some sort of chain around her ankle. Even as she began searching college guidebooks and studying for the SATs, her body needed to be dragged into each activity, her will feeling weaker each time. Eventually even her hands moved sluggishly over the applications. The tangles of imagined steel had crept up her arms, waiting until her mind went elsewhere, seized her wrists. She couldn’t shake the pressing weight even in her daily routine. Her hair brush rose and fell slowly without her realizing it; sometimes the tines met her auburn hair at the root and sometimes just dropped through the air. Though she was staring straight at her reflection, her gray eyes were unfocused, gazing past the mirror. She could sense her father leaning on the doorframe and watching her. In the past, Anna could be seen talking with great animation as she

brushed, going through the assignments she had to hand in, the teachers she didn't respect (and, rarely, the ones she did) and on occasion any plans her and her friends had for the afternoon. But today, she did not even acknowledge his presence. She avoided it. Eventually, he breathed in slowly, took a single step inside her room and tried to catch her attention.

“Hey kiddo.”

She didn't turn.

“Listen, you looked a little pale. You don't have to go to school if you don't want to. I can call the front office. We could pretend you have the flu.”

He grinned at her, but she twisted around, giving him the glare of a prowling lioness. Unexpected. He took in another gulp of air, grin transforming into a single straight line. When she spoke, there was hoarseness in her voice, a roar rather than a word.

“I want to go today. I have an algebra test. If I miss it I'll fail.”

“Oh.”

She brought the brush down through the air again, missing her head by inches. Zed placed his hand on her shoulder, using his other hand to slip the handle out of her clenched fist. He pushed the brush carefully through her tangles, as gently as when she had been seven. Anna watched him through the mirror, saying nothing, staring.

When he led her downstairs Anna's stepmother June stood over the kitchen table, doling scrambled eggs to her gaggle of children. They moved as one, shoveling cereal into their mouths as they held up their plates for the next course. June nodded to the appearing figures without taking her eyes off her spatula. When she spoke she sounded like a creaking house, voice breaking in an attempt to seem softer and sympathetic.

“Anna, there’s some sausage in the pan if you’re hungry. Be sure to put your dish in the sink when you’re done, all right?”

“Annie, Annie!” one of the boys squealed.

“Tell me a story, Annie!” another choked out between egg bites.

“Annie, I tore my skirt yesterday after school. Can you fix it for me?” a small female voice called.

“Annie, Annie!”

“Excuse me.” June’s voice sharpened with severity, and as her eyes rotated to each of the children in turn silence prevailed. Her spatula scraped against the pan. The sound was that of chalk as it carves into a chalkboard. Anna’s father directed the girl towards the sausage before approaching his wife. His steps slowed, reluctant, a soldier’s unsure of victory in the battle ahead.

“I’m going to drive Anna to school today. It’s been a while since we’ve had time to chat.”

“And what are you going to do after that?” June’s eyes stayed on her children. There was a pause as Anna’s father reached into the air, trying to pluck invisible courage, before his hand dropped to his side.

“I’m going to do some practice rings around the island. The summer will be here soon, and I want to make sure *Xenios* is ready to carry my customers.”

June stared down at the emptying plates.

“I’ll pick up Annie and come right home, all right? I expect a great dinner. Lobster, maybe?”

“Ari is allergic to seafood.”

“Oh. Right.”

June's eyes found her stepdaughter's back. "Maybe I'll make one for you and her. You can eat it on the porch, where the boys can't steal any. But only if you come home straight away."

"Right-o, my queen."

"I want lobster!" Ari slammed his fork onto his plate, banging his porcelain drum until his mother ripped it from underneath him. As her father guided Anna to the front door she watched as the spatula, then the shadow of the spatula, rose and fell in a crescent against the hated egg pan.

Anna was only three when her mother disappeared. After that it was just Anna and her father; then he met June, a decade ago. While the child insisted that she didn't need the mothering of a stranger, the teenager appreciated the other woman's struggle to maintain a home, raise three children, and pay the bills on time with a husband like Zed. Anna's father must have had a steady job at one time; now he acted as a part-time tour guide and amateur speedboat driver. Summers were a prosperous time for the family; he would come home with a flourish and drop wads of cash in front of his wife. Each bill would give off the smell of smoke, and most of the bills would be crumpled at the edges, but June would accept all contributions with a proud smile and a tight squeeze of the shoulder. This gesture was the only public display of affection June seemed capable of with her husband, yet in its smallness there was a jolt in the room.

Anna's siblings would cheer in unison, louder and more present than June herself.

After the tourist season was over, Zed would sulk in later at night, avoiding the gazes of his wife and children, unless he had obtained some temporary work that could elicit the fabled shoulder squeeze. He had been a Santa once. He couldn't explain it properly in front of the younger ones; any revelations of his secret identity might compromise their precious naivety. But if Anna was in the room he would pretend to hold an invisible beard between his fingers and feel

along the side of his chin, sliding down until his thumb and forefinger came together in the center of his chest. He would even slap his belly for effect if he was feeling bold. The fabled “ho-ho-ho” and costume were reserved for his place of employment.

However, it had been three months since Zed had held one of those seasonal jobs. He had been a Valentine’s Day Cupid for a used car dealership, and for the privilege of a small salary he donned an adult diaper, draped a banner of deals around his shoulders and waved at passersby. With the money already spent, only the memory of his humiliation remained in the minds of his wife and children. Anna felt particularly galled, as the dealership was located close to a road commonly used by her peers to get to school. The route Zed chose to take his daughter passed by the lot directly. It was as if the island she lived on was some sort of museum devoted to her humiliations, and as many times as she tried to escape her least favorite exhibitions the labyrinthine hallways led her again and again to the same place. No escape. No place to hide.

“So, are you excited for summer break? The tourists will be coming in droves. Lots of rich boys, right?”

“Your enthusiasm astounds me.” Anna stared out the window. The small houses of her street would soon vanish, replaced by the rental places close to the city and eventually the isolated mansions of the richest guests. They were empty, but waiting for their usual summer occupants. Circles have no end, unless someone attempts to create a tangent. “Listen. I need to talk to you about something.”

“Wonderful! You know how much I love talking. Oh, hold on a second.” His car slowed to a crawl. The girl could see her father’s eyes start to abandon the road in front of him, one of his hands leaving the steering wheel. His fingers started tracing figure eights on the top of his chin. Anna glanced after her father, unsurprised to see a river of new arrivals had started vacation

early. The summer routine begins anew. The college girls had stopped to wave, perhaps attaching some celebrity quality to the man in the front seat. He waved at them, grinning. "Hold on a minute, ladies." Zed used his free hand and began digging through his right-hand pocket. A few gum wrappers fell out before he got hold of his business cards, which he presented with a flourish to the co-eds. One girl looked it over, forming a smirk as her eyes reached the center.

Anna had drawn a cartoon boat in 3rd grade art class, with windshield eyes and a grin on the hull. Her father had taken the picture off the refrigerator where Anne had placed it and took it immediately to the printer, and even after years of maturity and better drawings the boat remained on all future versions of the card. Another inescapable exhibit devoted to her role in his life, the role that she continued to stumble upon no matter how many detours she searched for.

"First ride is free, girls! Fastest tour of Nantucket you'll ever take."

"As you know, I am going to be a high school senior once the summer has finished," Anna pressed on.

"That's true, sweetie. Hey, girls, where do you go to school?" His smile was met by giggles and not a few blushes. One girl finally pointed to a logo on her t-shirt. "Northwestern, eh? Heck of a school. Kind of expensive though, am I right?"

"I know the subject is painful, and I've gotten the impression over time that we aren't supposed to talk about this, but I am concerned about finances, so I was wondering if we might, perhaps, try and find out what happened to Mom. Maybe she's alive; maybe we can contact her. She's as responsible as you are in creating me, she might as well go Dutch on my education."

Zed stopped smiling. The co-eds sensed the sudden chill in the air and trotted away, glancing back at the car with serious faces. Anna followed them with her eyes, resenting their escape even as she secretly enjoyed her father's discomfort. Slowly he rolled up the window and

brought the car back up to the speed limit. Each turn he made came with sudden jolts to the left and right as he robotically twisted his arms. The disappearing trees seemed to shiver as the car flew past.

“Dad?”

“There’s no reason to do that, is there? I was joking with those girls. I can get loans. We can both get loans. June could contact her relatives. I think her uncle works at Boston U. They still give free tuition to relatives, don’t they?”

“I knew you’d get like this.”

“Get like what?”

Anna stared at her father. He had both hands clutching the steering wheel now, holding it captive as his eyes fixed on the road. The eyes were better described as peering, piercing the quiet suburban road as if expecting a littering of landmines around each corner. She considered reaching for his arm but changed her mind. “It isn’t all about the education, if that’s what you’re thinking. I need to get off the island. I want to try something new. I want—” Anna’s eyes found the roof of their car. She mentally counted the fibers coming off of the top. “I want to get out of this state. New York, maybe.”

“New York. Right.” Zed’s hands gripped the wheel like a life preserver. “That’s a tough town. Best to stay close to home.”

“Are you even pretending to listen to me?”

“I’m listening; I just have your best interests at heart. Contacting your mother is not a good idea. Let’s drop the subject. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why not?”

Zed glanced at his daughter, then directed his eyes back to the road. The normal houses had long given way to the mansions, which engulfed the street with their shadows. Even the sun had left Anna alone with her father. Even with the light suddenly vanishing, Anna could see Zed start to bite down on his lip, and his hands start to press into the steering wheel's surface. The plastic left impressions in the tips of his fingers and palms. They turned from gold to red.

“Did something happen to Mom?”

That was the trigger. All at once her father shot his strength into pulling the steering wheel left. They ran over half of the sidewalk. Zed released his grip on the wheel, slowly pulling his hands away.

“You know—” He paused, air escaping from his still-open mouth in a hiss, before gulping and continuing. “You know I’m not the easiest person to live with.”

“Believe me, I know.” Anna kept her eyes on her father, who was now placing his hands on his knees. He moved each digit with the delicacy of someone handling a museum artifact, a one-of-a-kind from a faraway land. “I was worse when I was younger.” There was a long pause. Anna could see the car’s digital clock out of the corner of her eye; she was already late for school. There was a tendency to arrive late when her father was driving her anyway, and she had built quite a reputation for excuse-making and dramatics at the front office. But she had hoped that a solid month of early arrivals might help her eliminate the cocked eyes and half-frowns, and the repeated requests to “talk” to her dad on the situation. No more hope for that, sadly. Yet as each silent moment passed, and her father’s fingers continued to clench and unclench, and some hints of sweat began to crawl out of the top of his forehead, Anna knew that if it took three days of sitting in this car and waiting for him to speak again it’ll be worth it, no matter the consequence.

“Dad?”

“I’m getting to it.” His hands slowly went to the gear shift. He pushed the stick into park in one slow, calculated motion. “Your mother and I were very young when we had you, you know. And young people, sometimes they lack responsibility. Consequences are like tax returns; someone else’s problem.”

“And?”

“And in a lot of ways, I don’t know if we were prepared for what that was like to take care of a baby. I wasn’t as responsible as I am now.”

“Sure. Sure you weren’t.” Anna’s whole body was starting to tense. She could feel a straight jacket being tightened around her body, causing each connecting bone to grind against each other. If her body continued like she might contort small enough to fit in her father’s glove compartment, and she could hide from what she had released into the air.

“Your mom didn’t have it easy. It was—I mean, it must have been straining. Trapped in that house all the time…”

“And?”

“You slept so well. I remember your little yellow blanket with the little Disney Bambi drawings, the images dancing up and down the fabric. I went to call your mother and she just wasn’t there.”

“I’ve heard this, Dad. I’ve heard all about the blanket. The point is: why can’t we go out and find her? Just because she was selfish then doesn’t mean she might not regret it now.”

“I can’t. I let her go, Annie. It was my gift to her. I can’t just pick up the phone and call her. I can’t force her into a life that was so, so bad for her.” Zed looked in all directions,

anywhere other than at his daughter. He was a wild animal in a cage of a car, searching for the door out. “You don’t get it. I lied to her, I cheated, I left her alone for days at a time...”

“Please explain to me how this is any different from what you do to June.” As soon as she said it, Anna began to regret having spoken at all. Zed’s face went through a series of changes, eyes flashing with lightning before suddenly turning dull. As he leaned back into his seat she could see every muscle in his body slack and give way, the wild beast giving itself up to the mercy of its captors.

“June is stronger.”

“That’s it.” Anna pressed her thumb down her seatbelt; before Zed knew what she was doing she had already thrown open the door and fled down the sidewalk.

“Annie? Annie, please don’t.”

“I’m going to walk to school. Don’t worry about it.”

“Anna!” Zed’s car began to roll down the street beside her. The girl could see her father’s face, how pale he had turned, and yet she could only imagine her fist buried in his jaw. “Just listen to me, all right?”

“I have learned enough. So you don’t want to find her. It’s fine. I will.”

“Anna, you don’t understand. She didn’t just leave. She told me where she was going. I knew it was best to leave her to what she wanted to do.”

“Where, then? That’s the first place I’m going.”

The car stopped. As the engine shut down she could gradually hear his fingers drumming against the top of the steering wheel. “She had issues.”

Anna found herself stopping too. “Issues?”

“She had issues with certain, well, substances. I hadn’t realized until...but she went to get better. It was various different things. Different— ” His voice failed again, but the way his whole head fell told Anna about his guilt, his shame. He blamed himself, and yet, Anna could only imagine one hand injecting or smoking or drinking or whatever had happened (did it matter what it was?) and it was a female one. “She had a timeline all written out. We were both going to change, she said, she just needed a little more time to get it together. She circled the last date, but when it came I just...let it go. I let her go.”

“Why?”

“Because I didn’t change, and if I couldn’t for her I couldn’t for anyone. I am who I am.” He uttered the last five words slowly, with three extra syllables. She could feel him staring at her. “She gave me the gift I needed. I wanted to return the favor.”

“Did you ask her if this was what she wanted?”

“Did she ever come back?”

Anna stopped walking. Too cruel. He was earnest, but he was cruel. The tree branches above her seemed to be reaching out to her. To her, or to the sky, searching for answers. “I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

“Get back in the car, sweetie,” he pleaded.

Anna walked around to the passenger side. Each motion was mechanical, forced; she had to pretend her fingers were made of metal to keep from dropping the car door and simply standing there in the road. As she slid into the seat she felt her father’s hand touch her shoulder. “Your mother had her problems, but, no matter what, she gave me an amazing daughter. You’re the most important person in my life. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“I get that, Dad.”

“I don’t know if your mother stayed at that place, if she got better or not, but I know wherever she is she knows she made the right decision. It’s you and me, kid. Everyone else is window dressing.” Anna bit down hard on her lip. She could feel her lips tremble around her teeth in an attempt to slip away. He let go of her shoulder, and though she wasn’t looking, she envisioned his smile, his hand taking the steering wheel with its usual lazy energy. “Hey, I’ve got an idea. Let’s skip this whole school thing and head down to the waterfront. It won’t be like I lied to June, and you know how much you love *Xenios*.”

“It is a nice boat.” Her voice was unbroken but small, trying to blend into the dashboard. It couldn’t hide any more than Anna could.

“Are you ok, sweetie?”

“Fine. I’m fine.” There was a single, wet tear running down the side of her nose; she angled her head to disguise it, staring out the window as she did so.

“I’m glad we talked about this, honey. It’s like a load off my mind. Oh, and don’t worry about college. I’ll think of something. Is there a school on the mainland you like?”

“I don’t know. BC?”

“Boston! Now that’s a city. Much easier than New York. And I can visit you every weekend! The boys there are supposed to be very nice. Very Catholic, if you get what I’m saying.”

Anna was full-on crying now. Each muscle in her body seemed ready to shred into pieces, as the tension in her body pulled her veins and tendons in all direction. All of her energy had been devoted to keeping her voice trapped inside, without making a single sound. Any small whimper would send her into hysterics, and he couldn’t know. She was imagining her mother; was she healthy? She could be in New York, a career woman, or maybe she had found a new

family as her father had. Or maybe she was unchanged, waiting in some rehab center or another, who like a bug to a flame was flying from one intoxicant to another. Secretly she knew this mother only existed inside someone's head; she didn't even know what her mother looked like, and each of the images she made up didn't have her face, but June's. She wasn't crying for June, no; June still had some chance of escape, her and her little ones. For Anna, she was going to be his and only his forever. She had leaped from his head, fully formed. There was nothing else to do except mourn.

Aubade, Or Elegy for Phaeton

I watched you light the horizon on fire;

I admit it, I was glad.

Your rash decision aside, when I heard Africa scream

As you bounced off the Sahara

And the rivers and seas leapt up in evaporation

(I could see the salt lining the ocean beds like snowflakes)

And even Earth herself cringed as her skin turned ashen

I smiled to myself.

Even when the well-placed lightning bolt

Broke your body and sent you flaming off the chariot

I couldn't slough off some cheery disposition.

I'll mourn you, son,

But I enjoyed the fireworks.

Alpha & Omega

Light had been created six days ago, and yet it still beamed with the newness and youth that finds each individual moment charming and poetic. It shined equally on animal and apple tree, and on the two figures that sat below the tree and slow as snakes peeled the skin off its dropped fruit. To the new-born light, everything glowed with wonder as it shined, but the figures kept their eyes fixed in one direction even as their fingers dug and carved crescents into the flesh of the apples. They watched the movement of a thin creek of a river, which flowed across their vision with the gentle forward motion of grass tussled by the wind. Occasionally a fish, pinkish-gold, would shoot through the waters; it passed by nameless, unnoticed. An animal with large ears and enormous eyes lapped at one of the rivers' shores; it too had no name. It glanced at the duo and sniffed the air, as if tasting the apples' slightly sour sweetness through its nose. The two figures paid it no attention; eventually the animal bounced down the side of the shore until it disappeared amongst the foliage and grass beyond the apple tree's shadow. Other than the sound of its padded feet hitting the ground there was no noise, as all the other animals had paused in place for this occasion. Only the rabbit in its thirst had broken the unspoken agreement, and it would be punished for it in the future.

Glancing briefly to his right, the first figure let his apple skin drop on the grass beside his companion with deliberate pleasure. The second figure flicked the skin back onto the other's lap with one finger, without bothering to glance away from the tiny path of water. One laid down his legs in one motion, causing the skin to drop in front of and exactly in between the two individuals. The other turned his body slightly to mask the skin from view while taking his own apple and bringing it closer to his face.

The apple looked vulnerable and pale without its reddish coat. Without the mottled skin to disguise it, the fruit's perfection glowed in the light like a miracle; there were no darkened blemishes, no suspicious holes, the only contrasting color coming from the stem peeking out from its top. The skin that the first had dropped was speckled with a variety of reds and oranges, which meant nothing to either man. Both figures found that their fingers and hands had become coated in the fruits' juices, until every attempt to move the apples transformed into an endurance test. Any time the apple balanced on the tips of their fingers was an unexpected triumph.

"When is it starting?" the second figure broke the silence. His voice was a deep bass; if the sound were an object it would sink almost instantly to the bottom of the creek.

The first tossed his apple from hand to hand; the juices made the fruit slide dangerously close to the ends of his fingers, but he always managed to grab hold just at the last second. "Don't know. It's got to be important though." His voice was higher than his compatriot's and a little sweeter; he would be more likely to float down the creek, bobbing every so often underwater before rising out into the dry air again.

"Of course it's important," the second stated, "this is it. His greatest creation. It's what we've been waiting for. Have you been paying attention?"

"I have been keeping up to date on all these matters, if that's what you're asking. Have you?"

The second turned his gaze on his companion, lip curling. "I have watched the creation of every tree, the birth of every fish, the separation of land and seas, the divide of the light and the—"

"Good for you." The first held his apple to his lips. "It's nice to know you're keeping a catalogue."

“What?” The second tried to steal the other’s apple, failing as the first figure leaned his entire body to the left.

“A cat-o-log. Catalogue. You can write down each and every one of these miracles of yours, think on them, and reflect on their purpose. I’m just in it for the show.”

The second figure shook his head. “Every day we see miracles, and you welcome each with the same expression.”

“It’s possible to be out-surprised, my friend.”

“It’s also possible to take an interest in new things, and learn from the experience.”

“You don’t need to know everything.”

Meanwhile, a sudden gust of wind began to pull at the leaves of the apple tree, tearing through the air between the figures and finally to the water before them. The two figures leaned forward in unison; the first with bland curiosity, the other with intense interest. The dust and sediment that lined the sides of the creek began to rise into the air and twist, particles rushing past and pressing against each other until it seemed to be one whole object. Eventually the dust elongated to form arms, legs, a torso and a head. A tail began to peek out from behind but just as quickly fell and was enveloped into the dust-form. By the time the remaining dust settled a naked man was sitting on the edge of the river, looking in confusion at his new hands, new toes, new ligaments.

The first figure watched in silent wonder, thinking that minutes ago there was sand, and seconds ago there was lace on the wind; now there was a man. If every blade of grass and tree branch spontaneously grew eyeballs it would be just as remarkable and beautiful, without knowing how each sudden growth came to be.

He bit into his apple; the fruit was both sweet and tart, and seemed to bleed with the sudden outpouring of knowledge. With each bite came the same crunching noise, like the snapping of a twig or the crushing of a beetle. As he ate, the first figure realized many things; the names of plants and trees, the way the animals communicated, even the nature of his own existence. Few people glean this knowledge, and even fewer accept it. Yet for this individual, his destiny burnt against his heart like a medal, and he grew even more proud and inspired by these things he had yet to see.

Each bite took a significant piece out of the apple; within minutes all that was left was an ivory core, an hourglass with the same chocolate-colored stem poking out of the top. The first continued to nibble at the top and bottom, chipping away at the shape and sending juice dribbling onto the grass. The second let his core fall on top of the discarded apple peels, where it bounced and rolled down the hill. That animal—a rabbit, they both realized at once—peeked its nose out of its hiding-place in the foliage and eventually bounded its way down to the creek’s side to nibble on what the second figure had dropped.

“Michael,” the first figure said, taking a second to lick any remaining juice from his lips, “I think that was beautiful. What’s your assessment?” The name Michael came to him instantaneously, as easily as the rabbit’s had, and he pronounced the word as naturally as if he had been saying it all these seven days.

“As always Gabriel,” the second replied, “we are witnesses to someone’s greatness. I can’t wait to see what happens next.”

Time passes.

Later, the light darkened and turned, the sky losing its naïve luster and changing into a dull gray; usually this is known as a poor day for eating ice cream. True, the lack of sunlight was

due more to the irregular fall of smoking ash and the occasional fiery rock than the clouds that had dominated previously, but for Tom and Grady the resulting pallor was more important than the natural forces that created it. The walls of the old ice cream shack had turned black from the recent aerial debris, and there was a suspicious glow emanating from the gutters, but its strange structural soundness enticed the two to approach the entrance. The door was locked, yet a simple kick from Grady collapsed the exhausted bolts and released the smell of vanilla. It wafted into the air and mixed with the sulfur, bitter and sweet, like chicory coffee. Grady tried to flip on the light switches, but as with all the other buildings in the city the electricity was unable to reach it. Yet the slight coolness of the temperature hinted at the possibility of some ice cream surviving the increasing temperatures and floating dirt. As his eyes lingered on the circular drums that sank into the store's counter, Grady moved as if hypnotized into the inner sanctum of the store. Other than the bursts of fire which hit the ground with miniature explosions, there were no other sounds within the store. Grady's own breath took on a certain kind of clarity, which filled his ears in between each of the outside blasts.

Tom attempted to follow the other boy inside, but Grady pushed his hands against the Tom's fingers until he released his grip and the door slammed shut between them. The younger boy watched his brother through the window as metallic scoops and paper napkins shot into the air, eventually culminating in the rise of a single lid into the air. As much as he squirmed to see his brother's actions, Tom could not get a glimpse at what was happening behind that enormous circle. When Grady returned with two cones of chocolate Tom snatched rather than took the offered treat.

The Shack, as it had been colloquially known when there were people to talk about it, was famous for its chocolate ice cream. As the boys tried to dig into their cones rich cream slid

down their fingers and dripped on the ground as the outside heat worked on the crystals of ice. Still, as they lapped up the half-liquid mess off their hands the taste of cocoa and cream melted into them, folded, and sent them into a brief moment of chill. They resorted to sucking the cream off their dirty knuckles, trying to ignore the grit of ash in favor of the coolness and the sweet flavor of the chocolate. The cones soon weakened under the onslaught of liquid ice cream and the friction of the boys' tongues, yet they ignored the delicacy of the waffles in favor of ingesting the ice cream in record speed, brain freeze be damned.

“So, what shall we do next? Hit the electronics store?” Grady said. The boy had a slow, lilting way of speaking even as his eyes burned with urgency. The chocolate cream dribbled down his chin until he stuck his tongue out and attempted to catch the escaping indulgence.

“Why bother? It’s probably already cleaned out, and it’s not as if the electricity works anymore. We’re lucky this stuff was still cold.” Tom pointed to his cone, which had already become dotted with black ash. The younger boy stumbled over his words; even in peaceable times he was the nervous type, but in their new situation each word came out as on high-pitched, singular peep.

“You’re so whiny. Why don’t you come up with an idea instead of expecting me to do all the work?”

“You’re older.” Tom grumbled.

“Maybe we could go find Mom and Dad. They’ve got to be around here somewhere.”

“I guess.”

“Hey,” Grady continued after another lick, “I’ve been wondering something. Aren’t we supposed to be raptured or something? Like in those books, the ones Aunt Cathy reads.”

“We aren’t Catholic. It wouldn’t work.”

“Catholics don’t believe in rapture, stupid.”

“They did too!”

“They did not!”

“You don’t know everything!”

The boys were pushed into silence by a sudden scream; the sound was piercing and familiar, too similar to the memories of past unfortunate encounters for Tom not to swallow down some apprehension. Out of nowhere appeared a small bird, like a sparrow, twittering into the air as it struggled to beat its wings. Blood trickled from new injuries to its wing and chest, tiny droplets which plopped onto the shack’s roof like raindrops. The bird was soon surrounded by three bat-like creatures, which took turns thrusting their heads at the animal and snatching feathers and skin. With each successful grab they howled with human voices, screaming into the non-night as the bird plummeted behind the shack and out of sight. One of the bat-demons paused in the air, staring straight at both boys before yowling and chasing his brothers behind the shack.

Grady’s eyes chose to follow the sparrow’s trajectory; he wondered in silence if he should go and pry the demon things off of the little bird. Small and vulnerable things should be protected, he decided, even if the sparrow could not begin to appreciate his efforts.

By this point the ice cream had nearly vanished into their mouths and onto the street below them. What little remained was like dark water, safe inside the cone’s shell but bubbling slightly as the burning air finally removed all semblance of the cold. Yet, as damaged beyond recognition as it was the ice cream represented something to Grady: the days of running around under the trees in summertime, learning the names of plants in Scouts, teasing his brother by stealing the whipped cream right as he takes his first bite of sundae. The shell too had lost some

of its shape with the heat of the air and the sweat of the boy's tightened palm. It opened at the top like a flower, begging for the pressure that would send the lip of the cone either into a mouth or detached onto the street below.

Grady refused to send the waffle in either direction; instead he dusted the dirt off of his cone and turned it vertical, shooting the hot chocolate drink down his throat. The liquid burned as it coated his throat and tongue, but the sweet and familiar taste for a short time eliminated the sulfurous smell that had seemed to be ever-present. Tom cocked his head as he took in the spectacle, and then silently mimicked his brother's tactic. He coughed as the mixture scalded the sides of his mouth, but when Grady turned glance over at the sound the younger boy pretended not to have made any noises.

The older boy touched his brother's shoulder. "Hey. Do you want to head home? Mom and Dad usually get off work by now. They might be waiting for us. They might have a plan." Even as Grady played at a reassuring tone the words felt false in his throat, and yet, hope springs eternal after all.

Tom twisted the empty ice cream cone in his hands, letting the waffle crumble. "I guess. But before we do that, could we get some caramel? For the road?"

Part II

Shards

Atoms are said to be composed of protons, neutrons and electrons; this is a myth.

Protons, neutrons and electrons are composed of the same matter

which divides endlessly until its heart stops beating.

Books are the same.

In the center of the story

the only thing that stirs

is a sharp hiss caught at the tip

of a tongue:

one quarter of an “s.”

Odyssey

Norwich

It is snowing today as if I subconsciously glean some example for my life from the weather. I find that I enjoy the same sense of silent calm with a mug of tea. The temperatures between the outside of the building and what I've brewed are directly opposed but both have the same quality of slow, goalless development. Brewing tea, after all, is a simple procedure. I have purchased a water boiler expressly for the purpose, which allows me to press a switch and let the water boil as I select the tea flavor, unwrap the bag and place it in the empty mug in preparation for cooking. I find that English breakfast is a especially soothing flavor. When I lived in Norwich I was particularly partial to the flavor, as the tea's name imparted an authority I expected of its creators. Our kitchen had one enormous rectangular window which looked on to the central square of the apartment buildings, which allowed me to drink my tea and watch students travel to and from classes. When darkness fell, most of the students vanished but a series of lampposts flickered on, illuminating bare trees and brick buildings. The sight was boring, and leaning towards the industrial grunge I had seen in American cities and London, but I had seemed to escape within the crumbling walls of my medieval town. Yet when there was snow, the grime and barren trees would become inundated with flakes that reflected the light back into the air. In this way the square would light up as if morning had arrived, and I would be allowed to sit and watch the entire sky suddenly open with white petals, dancing down the length of the horizon. How graceful they seemed, waltzing through the air before taking their place amongst their compatriots and reflecting back ever more light! And how soothing, even more so than the tea I would touch to my lips as I watched the spectacle.

This has been my home for five months. In two weeks I will wander Europe and search for stories.

Big Ben

Look up. He looks down on me, my fellow travelers, and my meager little camera with equal contempt. When I stand at his feet, any attempt to capture him in film loses at least some of his majesty.

The Elgin Marbles

The Parthenon's crown was taken a century ago and removed from her head, carried by sea to a British Museum where I see them today. The rooms are tall, dark, and for the most part empty. While I had been forced to battle my way past the Rosetta Stone of Egypt and the appropriated Easter Island statue, the decorations of the Parthenon have been abandoned to all but those who seek them. They are kept in perfect condition other than the jagged edges which provide testament to their travels. The marble is creamy white, even as signs call attention to the fact that at one point they had been painted in a multitude of jewel tones, before time and well-meaning caretakers wiped them out. The statues and reliefs are all in the act of an enormous confrontation; each side of the Parthenon had been meant to picture a battle Athens or her gods had mastered. Yet the battle continues. The empty white eyes still evoke horror or pain, hands grasping spears that are lost with time, dying bodies trapped in the middle of their falls to the ground. There is no bliss in the chase to be celebrated; I can imagine the dying centaur, the stabbed Amazon, and the flailing giant would prefer time continue, and the victorious Greeks let them die.

The Tower of London

The Tower of London sits on a hill in the middle of 2010, a sacred space where time has been deliberately stopped for the benefit of thoughtless tourists such as myself. After complaining about the price, I entered through the gates and found myself on cobbled stones. Tall buildings surrounded the hill, stabbing into the blue-gray skies. I could already see the line for the crown jewels from where I stood, but my interests did not lie across the square. I was in search of the rooms that held Richard's nephews, Anne Boleyn, even Lady Jane Grey. Despite the brightly colored signs and the protective glass, the ghosts of human suffering wandered down the hallways and winding steps. Each scratch in the stone was covered by thick panes of plastic. Circles of red paint emphasized each marking, with a label that determined 12th century, 13th century, this hand, that man, and the death that came soon after. Those who are executed always have their chance to say their last words, but once the words have escaped their lips and entered ears they are as gone as the person themselves. Historians account for figures as important as a queen, but for others all we have are angular scratches scrawled into ancient stones. The rest, as Catullus would say, is written in water. As the curious crowds surround each savored testament and try to determine its meaning, a prayer here, a message there, it strikes me each epitaph is more famous than the person who, hundreds of years ago, wrote it into the wall.

Eiffel Tower

Closed. It sparkles with artificial delight but its gates slam shut before me. I can glean its brown-black skin and skeleton of connecting metal but its view, like the entirety of Paris, is beyond me.

Notre Dame de Paris

The line to enter Notre Dame Cathedral is as labyrinthine as the church itself. I am standing between a Nigerian and a Columbian, trying to explain to them that I want to search the building for a few scratches buried somewhere inside, chipped into its massive stone walls or scratched on a wooden pew. I had read years and years ago that a young Victor Hugo had toured the cathedral, discovered the markings, recognized them as letters and charmed by their mystery went on to write The Hunchback of Notre Dame. Both of my companions had excellent English but seemed to lose the significance of my declaration. “If you want to see these letters,” the Nigerian said, “we will find them for you.” And yet, I couldn’t get either of these men excited about Hugo’s inspiration for themselves. As we inched closer to the doors of the cathedral, and the doors and windows grew in my eye, I began to wonder in silence that a structure as massive and elaborate as this would have enveloped the mysterious note, trapping it between centuries of natural erosion and graffiti. Once I entered, I sank into the floor. The cathedral was an awe-inspiring place of worship, built like a cavern, and deadly dark. The shining sun only had one small invasion at the ever-open doorway. Nevertheless, I combed the columns, inspected the walls, and let my fingers linger against each pew in hopes of feeling the unnatural notches that might indicate Hugo’s inspiration. My determination had a cost. First I lost my Columbian friend as he disappeared into the churches’ hub. Then, though he struggled not to, my Nigerian companion became lost in the crowds as I stood stock still in front of an old looking rock. Inch by inch I made my circle. Yet I was only halfway finished when I felt a hand on my shoulder and found myself beside a girl from Wisconsin, another of our tour group who had been sent to find me. “It’s time to go,” she insisted. I told her about Victor Hugo, about that message that might have been borne through time if I could only find it, but she did not understand any more than my

Nigerian friend. She lacked his sympathy as well. As we guided ourselves between the open-mouthed tourists and past a line leading to the upper floors, I determined I would never forgive her.

EuroDisney

I get the sensation from the second I enter the door, and the bombardment of bright colors and cartoon smiles begin their assault, and the small children's faces transfigure from the contracted groans of a long journey to wide eyes and smiles, and my own eyes rise with the turrets and towers of a pastel palace, and I remember the first time I crouched in front of a TV and saw the stories of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Aladdin, and Ariel open before me like a new book once did, filled with the wondrous and unfamiliar, and the crowd breathed like a hungry animal and slouched forward to the castle's gates, despite the fact I consider myself a mature, thinking human being beyond the need to depend on stories and exaggerated eyes to understand the world I want to lead this parade of strangers into the house of stories and escape the world where the magic long ago fled. There are no myths to investigate, but too many stories to pass up.

The Parthenon

My last stop. This city surprised me; without my knowledge it had managed to adapt to thousands of years of human evolution, becoming a place of metal and glass with a smell of car fumes. But the Acropolis is the same as it ever was, minus some long-lost coats of paint. Sadly, it's here where I realize that even in this temple of stories real life can't be completely segregated. There is scaffolding on the temple of Athena Nike. Long silver poles pop out of the stone floors, holding up ropes of various length to prevent intruders from entering the buildings. What was once a place of frenzied activity now contains ambivalent strangers circling the temples the way a vulture circles its future meal. But, other than these small changes, the Acropolis looks like you would imagine the Acropolis to look. The marble buildings rise up into the air, elegant and aged. There is no difference between the Parthenon and a picture of the Parthenon. But then you start to notice the dogs. There are dozens of them, of every shape size and color, sleeping on the hot stones and begging for the food of the tourists. They alone are permitted sanctuary in the Parthenon. They dash across the marble steps with no regard for the historical importance, sniff at the statue-columns of the Erechtheum, and jump for treats on the steps of the Propylaea. To them the ancient structures are as trivial as any other building, excepting their ability to attract rich tourists with plenty of food in their pockets. And while they don't enter the Parthenon to pay tribute to Athena's golden statue, now melted down into coins and scattered throughout the museums of the world, they still seem to be her most sincere supplicants. When the tourists return to their hotels and hostels, the dogs stay.

To the Red Sox, on the Anniversary of Their 2004 Championship

I remember walking up and down the center of Yawkey Way.

The air smelled like cinnamon and cooking meat,

and the sweat of herds of people

walking, like me, up and down

up and down.

The brave wore blue that day; the rest wore red.

and though it was cold, there was a certain naked desire

to keep jackets open and let the insignias, the numbers, the names

wave like banners for our cause.

It was afternoon: the street was shaded

shadowed by the wall on the right side.

It swallows the present, this wall.

While I was here to see young men play

the wall devoured them and put in their place

The ghosts of eighty years of futility

and he

who caused it all.

I think we won that game; no matter.

Our fate is eternal. The past would cover the present

like a rain day tarp

and the memories of loss coated
with the hopes and dreams of young men
now old, or dead like Ted.

His numbers stared me in the face.

They were painted on the wall.

Years passed

and I am in my home

in red

and watching Edgar Rentería

hit the ball like a gift.

It goes to our pitcher—

it's tossed to first—

and there's release

and screaming, just me there screaming.

Time passes on

and I think back on that moment.

The Cardinals were a casualty of our fanaticism,

our overwhelming desire to torch the past

and build our dynasty in the ashes.

But

it's come to a point where I realize
our pain, our loss
a century of grief,
like we once had,
is to be cherished
and preferred.

There was a certain power in fighting against the past
of striking at a wall built of towering brick
but knowing that the fight was lost when the ghost
cast his curses in blue pinstripes.

We didn't think of it then, but there is a certain poetry
in futile catches, failed hits
and there is destiny
in a ball
sliding
between a man's legs.

We have that championship ring
but we lost the past

the wall is still there but the shadows
aren't shadows anymore.

An Interview with Jorge Luis Borges

I discovered the labyrinth in a book.

It had cracks and seemed tall.

That labyrinth was, besides a symbol of bewilderment
a symbol of being lost in life.

Ah, yes, in it I do speak of a lost labyrinth

I dedicated that story to Victoria Ocampo

and it is because a labyrinth is a place where one loses oneself
(My eyesight was not perfect).

If we were positively sure that the universe is
a labyrinth, we would feel secure.

A place (in my story) which in turn is lost in time.

It seems to me to be something magical
but it may not be a labyrinth.

Consequently, it is probable that the universe is
not a labyrinth but simply chaos,
and if that is so we are indeed lost.

We don't know if the universe has a center;
the English word maze is not as enchanting
or as powerful as the Spanish word *laberinto*.

If we were positively sure, we would feel secure¹.

¹ In the labyrinth
there is a center;
that terrible center
is the minotaur.

Part III

Osmosis

She collected her new lives like spoons, old coins, stamps;
Each new world of knowledge she painted on the wall of her bedroom
Detailing the techniques and grammatical structures
With a code all her own; smiling faces pointing to ice cream
Lovers walking in the woods, a dog chewing on a live chicken
The code was for her alone, not you.

She could learn all of your secrets with just a touch.
The first time, she brushed against her professor
And learned the secrets of calculus in three dimensions.
Then when she learned to expect it
She searched out poets, scientists, Frenchmen, chocolatiers.
One kiss was enough to do it.
But only for the cute ones; the others received a firm handshake
Or a subtle squeeze of the shoulder.

When the government agents discovered her giving a neck massage
To the President
They had to lock her up; they had no choice.
There was no trial. Who could try a woman
For writing the nuclear codes
By counting off the stains on the teeth of thirty drawings of people?

They've locked her up in Guantanamo now

And she draws on her walls with dirt.

Fifteen FBI officials

Push her "coincidentally" on their most dangerous prisoners

Then look for terrorist plots

In the strands of hair on a laughing woman

Or the spots on a rabid dog.

The Red Saxophone

The Red Saxophone plays jazz music outside the Black Velvet Café on Saturday nights. Its owner, a skinny man in his twenties, tended to lean his whole back against to the club's brick walls and blow, manipulating the keys to produce a deep, passionate tone. Oftentimes a crowd would gather around the doorway, watching in silence as the man filled the air with long howling notes. But Jill Collins believed the true artist was actually the saxophone, which gleamed in the doorway light every time its owner threw it up for a long grace note.

Jill knew the saxophone's owner. He taught different instruments at the café in the morning, and sold pot at night. Jill frequented him for both services. He was incapable, in her opinion, of the musical brilliance that came flowing from his instrument. The man was too tall and lean, not in the agonized emaciated sense. There was a great deal of careless energy about him, as if he forgot to eat as a joke rather than out of any pain or poverty. When girls walked by him he smiled often, flashing perfect teeth and laughing at their jokes. Not morose or filled with angst, not even remotely sad. He had none of the torture of a true artist. While his appearance was that of a smirking teenage boy-band, his instrument was the one that showed the chinks of a long battle on its surface. To Jill, it was only natural it must be the saxophone that sang with such mournful beauty.

Jill had asked him many times how he had acquired such an interesting looking instrument. It had all the curves and shine of its brassy sisters and cousins, but for a coating of translucent red paint someone had thrown on. The keys had been soaked in the paint, and on a few of the pads there were uneven globs sitting along the center. They had been soft enough at one time to have accepted the owners' fingerprints, which had left twisting lines along their tops and a puffed oblong shape. The rest of the instrument, from mouthpiece to bell, was an

unvarnished red. The inside of the bell was the only place that had been spared, although whiskers of paint quietly interrupted along the very edges before being sucked into the black hole and vanishing. In some places a fingernail had scratched the paint away, giving the sides an occasional wrinkle of gold. The effect looked amateur, even spur-of-the-moment, but eye-catching nonetheless. This saxophone had seen things. Jill longed to let her fingers press on the paint globs, scratch new gold lines into the paint, and otherwise claim it for her own.

He had had one arm wrapped around it when they first met. She had come to the café to talk about music lessons, particularly piano. It was a few weeks after her wedding, about a week after she realized she needed a distraction from her husband; while he provided the stability and financial security she expected, he was unable to provide the entertainment and stimulation she desired. The Black Velvet, meanwhile, had seemed to provide mystery, intrigue and a multitude of different types of smoke from the perspective of her mini-van. In early mornings she could hear an orchestra's worth of different instruments playing jazz over her talk radio and sports programs. It was this music that played through her head over her work day. The music had been the idea but it was the saxophone that had grabbed her attention.

"Is that paint water proof?" Jill asked.

"No clue," the owner remarked. "Why do you care?" Perhaps it was just good luck that the red hadn't slipped off the saxophone, like a jacket from high school that rips and stretches but still manages to fit when wrapped around its owner. Jill immediately put it up to some higher power, someone that had a reason to keep this sax so unusual.

"Does the paint affect the sound quality?" she had asked a few seconds later, eyes focused on the black hole of an opening. "Sound quality" sounded like the proper musician word and she had a brief moment of pride when she used it.

He answered in a monotone, “No.” She waited for him to continue but instead the sax decided to start playing something. It was a John Coltrane number, something long and glorious. She was starting to believe in God just listening to it.

This man couldn’t do that, not with that attitude. She tested him. “How do you decide what you're going to play?”

He lifted his lips from the saxophone's mouthpiece. “I don't. It just feels right. Did you come here for something?”

Jill stopped asking questions for a while. Instead she just leaned against the wall near him, watching him manipulate the keys and listening to the result. Deep and layered, the music that slipped from the saxophone’s bell seemed to transport Jill back to her music history classes in college, and the feeling of alienation it symbolized. Jazz music did not belong to her; she could never understand it, not without the guidance and assistance of something like Bertha.

She had decided at one point that the saxophone's name was Bertha. It fit her. She was a deep tenor, with a fierce u-bend and a wide bell brimming with deep notes. Whenever her owner tried to make her play something light she rebelled, purposely screaming notes rather than singing them, waiting for her opportunity to dip low once more. She hated him for making her play commercial garbage. A few weeks ago a couple of teenagers had asked him to play ‘Happy Birthday’ and he had complied, winking at the girl as his hands flitted around the buttons. Bertha obeyed for a short time, but when he went in for a second verse her voice lowered and slowed. It was more a dirge than a jazz number. The teenagers walked off with neutral faces.

Eventually she learned the owner’s name was Miles. “Yes, I’ve heard it all before, should’ve played the trumpet, but you can’t help what you have.” He poked at Bertha on the last word, and

Jill felt her whole body twitch. She longed to smack his hand away but resisted.

Miles told her he taught music for the money and sold pot for the company. “You meet a lot of interesting people on the streets, you know?”

He had introduced Jill to Duke Ellington and the finer points of cigarette rolling, the latter a job he took on with great enthusiasm. Eventually they set a date for lessons, meeting every other Friday in the Black Velvet’s entrance. The Black Velvet’s owner, a man named Joe, knew Miles well and let him work in the smoky corner, where an old upright piano puffed out its last breaths out of a hole in its broken top.

“This thing’s been here longer than I’ve been born, you know? Joe used to try and get bands to play here; you wouldn’t believe the history she’s got hidden beneath her strings.”

“I wonder how that piano compares to your sax. Where did you get her, anyway?”

He answered her quickly, throwing the words over his shoulder and not looking back.

“Her? That saxophone belonged to my father. His father used to play all the time.”

“Who painted her red?”

“No one knows. Did you practice this week?”

Miles was a liar. Bertha must have had some knowledge. Her mouthpiece was sticking out of his rucksack then, waving itself, beckoning. Jill let one finger slide along the red surface, stopping at the reed that poked out. The surface was surprisingly warm.

“I’d like to buy it from you,” she said wistfully.

“Yeah, right.” He kicked his rucksack and the mouthpiece vanished within.

“No, I’m serious Miles. I don’t think I like the piano all that much. I’d like to learn to play the sax.”

“Well then, there’s a piano store on 3rd and Preston. You can get one any time you like.

I'll teach you."

Jill gritted her teeth at the insult. Her eyes fell back on Miles' backpack. She could almost see the bag wiggle. Something wanted out.

Jill was a slow learner. As much as Miles begged her to repeat and repeat his assigned songs, her fingers moved clumsily against the white keys. Music was harder than any other foreign language she tried. It took her a couple of months before she could play a song like "Summertime" at the expected speed and tempo. After that he taught her a little Monk, a lot of Ellington, all sorts of different standards. He showed her how to play 'Gloomy Sunday,' which quickly became her favorite melody. She would play it constantly on her piano at home, singing the lyrics under her breath. Miles had told her it was known as 'the Hungarian suicide song' and if you listened to it too often you would die of despair. He must have been exaggerating. She played it for two weeks straight right under her husband's nose but he stubbornly resisted death. When the song got too repetitive he just walked out of the room.

Though he was never a confrontational man, Jill's husband had a little bit of a problem with all the time she spent on jazz, particularly the amount of time spend in the presence of Miles. 'He isn't even an artist, you know,' he snapped one day. 'He just copies old songs from the twenties and lets the girls swoon around him. Have you ever seen him do anything original?' Her husband looked like a woodland animal when he was angry. His little nose dipped low and black eyes curved inward, turning beady.

"Jazz has a long and varied history over most of the 20th century," she stated, echoing both her college professor's jazz lecture and Miles' brief, barely interested run-down, "and the music he plays is quite lovely. If you really listened you'd notice.' Bertha always played things

just a bit lower in pitch than the recordings played, adding her hint of melancholy.

“You’re always taking his side. Why do you have to go to that café for lessons?”

“That’s where he’s comfortable. Why do you always do your work on the kitchen table?”

He growled to himself and shook his head. Whenever her husband entered this badger mode Jill always considered locking him outside to burrow in the grass. He would be more comfortable there.

Jill and Miles worked on her piano skills for weeks and weeks after that. As he got more comfortable with his student, Miles started to let Jill have more access to Bertha. He stopped hiding Bertha whenever Jill’s eyes wandered to her; he’d even started to take amusement from her interest. “You got a thing for red, Jilly?” He had started to call her “Jilly” a little bit after her husband’s outburst; Jill had liked it enough to try and train her husband to say it. There was no reason to believe it, but Jill was convinced that Bertha had subtly suggested the nickname to Miles during one of their performances, whispering it under her grace notes subliminally.

“I love red. It’s my favorite color.” Her fingers traced the saxophone’s curves, longing to place them around the keys.

“You know they can tint the metal on the instruments now, right? You don’t need to worry about taking my girl. Just buy your own.”

“Absolutely not. It’s got to be her.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you know?”

Miles’ eyes widened in surprise. Before he could respond, a gruff voice coughed behind them; it was Joe. Someone’s father or brother, he wasn’t sure who, had come looking for Miles

specifically. Miles slid away from the piano slowly. It was the first time Jill had seen him seem reluctant to part company, both with the piano or her. Joe beckoned Miles up front but the café's owner had a powerful voice, something Jill could hear even from her corner. "Is there something you want to tell me?" he nodded to the exit, where the brother or father had exited.

"Probably somebody's been telling stories. You know how it is, don't you Joe? When a girl thinks you're talented and you look like the type who would, you know what I'm saying don't you? I look at a girl and she gets all sorts of ideas."

"Oh right, I'm sure that's what's going on, Miles. I mean, it's not like you have any sort of preference in students, right?" He pointed at Jill, who couldn't help but laugh out loud at the thought of Miles preferring her. Miles started talking again, in a bit of a louder pitch this time. The words strung together, notes upon notes, incomprehensible. Jill had let her eyes disengage from the scene and fall on something far more interesting. Miles had left his rucksack under the piano, the zipper half-drawn. The red saxophone was poking out and silently observing the battle that was brewing between the two men. Jill followed the direction Bertha's reed pointed her to. Joe and Miles were in a full-blast argument, thrusting fingers in each others' faces. Jill thought back on a nature show she had watched, where two deer had fought over a mate. It could have been these too, bashing their antlers against each other's bodies, puffing out their chests to try and look more threatening. The saxophone's metal body seemed much more collected, even human. With the two distracted she snatched the bag out from under the piano and slipped into the bathroom.

She breathed slowly. Her whole body sagged to the ground as she dropped the rucksack. The saxophone's mouthpiece appeared to be pushing its way out of the bag's top. She helped it, pulling the zipper and letting her hands rest on the bell. Removing the saxophone was a slow task,

like the opening of a flower or the hanging of a work of art. As each key became exposed she felt a both rush of joy and awe. By the time the end of the u-bend was in view she could only hold Bertha with the very tips of her fingers. The saxophone settled in Jill's lap as her fingers fondled the keys and slid against the gold wrinkles. The warmth she had noticed once before was still there, even where the red paint gave way to brass and bamboo reeds. Bertha practically pulsed.

Slowly she raised the saxophone to her eye level, pressing one of her thumbs against the back. The saxophone's top dipped in her direction, inviting her to the obvious conclusion. There was only one right way to introduce herself to Bertha. She put her mouth around the reed and blew.

The sound that came out was an elephant's cry, mottled and rough. She released the reed. Embarrassment set in. What was Bertha trying to say? Was she rejecting Jill?

Jill's hands linked around the saxophone once more, and she pressed the keys. The globs of paint still seemed to have some give in them, and she could feel her prints like a signature claiming their place above Miles'. She blew again, pulling her fingers down.

She didn't know what she was playing, or if the sounds in her head matched the ones the world heard. To Jill each note connected like a word on a page, making the perfect order, turning into poetry and realigning, becoming a voice. Bertha was speaking through her. The Muse was singing her epic, through growls and blue notes.

The door opened; Miles had finally noticed her disappearance and gone in search of her. Now he'd found them. His face was half open as he gaped at the scene before him. It was jealousy, Jill was sure. Now that Bertha was hers, she would never belong to Miles again, or so she assumed. Jill turned her shoulder on Bertha's former master, pressing the saxophone into her chest. She could see him lean against the bathroom doorway, his look of anger dissipating into

one of interest. He was listening, in spite of himself. Jill's mouth released the mouthpiece and she whispered to herself, "A love supreme, a love supreme..."

Elementals

I. Some Real-Life Stories of Fire

“This book, do you know what it’s referencing? It’s talking about St. Pierre,” Lacey informed her brother. They were sitting in front of the library, waiting for their parents to pick them up after their required “educational family outing.” She had been reading her novel for the past hour in silence; he was watching baseball on his phone. Nonetheless she began pointing excitedly at the passage. “A volcano blew up and killed everyone in the town except for one man.”

“Oh, is that so?” His eyed remained glued to the screen.

“Yeah. He was in prison at the time.”

“That’s not true,” he replied, somewhat distantly.

“Why not?”

“God wouldn’t let a criminal live and all the rest die.” He gestured to the sky, as if expecting vocal confirmation.

“He wasn’t a murderer. And besides, who’s to say the dead didn’t come out better after all?” She remembered but didn’t tell him that the one survivor was found with burns covering at least 70% of his body, screaming in pain. The lava had risen to his cell window and looked in on him. As he waited for the magma to begin trickling in, the convective heat became too much and he collapsed. He was not told until later that the lava was unable to enter or burn through the heavy walls of his prison and had to pass him unmolested. After the first rescue crew picked through the smoldering remains of the town and its inhabitants, they took pictures of the black burns that ringed the building right up to his barred window. It was the only building, other than the church steeple, that was still standing after the pyroclastic flow had swept away the houses and all the people.

“Everyone always thinks that death is better,” he countered, “because they don’t experience it themselves.”

“Maybe that’s true.”

“And what’s worse than dying in a fire? Nothing.”

“Living through it,” she whispered.

II. The Malady of Wind

Erin began hearing the wind blowing in her ear, maybe a whisper, mostly a yell, on a sunny, still day just before she had turned fourteen. At first it was careful enough to keep quiet until the sun set. She didn't recognize her companion until she turned off the lights for bed, and the silence of her house gave the blowing sound a kind of echo chamber. Back then it sounded like the tapping of animal claws on a wooden floor above your head or a trickle of water falling drop by drop into a half-full glass of water. It didn't manifest full significance until the minutes wore on to hours and the single random sound started to remind her of her book on Chinese water torture. Then it escorted her to school, to the mall, and home again. She would wonder, in brief periods of solitude, if it was it trying to remind her of something she had forgotten, whispering frantically just below the point of comprehension or simply trying to annoy her into some kind of madness. Whispers turned to words, turned to voicesm turned to shouts, and her head started to ache as she realize that her companion wasn't interested in separating on weekends, or taking its leave by four in the morning. Impolite. While this constant disturber of her peace grew more confident she found herself losing sight of what she set herself to accomplish. She'd stop in the hall on the way to class and search for the ghost that haunted her steps. Rich girls hid their laughs behind science textbooks. Eventually it got louder, more insistent, and even more present. Finally, and with much pleading, her mother took her to the doctor in hopes of a medication. The physician was a kind woman, but she lacked what one would call bedside manner. Her timing, for instance, was unfortunate. She patted Erin's shoulder in one motion before sticking a long plastic spine in her ear. After staring down the canal for some time, she eventually informed the girl without irony that "your ear is just perfect, so it can't be that. Medical students should study it. Not even

a scratch!” Her whole face darkens as Erin burst into tears, for she doesn’t seem to realize that’s not what the girl wanted to hear, not at all.

III. The Girl Who Listened for Earthquakes

Elle liked to press her head against the Earth with one hand; she claimed in doing so she could hear the echoes of old earthquakes bouncing around the upper crust. I tried to tell her that this is Wisconsin, and earthquakes occur too far away for their murmurs to reach her eager ears. This explanation went about as well as could be expected, especially from one as ignorant as an older sister. She would push her ear even harder against the ground, until pebbles broke the skin on her cheek and blood dripped out and stained the brownish yellow green grass a gory shade of red. If it was dinner time and I dared to interrupt her she would shoot her free hand straight up and slash the air, almost grazing my knees. As I leapt backward there would be a second of silence and then she would jump up, squealing, "That was a Richter four! I just know it!" Before I could say anything she would fall down again, waiting for the clattering of an aftershock.

IV. On the Dangers of Rainfall

When Lena dreamt of rain, and the entire world is beat down in subjugation, and all living things flee from their caves and hideaways, where some voices rise with the sea level and others drop like a wrench in the ocean, when she sees the whole world turn blue-grey, you see it too, because she made it happen.

The visions started at thirteen. When her eyes closed she saw the river rise rapidly above her town, washing away homes like a child's sandcastle. She awoke to shoes floating across her bedroom floor, two ships sailing side by side on the way to the window. We told her travelling might help. Yet as soon as her exhaustion overcame her, the rain came too. There were places that hadn't seen wet weather in months, years even, suddenly overcome by drops that fell like bullets, hail the size of baseballs, and even the occasional snow. She learned that in Dallas, Texas they don't have a city-wide plan in place for 13 inches of snow, not even for five solid weeks of torrential downpour. After she slept in the Badwater basin for three months, the deluge had transformed the desert into a flower field. The world had been painted yellow, God's hand brushing liberally against the brown, murky terrain.

The girl thought that her entire destiny would involve drowning squirrels and causing property damage. Yet when her eyes opened and watched the blossoms breath in the water, she couldn't help but smile, pluck a few blooms and weave them into her hair.