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Mother Tongue

Amanda Love Giracca
Northern Michigan University

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MOTHER TONGUE

By

Amanda Love Giracca

THESIS

Submitted to
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For the degree of

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Graduate Studies Office

2009

SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Amanda Love Giracca is recommended for approval by the Student's Thesis Committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Kate Myers Hanson

Date

First Reader: John H. Smolens

Date

Department Head: Dr. Ray Ventre

Date

Dean of Graduate Studies: Dr. Cynthia Prosen

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NAME: Giracca, Amanda Love

DATE OF BIRTH: January 22, 1980

ABSTRACT

MOTHER TONGUE

By

Amanda Love Giracca

Mother Tongue is a collection of three stories. Thematically linked, these stories examine loss, and each main character struggles to situate his/herself in the present by coming to terms with a void in his/her past. The author strives to deliver the stories with authentic dialog, strong organic detail, and a sense of place.

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2009

DEDICATION

To Ben, for patience

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I am eternally grateful to my thesis director, Katie Hanson—teacher, mentor, and friend—who spent countless hours guiding me in editing these stories. Thanks also to my reader, John Smolens, for his support and suggestions (and the occasional pint). I greatly appreciate all the other fine teachers I’ve had the privilege to work with these past two years: Jim McCommons, Dr. Bronwyn Mills, Dr. James Schiffer, Dr. Paul Lehmborg and Dr. Candy Bays. I have grown tremendously. And thanks to Dr. Ray Ventre, head of the English Department, for his exceptional support of and belief in his students. And none of this would be possible without Mama and Papa Giracca and Monsignor Shalles, who gave me respite from the frigid north (if only to a slightly less frigid north).

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

A month before my thesis was due—somewhere around the tenth revision of these stories—a common theme that I had not noticed before emerged. I don't know how I made it so long without noticing, but suddenly it was apparent that this collection of three stories deals with loss, or more specifically, the notion of *something missing*. “A good theme,” writes Argentinean author Julio Cortázar, “attracts a whole system of interconnecting links; for the author, and later for the reader, it ‘gels’ a vast amount of notions, half-glimpsed things, feelings and even ideas that were virtually floating around in his memory or sensibility.” I like this idea of “half-glimpsed things,” because I never saw my stories about loss, only about identity, about characters struggling to understand themselves in their surroundings. But what story isn't about identity? The deeper meaning was floating around, waiting for me to notice. After months of scrutinizing these stories on a sentence level I stepped back, and like magic their common theme arose.

“A good theme,” Cortázar continues, “is like a good sun, a star with an orbiting planetary system, that, often, goes unnoticed till the writer, an astronomer of words, reveals to us its existence.” And what does it take for the astronomer herself to notice? An apple falling on her head? Like an “aha!” moment, we don't create themes, we discover them. At any given moment they make themselves apparent, like a constellation suddenly presenting a picture out of a previously random smattering of stars.

In these three stories, each main character tries to reconcile him or herself with the past, more specifically with an object or person from the past that is now gone. In

“The Artist,” Elaine struggles to define herself as an artist and as a person after losing her right arm in a car accident. In “A House in the Country,” Ted struggles through his adult life replaying his brother’s abduction, forever trying to make sense of the moment his brother disappeared. And in the collection’s title story, “Mother Tongue,” Jemma tries to fill in the void left by her deceased mother with language, books, and astronomy, only to understand that the things of her mother in no way substitute for the woman herself.

That I subconsciously revisit this theme of loss and of reconciling with the past could say a vast number of things about my own psychology, but luckily, I don’t need to know what. I offer up these stories that the reader may chart her own discoveries, draw his own message from the stars. And just as most of us are content to enjoy the sun’s warmth without having to constantly keep in mind the planetary implications involved, I also hope that the following can be enjoyed simply and purely as stories.

The Artist

As the late-afternoon sun drops across the Cincinnati skyline, it gives the museum a quiet feeling. Elaine Clay watches the light through an arched window, the way dust motes cling to nothing, defying gravity. She feels out of place in this modern art exhibit. As she stands before a canvas, she can make no sense of the splashes of color, the disequilibrium of the shapes. “It’s just supposed to evoke an *emotional* response,” Nora would say, but her eyes still try to decipher some sort of concrete image. As she and Nora walk slowly, she clutches the empty sleeve of her brown corduroy coat. Nine months earlier she lost her right arm in a car accident, the bones obliterated up past her elbow. There had been no chance of saving it. They’d cut just below the shoulder. “Like the Venus De Milo,” Nora liked to say, “Except with an extra arm.” Grasping the empty sleeve has become a habit for Elaine, especially when she feels uncomfortable.

“Sweet Jesus,” she murmurs. The painting is titled *Apocalypse* and the whole point of it appears to be chaos. Like everything she sees in modern art—no point except absolute confusion, which, to her, is no point at all. She tries to like it, but it looks like a headache.

“What’s that, hon?” Nora asks. She is a few paces ahead of Elaine. Nora doesn’t take her eyes from the paintings as she speaks, twirling the end of her long red braid through her slender fingers. She wears a blue silk scarf tied *babushka* style, holding back unruly wisps. She’s been a saint, pulling Elaine from her suburban house, a different museum every week. Nora’s enthusiasm is endless. And Elaine knows that Nora is just trying to get her out, to be a good friend.

Nora peels her gaze away from the canvas and looks at Elaine. “You’re not having fun, are you?”

Elaine shrugs. She *wants* to enjoy herself. Even though they are in air conditioning, she feels hot. It is early May, and already there have been six consecutive days in which the temperature never dipped out of the eighties. Her long hair sticks to the back of her neck, and the brown coat is starting to itch. “I guess I’m just tired,” she says. “And I didn’t leave Glenn any message saying where I’d be.” Although she knows he is just at his desk, compulsively working on his architecture drawings, fiddling and perfecting.

“It’s okay,” Nora says, smiling. Elaine is afraid for a moment that Nora will go off on how Elaine’s her own person, how her boyfriend doesn’t need to know where she is every second. But she doesn’t. “I know you,” is all Nora says. “You’re just too much of a realist.” She winks at Elaine. “Mind if we just finish looking in this room, then we can head out?”

Elaine agrees. She thinks of how Nora would always accompany her to the exhibits of Elaine’s choice—almost always paintings of the human form. The two of them spent their art school days attending any life-drawing class that was offered. Now

they are both thirty-two and Nora's tastes have shifted. During her last year of art school she declared herself a "feminartist." "Why shouldn't I have an agenda?" she'd replied, when Elaine claimed Nora's art was becoming too didactic. She painted women who were maimed, women gagged and bound. She dyed her hair a bold red and took classes about "exploring the inner artist."

Glenn teased Elaine. "Pretty soon she'll make you go to classes on 'interpersonal communications with the *labia majora*,'" he joked. "If she busts out the mirror, run!"

But Nora exhibited no self-consciousness. "You only live once," she told Elaine after partaking in a three-day primal scream workshop. "I'd hate to think I'd wasted even a minute of my precious time on this planet."

At first Elaine tried out some of Nora's events. The yoga retreat in North Carolina had been okay; at least they were on the beach. But when it came to art, Elaine was a purist. She restricted herself to figure studies; she painted figures over and over again, as though searching for some perfection of form. Her goal was pure mimesis: the hollow scoop above a collar bone, the sharp drop of a scapula. She did not want to comment on or embellish what she thought was already perfect: the human body. They'd grown distant over the past few years, but since the accident Nora had made herself completely available to help Elaine. She'd be lost without Nora.

Elaine wanders in front of another large canvas. Red slashes jump out at her. The frenzied shapes keep her eyes roving all over the painting, never settling on one thing. It looks like the scene of an accident. She can't stop looking.

She feels a tingling in her right hand—or rather in the empty space where her right hand would have been. There's a sensation in the tips of the fingers and they brush

the surface of the painting. It's as though she can feel the textures of the canvas, the copious amounts of paint used to form the globules. She smiles to think of the alarms that would go off if she *did* reach past the security laser. She'll tell Nora about it later. Maybe Nora will think it's good that she is so intimate with the art.

When she opens her eyes Nora is still engrossed in front of another canvas. When Nora finally moves away, Elaine catches the painting's title: *Aftermath*.

When the car had flipped she was projected through the windshield. The glass smashed to bits from the impact of landing on the roof. Everything except her right arm made it through, her elbow hooked at the edge of the roof along the jagged remains of windshield. It was as though she'd "do-si-doed with the roof of the car," as one nurse put it. She had been driving through the sparsely forested patch of suburbia, up towards Fairfield, where deer roamed from yard to yard like tamed pets. For twenty minutes she lay pinned by the roof of her Subaru Outback. Groceries were spread amidst the glass. Not five miles from home, she thought of Glenn getting up from his desk every ten minutes to stir the minestrone, waiting for her to return with the parmesan that they both loved to grate into their soup. While the medics pried at the vehicle and the police pieced together exactly how Elaine ended up beneath the car, she tried to calculate the exact swerve that had put her car over the embankment, the astounding timing of the buck. An hour later, strapped to the stretcher in the back of the ambulance, she closed her eyes and saw the animal's perfect body leaping, stretched in mid-air—muscles tensed beneath the hide—forever making contact with the hood of her car.

*

Inside Nora's Honda, Elaine sweats in her coat, wishing she'd worn the silk one. But she'd already worn that one four days in a row and couldn't bear to wear it a fifth.

A few weeks ago, when the warm weather came, Glenn said, "Fuck what other people think." Elaine refused to venture out of the house without a coat or heavy sweater to disguise the missing arm. "Elaine," he said, smoothing her dark hair away from her face, "you just need to get used to it." She pulled away from his hand and said, "Please, don't." She slipped into the coat. "I'll get used to it on my own time, thanks."

Tonight at least she wears a skirt, the evening air tepid against the bare skin of her legs. She was shocked at how white they looked in the mirror this morning, missing the days of tanned skin when she would spend hours out in her and Glenn's tiny backyard garden. She'd take breaks from painting, plant dahlias. She loved their small explosions of gold, crimson, and chocolate brown, the way the succulent stalks depended upon her assistance—without stakes the sunburst-shaped flowers would droop beneath the weight of their own beauty.

Nora's brakes screech as they pull to a stop in front Elaine's house.

"Tomorrow, my place?" Nora asks.

Elaine nods and Nora leans over and pecks Elaine's cheek.

"Take care, babe."

Inside, Glenn is chopping cucumbers in the kitchen. He is shirtless, in shorts, and barefoot.

"Oh, there you are." He chops thin, perfect slices. "I was beginning to wonder if those aliens finally got around to abducting you."

“Sorry.” She walks over and kisses him on the shoulder. “I was at the museum and completely lost track of time.” She drags a stool away from the counter to sit, but he puts the knife down and pulls her towards him. His belly sticks out slightly over the waist of his shorts—it always has—and she remembers how much she likes it. It’s the little imperfections—the belly, the way his hair frizzes in the humidity—that she likes so much. He runs his hands over her hair, tucking it behind her ears. He helps her out of her coat, smooths the wrinkles from her T-shirt, and kisses her forehead.

“Out with Nora?” he asks.

“I was.”

He returns to his task, arranging the slices atop beds of mixed greens in bowls: cucumbers alternated with red onions, sliced so thin they are almost translucent. “A new exhibit?” he asks.

“Modern.”

He scrunches up his face, smiling. “Did she make you look at big black circles and ask what they make you think of?”

Elaine laughs. “Shut up, you. But yes, it was along those lines.” She watches him shake the honey, mustard, and oil in a jar.

Somewhere in the back of their hall closet are her sketchbooks filled with drawings of Glenn cooking, Glenn at his desk, and later, once he became impatient with all her staring, Glenn sleeping. Through her endless sketches of him she felt she’d never been quite able to capture the essence of him. Now, without her drawing arm, she has to live with the sense of her work being left undone. No matter how many years she spent learning to do things with her left hand, she would never be able to draw like she used to.

He carefully drizzles the dressing over each salad. Even through his furrowed brow he looks happy; he always seems to these days. She looks down at her salad. The loops of dressing perfectly overlap the spheres of cucumber. She lets her imaginary fingers hover over the cucumbers, absorbing their coolness, touching for a moment the slick surfaces. She remembers her long, thin fingers, nails trimmed short, her slender wrist with visible veins. A hand that did things. Fingers that created, that had swirled life into a thousand figure drawings.

“Hungry?” he asks, handing her a fork.

She takes it, looking down at her left hand. The nails have grown long, and she’ll have to ask Glenn to trim them again.

There wasn’t much left to remove. The car, the doctor told her, had done most of the work. He said all the right things. It was a miracle, really, that it was her arm and not her head. It was remarkable that she came out alive at all.

Since she was eight years old, she’d wanted nothing more than to paint. She had some talent, but she wanted to be phenomenal. So the next twenty years of her life were dedicated to technique. She took every art class in her high school and went on to art school. She figured at one point that she had painted more than five hundred people throughout her career, the figures of different models like a flip book in her mind. Like snowflakes, no two bodies were alike, and with each new model she would dig in, as if starting a new novel, waiting to see what each new curve would bring to her canvas.

She knew to be grateful for her life. But she couldn’t keep from thinking, why not her left arm instead of the right? She’d hardly known life without painting. Whereas

she'd always been able to appreciate the world around her, she thought this appreciation had a great deal to do with why she was an artist. Glenn still had his architecture, and she envied him at his desk, bent over his computer. Or, as he still preferred the old-fashioned way, over a sketch, the hours slipping away as he scrupulously added lines of graphite to his page.

Three months after she was released from the hospital she began making regular visits with Dr. Phelps. A tall man, he had a tendency to stroke his mustache with the end of his pen while listening, "mm-hmming" after each statement. He would lift what was left of her upper triceps and biceps, test the muscle development in the shoulder. He was careful to work around the scarring at the stub, where the skin was still pink and tender, still at the beginning stages of healing. Even the occasional nudge would send shooting pain through her shoulders and clavicles. For weeks she avoided crowds for fear of bumping into people.

The "sensation" began soon after the pain from the surgery had subsided. One day, returning from errands, Glenn hung his down vest on a hook by the door. As he turned, Elaine noticed several down feathers stuck to his black sweater. "Come here a sec," she said. He came towards her and before she knew it she was reaching with her right arm to pluck the feather from the sweater. She closed her eyes, grasped the feather. It was so light and soft between her fingertips. She let it drop. But when she looked it still clung to his sweater, and his wide dark eyes stared down at her. She had felt it. She swore she had touched it.

When she told Dr. Phelps he said, "They used to think it was a psychological phenomenon. But phantom limbs are now understood to be completely neurological."

He had the kind of smile where his eyes wrinkled up but his mouth hardly moved at all. “It’s completely normal to feel as though your hand is there. It often manifests itself in the feeling of itchiness, tension, or pain.” He went on to explain how one woman missing her arm had described it—the missing limb was felt to be there, but it was, in fact, “six inches too short.”

Mostly what Elaine felt was the desire to touch things. At the end of the appointment when Dr. Phelps ushered her out of the office she paused behind him, closed her eyes, and stroked his smooth bald head. He turned and looked at her. “Coming, Ms. Clay?”

She opened her eyes quickly, relieved to see that she had not indeed touched the doctor’s head. “Yes, of course,” she answered, and quickly walked into the hall towards the receptionist’s desk.

As Glenn begins the dishes, Elaine retreats to their tiny yard with a glass of cabernet. She laments not having had the chance to clean out the garden last fall. Dead stalks litter the ground, flattened from the winter’s snow. She should have at least cut back the geranium, although new green is beginning to sprout out between the brown clumps. Glenn would never get to it; that much she knew. Once, during the early spring, just after the sensations began, they received a surprise foot of snow. She stood out here in her galoshes, reaching in up to her elbows. It was like touching snow for the first time. It was crisp and numbing, and she was tempted to stay there for hours. Was it possible to feel the re-death of her arm? Would it blacken with frostbite, need to be severed all over again?

She can hear Glenn running the water—hot and sterile the way he likes it—clinking the dishes around in the sink. Outside the sun is just dipping; the landscape around them is flat like cornbread, the sun’s descent with no hills to hide it. Voices of kids playing in neighboring backyards rise up; the air cools a notch. Just across the yard is the fence post Glenn kicked in last year. A thin picket, cracked nearly in half at the middle. A few weeks before the accident she had told him she wanted time alone, to try things out for herself. The truth was that the idea of life without change was excruciating to her. Five years they’d been together, two living in the same house. They’d never felt the need to be officially married, but now she realizes it was for different reasons. She hadn’t been quite ready to settle, thought maybe she’d travel more, see some of the world on her own. But then she flipped the Subaru. Sometimes her heart crushes with impatience, *what if, what if* clicking like a metronome inside her head. Still, no one has fixed the fence.

Back inside, Glenn is at his desk—back to the drawing board, so to speak. He has put on the Will Oldham C.D.

It’s a hard life, for a man with no wife . . .

Glenn hated it at first, and she couldn’t stop listening to it. She loved Will’s just-out-of-tune voice, the way it cracked. But then Glenn acquired a taste for it and now she is sick of it.

It’s a hard life, God makes you live.

“It’s nice and mellow—easy to work to,” he claimed.

Glenn can’t go an idle moment without making his way back to his drawings. Elaine is reticent to call them drawings—so devoid of anything artistic, lines and boxes,

everything a mathematical equation. She drains her wine glass and sets it on the mantel. The music is loud enough and Glenn is so absorbed that he doesn't hear her. She walks up behind him; his pencil keeps scratching away at the graph paper. She leans down and closes her eyes, smells the saltiness of his bare shoulders, catches the slightest hint of his shampoo, almonds or molasses; she doesn't know which but it's like something good to eat. Her nonexistent right hand tingles and she reaches out until she feels Glenn's hand beneath her own. She twines her fingers over his, grasps the hard knuckles. She follows for a minute, making little marks with him. Then she tightens her grip and takes control of his hand. She begins moving the pencil in loose, open curves. She strays from the little squares, lets the graphite run off the paper, nicking the desk a little. She guides Glenn's hand and from memory sketches out the contours of his face. She starts with the low brow, makes a solid line for the long straight nose, is about to start on the round lips when the song ends. She can hear only his little marks again, not the swooping shooshes the pencil would make if she'd been drawing. In the silence she opens her eyes. Glenn clears his throat, finishes a line, and lifts his head suddenly, bumping into her.

“Jesus Christ, Elaine!” The pencil falls out of his hand. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long.” She wonders if she'll ever be able to complete her drawing.

He smiles. “Have you been having sensations again?”

She shrugs. “I guess so.” If only he knew. She had told him about it a few times. But he didn't know she had them every day. He didn't know that five out of seven nights last week she stood behind him transforming his architecture into human forms, softening his lines, giving his work life. Or that when he slept she touched the lines of his face,

imagining he might reawaken as though bathed in something magical. She didn't know what she wanted to change in him. But she wanted it—something spontaneous, vibrant, and alive.

Still smiling, he pulls her towards him. His hand slides up beneath her shirt, his palm smooth and warm. He undoes a few buttons, his breath a hot mist on her stomach. He goes to pull her down into his lap, but she loses her balance. She trips forward and reaches out, as though to brace herself on the desk. Her would-be-right hand slams into the desk, and she keeps falling, more weight crashing down onto the hand. She would have felt bones snap. Before the stump of her right arm can actually hit the desk, Glenn catches her. But it's too late. The pain grows. She is steadied, standing, but it is as though she never stopped coming down on her hand. She backs away, and even part way across the room it is as though her hand is in a vice, crushing all the delicate bones of her fingers.

“Elaine, what is it?”

She drops to her knees.

“Elaine?” He walks over and puts a hand on her back.

She lies down on the floor.

“Babe, talk to me.” He leans down straightens out her shirt, re-buttons it. There is a deep line between his eyebrows.

“I wish you could just cut it off,” she says. “Just make it go away.”

“The pain?” he asks. “Make what go away?”

“It’s like something squeezing and squeezing that won’t let go. The phantom limb thing is true.” The pain surges, burning, then unbearable weight. “I wish you could cut off my arm.”

“But it is gone, babe. It’s not even there anymore.” He is stroking her hair.

“It’s like the bones are being crushed.”

His fingers tangle, a tug on her scalp. “It’s gone,” he says again. “There’s nothing there.”

She grinds her teeth, lets the pain overtake her. Glenn looms over her and coos his soft mantra, “Nothing there, nothing there at all.” But eventually Elaine doesn’t hear it anymore, lost in the buzz of unbearable pain, in the sea of stars behind her eyelids.

She would like to offer Dr. Phelps a painting for his office, something to replace the generic sunset which she is forced to look at as she waits for him. The neat jars of cotton balls and rubber gloves are more interesting to look at, but she and Dr. Phelps aren’t exactly on a gift-giving basis yet. Not to mention he probably doesn’t give a hoot what’s hanging on his walls. And who knows how he’d react to her offering of a nude figure to adorn his walls as he examines patients.

Dr. Phelps enters, beneath his white lab coat his khakis are neatly creased, his glasses rest on top of his head. He gives her a nod. “Ms. Clay, how are you this week?”

She tells him about the pain. The initial crushing sensation. After she finally got up off the floor the night before she drank three more glasses of wine, which had helped to ease the pain. When she awoke this morning it had lessened to a dull throb.

“Mm hmm,” he says, rolling up his sleeves. “Can you pinpoint a place where it hurts?”

It is in her hand, most definitely just in her hand, although the rest of her phantom arm tingles.

He nods and reaches out for her shoulder. “Is this the first occurrence of pain?”

“It is.”

After a few pokes in the shoulder he turns and reaches down into one of the lower cabinets. “We have an exercise that we do for patients with pain in the phantom limb.” He pulls out a rectangular box with a hole in the end. One of the long sides of it a mirror, and he wipes away any smudges with the edge of his sleeve. “The neurology behind this, needless to say, is quite complex.” He adjusts the box, fitting the stump of her arm into the hole. “But we find that it almost never fails.” He holds the box up for her, as there is nothing to keep it attached to her upper arm. When she looks, the mirrored side of the box is reflecting her left arm. The reflection creates the illusion that her right arm is complete, down to the hand.

“Wiggle your fingers,” he says. “But keep looking in the mirror.”

She wiggles her left fingers, and in the mirror her right fingers wiggle too. She plays an imaginary piano like she is complete with two arms, and the dull throb subsides. The pain, to her amazement, begins to clear up. Still holding the box to her arm, Dr. Phelps looks up. It is the first time she has seen him genuinely smile. She likes the way one incisor overlaps the other in front. “Feel any better?”

She nods.

“There’s a part of your brain that is still convinced you have an arm. Your cerebral cortex is making false associations. The pain exists, but the nerves don’t. The pain has no way of making it to your brain, it remains trapped in your hand—so to speak—waiting for someone to acknowledge it.”

“Like a ghost,” she said.

“Something like that,” he says, straightening up. “Phantom limb. Ghost limb. All the same idea.” He hands her the box. “You’ll probably want to take one of these with you. The first occurrence of pain usually isn’t the last.” He walks back over to the counter and picks up his clipboard. His eyebrows knit again, the smile dispersed.

“Again, Ms. Clay, I urge you to consider the prosthetic arm. Of course it’s no replacement for a real limb. But it might do your brain some good to acknowledge that your right arm isn’t quite what it used to be.” He scribbles something. “If the pain recurs, please give us a call.” He smiles—the eye wrinkling kind—and exits the room.

Nora is leaning on the window sill of her second-story apartment. Her head is out the window and she is smoking a cigarette. Her building is smoke-free, but she does it anyway. “Holy shit,” she says. Her long silver earrings jingle as she slowly shakes her head. “So, let me get this straight. Doc What’s-His-Face healed your pain that actually isn’t even there?” She throws the butt out the window.

“The *pain* existed,” Elaine says, looking at Nora. “I guess just in my head. And I wouldn’t say that he healed it. He didn’t do anything, really.”

Ever since the accident, Nora has been referring more and more to the “Drawing With Your Other Brain” workshop she took last year. In it, the participants were urged to

create in ways they were not used to, such as painting with the non-dominant hand. It was supposed to be about breaking habits, about exploring how people become addicted to routine. She showed Elaine slides from the members of the class: the man who'd drawn in a sketchpad an indecipherable black squiggle on every page, the poster-boards with chocolate pudding finger-paintings, the drawing of the naked woman composed entirely of minute penises. "Aren't they brilliant?" Nora had asked.

"I'm not so sure I get it," Elaine said. Why purposefully make bad art? It was like going from villanelles to nursery rhymes. She just didn't see the point.

Nora lights a stick of incense. "Trippy. It's just straight up trippy." She waves it around, dispensing the musky smoke before sticking it into the soil of a potted plant. Elaine loves Nora's city apartment—the enormous windows, high ceilings, the warped hardwood floors. It has so much more character than her suburban home, but she knows she would never convince Glenn to move into the city. *The noise, the traffic*, it was always something. Before the accident Elaine had wanted the quiet, sterile nature of suburbia. But now she craves distraction and the hum of city-life. If she couldn't draw people, at least she could look at them. She had wanted to shake Glenn at times, pull him from his graphs, his buildings, his computer. *See?* She wanted to shout. *Can't you see all those people? So alive?*

"And the other sensations?" Nora looks at her. Elaine has told her a little about the touching obsession.

"You know, I haven't actually had any since last night."

"That's a good sign," Nora says.

Elaine sits on the worn sofa and looks out. Pigeons are lined on a wire right outside the window. “Why?” she asks.

Nora opens a closet and begins pulling out supplies—sketchpads, oil pastels, a few rags. “Because you’re holding onto something that isn’t *there*,” she says. She smooths a blank sheet of paper before her.

“I like the sensations, Nora.” Her heart stirs as she sees all the vibrant colors neatly lined in the box. “Don’t you think it’s sort of fascinating?”

Nora grips a greasy orange block in her hand. “Oh, absolutely!” she says. “Of course it’s *interesting*.” She sits on the floor and begins smearing the block across the pad. “But you’re not learning to get over it. You’re in denial.” She smears for a moment, then smiles. “You’re just as stubborn as that boyfriend of yours.”

Elaine thinks Nora’s technique has gone all to hell, right down to the way she holds the oil pastel, her wrist dragging across the page, smudging the orange. She’s tempted to try for the sensation, to reach out and take hold of Nora’s hand the way she does Glenn’s. But there’s something in the way Nora moves across the page that keeps Elaine back. Her arm moves in free, open strokes, the ropes of her muscles flexing as she goes.

After a few moments, Nora looks up at her. “How are things with Glenn, anyway?” She pushes the pad away from her and lies down, propping her head in one hand, and then continues drawing.

Elaine looks out at the pigeons. “He’s been so sweet. He’s been so incredibly patient with me.” A pigeon flies off the wire, and a moment later the whole group follows, wings shimmering in the sunlight. “I don’t know how he does it.”

Nora continues drawing, orange quickly taking over the page.

“I want to kill him sometimes,” Elaine says. The statement comes out so quietly but fills the space between them, as substantial as a third person in the room.

Nora pauses and looks up at Elaine. Tiny lines gather around the corners of her mouth, from the corners of her eyes—all that smiling. Elaine looks out the window and a moment later Nora’s oil pastel swipes the page again.

“I can imagine,” Nora says quietly.

Elaine turns her attention back towards the orange page. It’s how engrossed Nora is in what she’s doing that Elaine envies. She crouches down onto the floor and closes her eyes, reaching out for the oil pastels. She tries to conjure up the feeling; she wants to feel the greasiness beneath her own fingers, her own arm moving across the blank page. She starts to feel a tingling.

“Hey,” Nora says. She is wiping orange off her fingers with one of the rags.

Elaine pauses in mid-crouch.

“Not like that,” Nora says. Elaine sighs, straightening up. She looks out the window but the wires are empty. “Fine,” she says after a moment. She thinks of Glenn, wishing he would do something horrible so that she could leave him. But she knows he never will. Kind sweet Glenn. Glenn who would love Elaine unconditionally no matter what happened to her. If anything changed it would have to be her move.

Elaine grabs a brown oil pastel. It is clumsy in her left hand, and she immediately wants to drop it. But she leans over the sketchpad and puts the pastel against it. She doesn’t know how to begin.

“Just move,” Nora says. She goes back to her drawing, but her motions are smaller now; Elaine can tell she’s not focusing like she was before.

Elaine draws a long rectangle. It’s the first thing that comes to her mind. When it begins to look like something—the torso of an animal—she adds legs. She fills in her shapes the way a child would, making the outline first, and then coloring them in. She adds a head and tall branched antlers. She makes the deer as though it is flying, legs all outstretched, smack dab in the middle of the page. After she adds the small, uplifted tail, she pauses to take a look. It is ridiculous. The lines are all wobbly, the proportions completely off. It looks like a seven-year-old’s drawing, the head nearly half the size of the body. It is horrible. It is quite possibly the ugliest thing she has ever drawn. She puts the pastel back to the page and continues, filling in the lines, adding shading and depth, giving the deer some life.

A House in the Country

They find the first one on a Sunday morning in November. Ted and Marla enter the old garden shed they are using for a coop and the flock disperses, revealing the hen's stiff body, a bald patch where the rest of the flock has begun to peck away at her.

“What do you think, a weasel?” Ted asks. He runs his hand along the boards of the shed and locates a small hole in the corner. A cloud of downy feathers rises and settles as he kneels and pokes three fingers through the opening. “What else could fit through there?”

Marla is holding the hen, smoothing what's left of the rust-colored feathers back into place. The two vertical lines between her eyebrows are deep, the way they look during the throes of lovemaking, pained or focused. “You think a weasel would be smarter than that,” she says, “trying to squeeze this big bird through that little hole.”

He almost says he didn't suggest the weasel had tried to pull the bird out, only that that's how it got in.

“Look at this,” Marla says, thrusting the bird into his hands. It is light, nearly weightless. “There, on the back of the neck.” She shows Ted the crusty wound just below the walnut-sized head.

“Whatever it is,” he says, rubbing dried blood between his fingers, “we have some sort of predator on our hands.”

She takes the hen back and announces she is going to bury it. They’ve hardly had the chickens a week. She could just toss the thing into the woods behind the house, let the coyotes and crows get it, but he doesn’t say this. He tells her he’ll stay and check the shed for holes, figure out some way to patch the place up.

They’ve been living in the old farmhouse for six months now. It was a move they’d both wanted to make, out of Manchester and closer to New Hampshire’s White Mountains. They’d searched for this farmhouse, which seemed to tilt east, drafts entering through invisible cracks that swirled around their ankles in winter. But they loved their tiny village and the stand of woods beyond the backyard. It was their first house, and with maturity and pride came an overwhelming sense of responsibility—suddenly all this space to fill. And then, for her thirtieth birthday two weeks ago, Marla announced she was getting chickens. Ted had wanted to tell her no, that he didn’t need one more thing to take care of, but he knew it was useless. “If we’re not going to have children, at least we can have chickens,” she said.

He inspects the old shed, examining the walls for cracks or openings, scrawls a few measurements on a crumpled paper he pulls from his back pocket. Length, width of the shed, so that later he can build a roost. It’s not that he *doesn’t* want to have kids, at least he doesn’t think so. He tells Marla that it’s just not time yet, but truly it is because

he knows the delicacy of children, how they can disappear on you so quickly. There isn't a morning that goes by where Ted doesn't wake up still standing in a cloud of exhaust, bewildered, his brother Ralph forever disappearing into a stranger's van. So he tries to make do, holding on to everything he has, afraid he might slip up and let go.

He thinks of the porch he'd rather be building, the sealing he could do to make the house more efficient. Weak light seeps through the grimy window in the corner of the shed, the glass nearly opaque. They will have to install a lamp to keep the chickens laying throughout the year, through the darkest months.

When he's done, Ted stands in the shed's doorway and watches the flock of seven now—six hens and one rooster—scrabble in the grass. Only the rooster comes within inches of him, his iridescent purple and green tail oily in the sunlight. His red wattle reminds Ted of a scrotum, swaying a little as the bird brazenly pecks at Ted's boot.

"You watch it," he says closing the gate on the rooster and turning up the hill towards the house.

Inside, Marla is standing in the kitchen, one hand pouring thin brown tea into her favorite mug, the other hand holding open a worn copy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a book she reads cyclically, one she reaches for like a baby blanket or good luck charm. She interchanges it with books that she seems to collect by the dozen from the bookstore where she works. Whenever he asks how she reads the same book over and over she says, "I find something new every time." Her wild blond curls are held back in a ponytail, loose strands spilling out. Ted kicks off his boots and blows warmth into his fists.

"You know, I was thinking," she says, pouring a mug for him.

“About what?” He straddles a chair and leans his elbows onto the table, a considerable slab of oak that came with the house. It’s too long for the two of them and they end up huddling around one corner when they eat, various bills and papers piling up at the other end. The tea is hot down Ted’s throat, almost burning.

“Maybe we should ask the guys across the street about the predator.” Marla sits close to him, her robe pulled taut so that her nipples show through. “They’d probably know.” There’s a general store across the street. Not only can you get the *New York Times*, but you can also get weak coffee, day-old doughnuts, beer, wine and—just in case you run out—ammo. When they first moved here, Billy, the owner, was always out on the porch along with a posse of men whose main task in life seemed to be spectating. Ted can’t go out his front door without somebody knowing about it. Isn’t that what they were trying to get away from by being out here?

“I think we can figure this out without their help,” he says. “Those guys sketch me out.”

“Oh, come on,” she says. She is trying to sound playful, but he can hear the hint of annoyance beneath it. “Just because they’re four-wheeling Republicans doesn’t mean they’re not good neighbors.”

Ted goes to the window. The kitchen is at the back of the house and it looks down the hill towards the chickens, towards the woods with the shallow river that winds south through the valley, a white church steeple rising over skeletal trees in the distance. When they first moved here Ted explored the woods alone. He was sure he was trespassing—their house hadn’t come with more than three abutting acres. But who cared? Nobody was going to charge him for trespassing; no one would even know he

was there. That was back in early summer, when the trees were in full leaf, a lush green canopy overhead.

“I don’t care if they’re conservatives,” he says. “I just don’t like the way they look at us, as though we’re freaks or something. I mean, what if they’re looking at *you*, checking you out?”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, Ted.” Marla sighs. “They’re not checking me out.” She gets up, pulls a skillet from the cupboard and eggs from the fridge, store bought ones, because their chickens won’t lay for weeks. Not until Ted builds the roost boxes—small enclosed cubbies that they’ll line with straw like they’d read about in *Raising Chickens for Dummies* that Marla brought home last week from work. “And I don’t feel uncomfortable at all. Harold gave me a great deal on those chickens, you know that.”

Harold. Like they’re old chums. Ted turns back towards Marla, both hands wrapped around the mug for warmth. She cracks eggs into a bowl, her arms lifting high with each one to break the threads of the whites. Her robe shivers with her brisk movements. “Sorry,” he says. “I don’t mean to sound like a jerk.”

She grabs a fork and begins whisking.

“I want the chance to do this myself, first. We just got them, after all.”

She tilts the bowl sideways and whisks in circles.

“Once I seal up that coop it’ll be fine.”

She turns on the stove, the burner clicking before the gas is ignited with a swift *whoosh*.

He goes to stand behind her, arms encircling her waist. “Just give me a chance to do this for us, okay?”

She shrugs. “Alright, if you say so.” She turns the flame down, letting the skillet warm slowly.

He puts his face against her hair, slips a hand inside the robe, cupping a breast. Her shoulders drop and she leans into him, the fork slipping into the eggs. He holds her tight and can’t help but think that life is just fine the way it is, the two of them alone inside this house.

At night Ted hears coyotes. After six months of the howls sliding down the hillsides, entering his dreams, the noise still wakes him, makes him think of his childhood when his father would bring Ted and Ralph camping in the mountains. And thinking of Ralph at all, of course, brings back the memories of the day he disappeared. Ted was nine and Ralph thirteen; they were coming home from school like they always did, three o’clock, walking to meet their mother at her office. It was early spring, the maples just sending out their yellow wispy buds along the streets of Lowell, Massachusetts, where they lived then. A teenager, Ralph was becoming a mystery to Ted. Ralph walked a few paces ahead—not to be mean, just because he was in another world, oblivious to Ted. No matter how hard he tries, Ted can never remember enough. He hates that he didn’t pay more attention but figures he must have been distracted by the sun, the new warmth after a long winter. When the van pulled up, stopping along the sidewalk, a man leaned out the window and asked Ralph a question. Ted was too far behind to know what the man said. By the time he caught up they’d stopped talking. Ralph held up his hand, *Just wait here, okay?* Then Ralph swung open the van door, only one foot in and the van peeled away. He was swallowed up, vanished. Ted waited for over an hour, but no Ralph. He

walked to his mother's office, hoping Ralph would be waiting, that maybe he'd played some mean trick on Ted. Then weeks of policemen asking what color hair the man had. *Are you sure you didn't see the license plate?* Weeks of crying—his mother's high whine, his father's deep bellows loosed into the night. He came to know those sounds so well through the walls, alone in his room.

The yips rise up in unison, a congregation of lunacy. Ted makes his way to the window in the dark, leans his forehead against the cool glass. The chickens should be safe now, locked away in the shed. He has wedged a piece of wood into the hole until he gets scraps to patch it properly. But still, precautions are only precautions.

When Ted slips back into the sheets, Marla turns towards him, heavy with sleep. She nestles her body against his, not flinching from his cold skin. She slips a leg around his waist, initiating her semi-conscious lovemaking. Sometimes she will not even remember when he tells her about it the next day, and it's strange, as if he's taken advantage of her somehow. But he doesn't feel like it tonight, and he doesn't think he can even properly make love to her anyway. He suspects that Marla has stopped taking the pill. Even when he was certain she was swallowing the tiny blue tablet each evening, he would not come inside her, always pulling out at the last minute. These nights when the coyotes wake him he always gets out of bed, listens. The shrill canine talk floods the valley with echoes, howls like war ululations—then it ends abruptly, the animals suddenly silent, the night ever so still.

They find the second one on Tuesday afternoon, right in the middle of the chicken yard. The birds had all been there when he let them out early that morning, and it's not

really a dead bird he finds, but rather a wing, some feet, a small heap of viscera. When Marla gets home, she picks up the wing, shaking her head. “Poor baby,” she says, running the feathers against her cheek. Ted walks along the fence looking for holes, signs where an animal could’ve gotten through. He has brought home scraps of wood he salvaged from his worksite, renovating a wealthy New Yorker’s second home. At the end of the day he takes the odd-length boards to patch up the old garden shed and to make a roost for the chickens. But he feels he can’t work fast enough, or maybe his efforts are worthless because the chickens don’t seem safe anywhere. Suddenly Marla’s chicken plan annoys him.

“Maybe it was a hawk,” she says, “or an owl. They’d kill a chicken, wouldn’t they?”

He rubs a palm along his cheek. It’s ridiculous, the two of them trying to figure this out. A flock of damn chickens! What are they doing wrong? Ted suddenly misses the city and their old apartment where he knew how to do things like fix the dryer or drive in traffic. Marla looks like a little child, clutching the wing. “Doesn’t seem right, does it?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“Bird killing bird? Do they do that?”

“Well, the chickens were eating the last one.”

“Yeah, but it was already dead.”

“Yes, Ted, birds kill birds,” she says. “I’m pretty sure, anyway.”

“It’s sick,” he replies.

Marla just shakes her head. “It’s not sick. It’s nature. Survival.”

He turns back towards the fence and inspects it closely. He imagines a bobcat or a fox slipping through the wires, unable to tell if they'd fit. He's never seen either of those animals up close. Who has? He should've gotten the sturdier fence, with the smaller holes. But it didn't seem important before. "Well, if it *was* a hawk," he says, "you'd think it would pick up a chicken and fly away with it, not sit in the middle of the field and pull it apart."

Squabbling comes from the shed, and out runs a hen, the rooster in close pursuit. She ducks to the left, then swivels and runs right, but she doesn't fake out the rooster. He catches her, pins her, his feet jumping as he pivots, the two of them creating a cloud of feathers. It's hard to tell if they actually mate. Marla kneels and holds her hand out to one of the hens like she's trying to coax it towards her.

"I don't like that rooster," Ted says.

"What, don't like having another guy around?" Marla clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth like she's calling to a cat or a baby, but the birds pay no attention to her.

"He's up to no good."

Marla laughs. "He's a rooster, Ted. A cock, if you will. He doesn't think; he reacts."

He wants to ask *what do you know about birds*, but catches himself. He turns back towards the fence. He wonders about the first chicken, the possibility of a weasel, its slim spiral of a body. Looking at the fence he realizes each hole is big enough for such a mammal to slip through with ease. "Fuck," he says. No matter what he does it will never be enough.

Marla stands, resigned with the hen's aloofness. Or maybe put off by his swearing, scared that he's getting into one of his moods. "Well, I'm going to head up the hill," she says, still clutching the wing, holding it gently like she might be able to nurse it back to life. As she ascends she is tiny against the looming farmhouse, as though she could disappear. Ted waits until she goes inside, then walks down the hill to the edge of the woods. The river rushes in the distance, a faint yet constant roar. He squats beneath an oak, soaks in the feeling of solitude. It is safe here, where he only has to worry about himself. Ted is reminded of the coyotes—do they wait anxiously, plucking stealthily through the forest, anticipating their nightly forays with the pack?

When alone, Ted sometimes replays the memory of Ralph disappearing. There is the back of Ralph's head, his messy dark hair. Sometimes there is Ralph's sweaty palm, slipping through Ted's fingers, or Ralph falling onto the sidewalk as Ted pulls him from the van. There are sirens and shouts, Ted throwing a rock through the window. Ted with a BB gun, shooting out the tires, or sometimes a real gun ripping a hole through the driver's ribcage, blood speckling the windshield, the van careening to a stop. He conjures up the warmth of that Lowell spring—the click of a passerby's shoes, shouts floating up from the nearby playground.

Back in his yard, the sun is beginning to set. The six birds left in the pen are pecking about, indifferent. He goes up the hill and is about to enter the house when he hears Marla's voice across the street. Billy, the owner of the store, is leaning on the porch railing, and Harold, the man who sold her the chickens, in a chair next to him. Billy waves his arms and talks to Marla, and suddenly she laughs, her voice a high-pitched birdsong. When she gathers herself she glances towards the house as if looking

for him. Still smiling she beckons him over. As he nears the store, the smell of stale coffee wafts from the doors. Billy wears a hunter orange cap and has a silvery goatee; Harold is older than Billy, deep lines etched in his face. He wears a cammo cap. Both men have crystal blue eyes. They nod, the brim of each cap sporting hunting gear logos.

“Did you know that Billy and Harold are brothers?” Marla asks. “I had no idea, but looking at them now it’s so obvious, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess it is.”

Billy’s toothpick flicks around between his lips. He takes off his cap and scratches his head, revealing thin greasy hair.

Ted looks at Marla. “Did you ask them about the chickens?”

“Why no, I didn’t even think of it.” She winks.

“What’s that,” Billy asks, “got a problem with the birds?”

“Something’s picking them off,” Marla says. She explains the dead hen from Sunday, the kill that happened today. “We thought maybe it was a weasel, at least that first one.”

Billy jabs the air with his toothpick as he speaks. “If it was a weasel he’d a killed every chicken in the coop. They’re bloodthirsty little suckers.”

Harold shakes his head. “Come on, that’s just some old folklore, Billy, you know that.” He runs his tongue over his bottom teeth after he speaks. “Remember Grady’s weasel problem? It would sneak in once every week or so, pick one off here or there.”

Billy nods. “True,” he says.

“So you think maybe it was a weasel?” Ted asks.

Harold shrugs. “Hard to say, really.”

“Could be,” Billy says.

Ted turns and rolls his eyes at Marla. He indiscreetly tilts his head back towards their house.

“But you know,” Harold says, “Billy’s got some stuff in the back of the store that’d maybe help you out.”

“What kind of stuff?” Ted asks.

“Traps. Snares. Stuff like that.”

Marla tugs her coat around her shoulders. It is dusk and the air has cooled.

“Well, I’m going to head back to the house and get some dinner started. Ted, why don’t you see what they have?” She pecks him on the cheek and starts back across the street.

“Alright,” Ted says to the men. “Can’t hurt to take a look.”

Billy stays in the front of the store while Harold leads Ted to the back. Behind Harold, Ted suddenly feels tall and youthful. They walk back through the rows of dusty packaged food, cheap wine, stacks of papers, racks of porno mags, a cooler full of Blue Bonnet milk whose cloudy glass doors sport faded and peeling Red Sox stickers, and into a tiny room. Two buck heads decorate the walls. Behind a counter are shelves of ammunition. Harold goes to one corner and picks up a small box with a hole in the front.

“This here’s about as basic as you get.” He shows Ted how to bait the trap—bloody meat is best. The weasel will enter the hole, trigger a spring and seal the hole behind it, trapping it in the box. “Then you got just your regular poison.” He hands Ted a small bottle. “You sprinkle a few pellets onto some meat, put it outside the fence. Whatever’s getting your chickens will most likely be drawn to it. I’d only use it as a last resort, though,” he says. “Whatever eats it’ll most likely run off and die somewhere. God

forbid they choose underneath your porch or something as a final resting place. It'll stink to high hell for days." Ted starts to say no, he doesn't want the poison, but Harold interrupts. "Oh, I got one more thing," and he disappears out of the room. Ted peruses a wall of photos—men dressed in orange, holding up their kills by the antlers, bucks' pink tongues lolling out of mouths, blood staining the fresh New Hampshire snow. Harold comes back with a rifle. "Know how to use one of these?"

Ted nods. His father showed him when he was a kid, on one of their camping trips in the mountains. The three of them would go up into state land in the fall. But after Ralph's "accident"—how Ted's father referred to it—he locked all the guns away in the basement, like getting rid of everything dangerous would somehow make up for things.

"I really don't think this is necessary," Ted tells Harold, trying to give the gun back.

"Really, just hang on to it for awhile. I won't be needing it any time soon. Besides, you don't know what's getting your birds. If you've got a fox or a bobcat, you gotta take care of it."

Ted nods. *Take care of it.* He thanks Harold and tells him he should be getting home. He turns out of the little room and starts through the store.

"Want a girly mag with that bundle?" Harold asks, stopping at the rack of magazines.

Ted just shakes his head. "No thanks, Harold. I think I've got enough to keep me busy for tonight."

Harold laughs and claps him on the shoulder, running his thick tongue over his teeth again. “I’m just joking, kid. Seems like you don’t need anything like that anyway.”

Inside, the smell of chili wafts through the house. The stewing meat and vegetables has fogged the windows. He sets the gun and the trap by the door. In the kitchen Marla is leaning on the counter, *One Hundred Years* open before her. The binding looks so worn he wonders what she will do when the story disintegrates, important pages slipping out and disappearing forever.

“They’re nice guys, don’t you think?” she says, smiling up at him.

“Yeah, and extremely well versed in killing tactics.” He takes the lid off the pot and lets the steam drift up around his face.

“Did they give you any advice?”

He tells her about the ammo room and stirs the chili. “I guess we’ll just kill everything in sight and hope that somewhere in there we get whatever’s after the chickens.”

Marla laughs. “Well, at least they’re thorough.” She walks over and takes the spoon from him. “Grab some bowls, would you?”

As Ted reaches into the cupboard, he sees the chicken wing on the window sill, propped against the glass amongst seashells and stones. With the cupboard door ajar, he walks over, picks it up, turns it over in his hands. “Marla, what’s this?”

“What does it look like?”

“I know, but why is it here?”

She stops stirring and shrugs. “I like it. I guess I’m sort of feeling attached to the flock at this point.”

“Marla, for god’s sake, we got them so we can eat their unborn babies. This thing is disgusting; we can’t have it in the house.” He turns the wing over in his hands, inspects it for bugs or maggots.

She pounds the spoon against the edge of the pot as if to shake off excess chili. Little flecks of sauce spatter the wall over the stove. “Actually, I didn’t get those chickens just to eat their *unborn babies*.” She sets the spoon on the stove, grabs the dishtowel and wipes at the specks, but they only smear, leaving long red streaks. “I got them because I need something more. Something to do.”

“Are you bored?” he asks, pretending to still inspect the feathers.

“Yes! I’m fucking bored. Isn’t it obvious?”

“Bored with me?”

She sighs and grabs the wing from him. “No, not *with you*. Maybe just with life right now. I need more of a challenge. The bookstore just doesn’t do it for me.” She looks down at the wing, smoothing each feather into place. “I don’t know, our life seems so perfect in so many ways, but then there’s part of me that’s just always waiting for the next step.”

A heaviness pushes down on Ted. “Marla, you know how I feel about children.”

She whacks the wing against his arm. “Yes, now I do. Apparently you don’t ever want to have them but that’s not the way it was before. It was always ‘let’s wait and see.’ Well, I’ve waited. And now I see.” She focuses down at the feathers, aligning all the filaments. “And, you don’t even fuck me anymore.”

“Marla, what are you talking about?”

“Well, you don’t!”

“What do you call Saturday night?”

“I nearly had to force you,” she says quietly. “It’s something you just do; I don’t think you even want to.” She brings the wing up to her face, stroking the smooth feathers against her cheek.

“Marla, don’t do that,” he says. “There could be some nasty bird disease we don’t know about.”

She sighs. “Fine. You want me to get rid of it?” She walks to the front door. As she pulls it open her hair lifts in a gust of wind. She tosses the wing and the breeze catches it, carrying it aloft, the pale under-feathers glowing in the near-dark. It floats higher and higher and disappears into the trees across the street.

Before the abduction, Ralph was lanky, gawky. He was brown summer skin, long arms reaching over and over, arcing in follow-through as the basketball swooshed through the hoop. Ralph who could do a layup and was not afraid to jump twenty feet from the cliff into the reservoir where they swam; Ralph who could burp the entire alphabet, could pin Ted in agonizing headlocks and rub his fist fiercely against his hair yelling “noogie!” Ted plays the memories over and over. But he always runs out. Like a film that suddenly stops mid scene. And this is the most unfair thing. There simply isn’t an explanation.

Ted goes upstairs. Marla has fallen asleep with the light on, her hair spread across the pillow, book face down across her chest. He takes the book, places a Kleenex

in it even though there is no hope to save the binding, and puts it on the bedside table. Her mouth is open slightly and her breathing is so quiet he puts his hand before her lips to be sure there is the warm slip of breath between them. Ted thinks for a minute about climbing in beside her, allow her unconscious advances to arouse him, maybe make love to her the way she wants. It could be simple; he could just be normal. But he knows he won't be. There's always Ralph, disappearing in his mind, and Ted looking, waiting. He could have run, started screaming at strangers, telling them to stop the van, or at least gotten that damn license plate number. What if he'd grabbed onto Ralph's foot as it dangled out the door? Who'd taught them to be so trusting? It has occurred to Ted before that maybe Ralph knew the man; maybe they'd planned the whole thing. Ted can't know whether to be angry or hurt.

He turns off the light and quietly tiptoes downstairs, even though the old farmhouse creaks with every step. He goes to the door, plays eeny-meeny-miny-mo with the trap, the gun, and the poison. And even though he lands on poison, he takes the gun. There is something satisfying in the heft of it, the cold metal in his hands. Something that says *take care of it*. He pulls on boots and walks out into the dark. He will wait on the hill, keeping watch until the sun peaks over the eastern slopes, and the sky goes from black to indigo to blue. Maybe it's ridiculous, and he knows there's no chance he'll see something for sure. But maybe he'll spot the stealthy animal slipping through the wee hours of the dawn. He will do his best to protect Marla's flock. Because right now it's the most he can offer her.

Mother Tongue

Raúl's mother opens the fridge and pulls out a chicken carcass, already cooked, one side picked clean down to the slender gray ribs. It is our third Spanish lesson together and I am learning how she functions: she cannot teach if she is not cooking. She quizzes me with phrases while her stubby fingers husk corn, steam tortillas, or peel meat away from bone.

"*Voy a salir a las cinco,*" she says, setting the plate on the counter before looking over my shoulder at the blank page of my notebook. I write her Spanish words across the top line.

"I'm going to leave at five?" I ask, looking up at her. Her dark hair is pinned tight at the nape of her neck and she wears a shapeless dress over her wide, squat frame. Grease stains blossom from the center of her apron.

"*Si!*" she shouts, eyebrows raised high, head nodding. "Good, Jemma." She can't pronounce the J in my name, so it comes out *Yemma*, but I like it. "Very good." Her grin stretches across her broad cheeks, revealing a gold-plated eye-tooth. She rummages in a drawer and pulls out a spatula, inspecting its edge for a moment before

setting it on the stovetop. She turns back to the chicken. She has utensils I have never seen before: mortar and pestle, garlic press, meat tenderizer, whereas at Dad's I'm well acquainted with the can opener and the microwave. In our kitchen the only womanliness is a framed photo of my mother on the window sill taken the year before she died. The glass surface fogs up whenever we rinse out our soup bowls, the hot water momentarily obscuring her blue-eyed smile.

I decided to come to Señora Enriquez on my own. I bring her the bits and pieces from my sophomore Spanish class at North Adams High, and she helps me string them together into a language. Even if I don't understand every word, the fluid melody of her voice makes sense amidst the exotic smells that radiate from the kitchen.

The white meat is becoming a fluffy pile on the plate in front of her. She peels the skin and sets it on a separate plate. I love to watch her work, how her hands just naturally know what to do. She tears off the remaining drumstick and wraps it in Saran wrap, pulling the plastic quickly across the jagged edge.

"I am leaving at five," I say again. Which is true—Thursdays I come straight here after school, work on my Spanish, and then her son Raúl and I ride our bikes to the restaurant where I bus tables and he washes dishes.

"Y cuando vas a volver?" she asks over her shoulder, cracking into bone.

"When will I come back?"

"Si," she says, not confirming my translation but answering the question.

"El proximo jueves," next Thursday, I say. I close my notebook and gather my books into my backpack.

She looks over at me, then at the clock on the stove which reads four forty-five. She lets out a little gasp and mutters *Jesus Christo!* under her breath. “Raúl!” she shouts, making me jump in my seat at the table. She shakes the meat off her hands and picks up the spatula, rushing out of the kitchen. From the other room she accosts Raúl in shotgun Spanish. I try to make sense of it but can only pick out the words *ahorita*, “right now” and *porque*, “why.” A moment later Raúl comes through the kitchen door, Señora right behind him smacking his butt with the spatula. He pretends not to notice as he bends down, slinging his backpack over his shoulder.

“Ready for work?” he asks. Before I can answer he is out the door. I turn back to Señora and thank her for the Spanish lesson. She wipes her hands on her apron and walks toward me, smiling. She reaches up and grabs my chin, her fingers slick with chicken grease.

“Practice, practice,” she says.

“I will,” I promise. It is a promise I can keep. At least for now. I have a list of things to seriously work on this year. Spanish and astronomy are at the top. It all started when I found a box of my mother’s books in our back storage closet. *Recipes in Under 20 Minutes!*, *How to Read the Stars*, and *Italian for Dummies*, were a few that I had decided to keep. When I showed them to Dad he flipped through the yellowed pages, slowly shaking his head. “She’d get so excited about a book on something, and two weeks later she’d forget about it completely,” he said. I couldn’t find anyone who spoke Italian anywhere in our area, a little town teetering on the border of Massachusetts and New Hampshire, so I settled for Spanish. I was determined to finish all those things my mother started.

Outside, the evening is already darkening. I would have preferred to stay in the warmth of her kitchen rather than serve locals the same old greasy food at McLaughlin's. I like the Enriquez apartment despite the dingy walls and the incessant barking of the neighbor's Rottweiler.

I grab my Schwinn and rush to catch up with Raúl. "Was she mad because she thought you'd be late?" I ask.

Raúl looks at me. He has combed with some sort of gel, his jet black hair lined from the teeth. "Was she mad?" he asks. "I didn't notice."

We walk our bikes for a minute, comfortably quiet. We like to stretch out the time before work, getting there at the last possible minute. I think of the day's lesson: I can't exactly pinpoint any definitions I've learned, but I feel that I have a better grasp on the language. I know Monday in class I will try to remember what she taught me, but it will all come up blank and I'll be back at square one, racking my brain as the white spaces of the quiz sheet stare back at me.

It's only early October, but as the sun dips behind the tree line I can feel the sharpness of the air. I look at Raúl's bare arms. He insists on wearing tee-shirts, claiming his "hot Mexican blood" can handle anything.

"Aren't you cold?" I ask him.

"No," he says, smiling. Then he points at my jeans, a gaping hole in either knee. "Aren't you?"

My dad is seeing someone. I knew even before he told me, but it's not like I could sniff her out. He's had girlfriends before, but he rarely ever brings them home. It's been

a year at least since his last, a tall brunette who liked to call him “Stud.” I only met her once, but days later they stopped dating and he never brought her up again. This time, his habits give him away. For the past month he has been coming home late from the mill. One night last weekend I waited up until three, listening for the rumble of his V-8 down our road, but I fell asleep on the basement sofa before he returned. Some nights he would go out with his buddies from the mill, but three a.m. was pushing it. When I woke up later that morning his truck was in the driveway, his boots by the front entrance, snoring coming from the other side of his bedroom door.

I finally asked him point blank, about a week ago. He was cleaning one of his antique shotguns—he has a dusty collection he keeps locked in the basement—the parts strewn across the kitchen table. Although he never uses them, he likes to clean them, taking them apart, peering down the metal tubes, rubbing linseed oil into the stock. I was sitting on the counter eating ravioli straight from the can, *How to Read the Stars* open next to me. I was getting good; I could recognize most of the major constellations now. We hadn’t spoken for the past half hour and I’d become distracted, watching his gray head lean over the parts, his steely eyes peering down the barrel.

“So,” I said. “Who is she?”

He looked up, eyebrows arched. He opened his mouth then shut it again. He looked back down, pouring linseed oil into a rag. Our evenings, when we have them together, often consist of each of us doing our own thing side by side. And he is the one who usually struggles to find things to say. He took a deep breath through his nose.

“Sharon Rexroth,” he finally said, without looking at me.

“As in Billy’s older sister?” Billy was a senior, two years ahead of me in school.

He looked at the ceiling as though he had to think about it for a minute. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Dad!”

“What?” He rubbed the rag against the stock. The wood shined like new again.

“She’s like, hardly out of high school.” I had never met her, but I knew the name.

The Rexroths were a well-known family in our town.

“Oh come *on*,” he said. “She’s twenty-five, Jemma.”

“Dad, you’re *forty-three*.”

He sighed and rolled his eyes. “You really think I’m an old man, don’t you?”

“You said it, not me.”

“What, you want me to find some grandma to date? Would that make you happy?

I’ll leave a glass on my night-side table for her dentures.”

On the chart lying open next to me, Polaris, Kochab, and Betelgeuse are sprawled across a grid—the brightest stars in the northern sky. “It’d be better than having a dad who’s a pedophile,” I said quietly.

“Hey,” he said, slamming a piece of metal against the table, the clang making my heart jump. He looked at me for a long moment, and I tried to focus on the constellation chart. “That was uncalled for.”

I didn’t say anything and he eventually went back to the gun. As he reassembled it he said, “Actually, I think you two would like each other.”

I flipped to the next page where a series of drawings depicted the different positions of the Big Dipper through the night sky.

“Actually, Jemma, I was thinking I might take her out to McLaughlin’s on Thursday.” I could hear him clicking the parts back into place. “Would that be okay with you?”

I stared down at the chart. I’d never thought of how the constellations rotate throughout the night. Everything, it seemed, pivoted on Polaris. The North Star, I realized, was the one constant thing we could rely on. From there the rest of the world spun chaotically, but we could always look up on a clear night and know where we were.

“Jemma?”

“Sure, Dad.”

“You know, Thursdays aren’t that busy and all.”

“Dad, that’s fine.”

He finished putting the gun together. Squinting down the barrel, he pointed it up the hall, aiming at invisible prey.

On our way to work, Raúl gives me my supplementary Spanish lesson. Today he tells me all the slang words for penis.

“The word for beef is one, *lomo*,” he says. “And sometimes we like to call it ‘little bird.’” We walk quickly, a brisk wind against our faces. “You got to be careful what you say, you could always be saying ‘penis’ and not even know it.”

“Well, how many words are there?” I ask.

Raúl turns his face towards the sky, thinking. “Oh, like forty or something.” He smiles. “*Paloma*, is another,” he says.

“Paloma,” I repeat. “Isn’t that a name of some ballerina or something?”

“Maybe,” he shrugs. “It means ‘dove.’”

“Why so many different words for one thing? It’s not even funny after awhile.”

“It’s like the Eskimos and their forty words for snow,” he says. “The dick is a very important part of Mexican culture.” He wiggles his eyebrows up and down. “You’ll see.”

At school, Raúl and I never see each other—his schedule consists of basic classes and some ESL, even though he speaks better English than some of the students who’ve lived here their entire lives. Raúl’s family is the only Hispanic family in our town. They moved up from Amherst last year—his father had discovered he could make just as much in the mills as he could at a restaurant down there, and the living is much cheaper. We are just friends, but Raúl likes to push the line. Sometimes I don’t mind.

I finally crack a smile and get on my Schwinn. “You talk about penis too much.” As I pedal the air rushes through my clothes, chilling my skin. “Come on,” I call over my shoulder. “We’ll be late.”

My friends sometimes ask me what it is like to grow up without a mother, but what do I really have to compare it to? They can’t imagine life without Saturday morning pancakes and sausage, a house accented with decorations, the period talk, family vacations to the coast in minivans. She died when I was just an infant, the cancer and me gestating together like twins. *I* can’t imagine life without the dusty cab of Dad’s truck, Saturday mornings cutting firewood up in the lot, just the two of us like I’ve always known it.

Sometimes I stand at the kitchen sink and let the water run into my empty Chef Boyardee can and I stare at her photo. My mother's smile is wide with white, white teeth, and she doesn't have lines coming out from the corners of her eyes like Dad does. She is young still, not even twenty-five. Her clear blue eyes contrast with her dark hair—like mine—yet her skin is a deep olive and I'm snow white. I like to take out *How to Read the Stars* and open to the first page where her neat cursive spells *Marian Johnstone* in the top right hand corner. Sometimes I flip to the back cover, thinking I might find her photo there, but it is always the same man—Walter B. Schmitt, Astronomer—with his square glasses and thick lips.

After I discovered the box, I tried to press Dad for more about her. There were a few things I already knew—that she was born in Boston, she was an only child, and Italian. She named me after a great aunt she visited when she was just a kid, and Dad told me how she loved to talk about the mountains of northern Italy, the peaks of the Alps reflected in the still water of Lake Como. I knew they married young. But I wanted to know more.

The first few times I asked him he just shrugged. “What do you want to know?” he asked. “You already know most of it.” But I wanted details—the things she liked, her laugh, the movies she watched, what they talked about. I kept bringing him books from the box and asking, “Do you remember what she thought about this one?”

A few months ago he put an end to the questions. “For Christ's sake, Jemma! She read that book twenty years ago. You think I'm going to remember her *critique* of it?”

“I just want to know things. I need to know these things.”

“You think this is easy for me? If you don’t mind, I’d like to go back to my life the way it was. Just let it rest, okay?”

But I couldn’t let it rest. She wasn’t typical, not like my friends’ moms. I liked that she read detective novels and not romance novels. I pictured her wearing long silver earrings that rested against her dark hair. I imagined she grew tall colorful flowers all around the house; she could chop firewood; she could shoot a clay pigeon with a pistol; and in my mind she was fluent in Italian, teaching Dad and me the words for all the exotic dishes she cooked for dinner. In my made-up memories she held me on her hip, her newborn baby, and brought me out beneath the night sky and showed me stars, guiding my hand towards the pinpricks in the distance.

By eight-thirty the restaurant has already slowed down, like it does every Thursday. Only a few diners linger. I haul trays back to Raúl—water glasses of bloated lemon pith and coffee mugs with lipstick crescents along the rims. How easy it would be to trace a diner who’d just eaten a plate of McLaughlin’s fish and chips, the wine glasses and silverware clouded with fingerprints.

Every time I bring back a glass with wine still in it, Raúl tips it into his open mouth, pouring it straight down his throat.

“That’s disgusting!” I tell him. “You don’t know what those people have.”

He shrugs. “Who cares?”

The chefs allow Raúl to listen to the music he wants after eight o’clock. It always makes me laugh, the Mexican tuba music he puts in. He sings along as he racks the

plates, the upbeat melodies weighted by oom-pah-pah bass lines. They seem always to be love songs, and I can pick out the words “heart” and “darling” and “*amor*.”

Sometimes, when I bring a tray of glasses back, Raúl checks to see if no one is looking. He grabs me by the apron and sings a lyric with a pained expression on his face. Some nights, he comes out to help me clear. He’ll bend down next to me as I gather napkins off a table, his nose close to my hair, but never touching. It makes the backs of my thighs tingle, but I wish it didn’t.

I pack down a laundry sack of dirty napkins and cinch the top. I drag it to the kitchen’s back door and bring it outside for the linen truck. It is dark already, and I wonder if Dad and Sharon will come after all. I have forgotten how cold it is, but after being in the greasy restaurant it makes me feel clean, the air sharp with something sterile about it. The moonless sky is a slate with its tableau of bright stars. “*Las estrellas*,” I say to myself. They always seem brighter in the cold. I find the sprawling W of Cassiopeia—my reference point—and try to identify the surrounding clusters. Now that it is autumn the constellations are different. I will have to relearn them.

When I go back in, I nearly hit Raúl with the door. He is bending over his backpack and he stands up quickly.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Hey,” he says. “I wasn’t going to say anything until later, but I got a surprise.”

“What?”

He opens his backpack just enough to slide the neck of a bottle of José Cuervo out. “It’s too easy,” he whispers, shaking his head. “They keep all the liquor next to the bathroom supplies. They want *me* to change the toilet paper all the time so I guess I’m

just going to have to give myself a little bonus.” He puts his finger to his lips and slips the bottle back in. “Later,” he says.

I wonder if he has done it for me. He knows I’m going to meet Sharon tonight. His way of saying he understands.

During my first lesson with Señora, she showed me a map of Mexico. She pointed out the Yucatán Peninsula, where she was from, how Mayan culture still existed in small pockets.

“The land is flat like a tortilla,” she said, smoothing one hand across the top of the other to illustrate. “And very, very humid.” She told me language was useless without knowledge of culture. “*Contexto*, Jemma,” she said. “You can’t make sense of one thing unless you make sense of all the things around it. She was cooking something thick on the stove, a soup she used to make in the Yucatán, *la sopa Yucateca*, she called it. Her eyes lit up for a moment and still stirring, she stepped away from the stove and motioned for me to take over. I got up and took hold of the spoon, never letting the stirring stop. I leaned in to smell the steam and my hair trickled over the edge, the ends dipping into the soup.

“Ay, ay, ay,” she muttered, and took one of the many elastic bands she kept around her wrist and pulled my hair back into a low pony tail. “Better,” she said. She watched me stir for a minute, hands on hips, lips pursed. “No,” she said, coming over to me. “Like this.” She put her hand over mine and directed my stirring. She guided my arm in quick, rigorous strokes. We did it together for a moment and then she let go. She watched a minute longer. “Okay?” she asked.

I nodded.

“*Un momento*,” she said, holding up a finger as she walked out of the room. I leaned in again over the pot. It smelled aromatic. Herbs and spices, I imagined, that I had never seen before. Curious, I brought the spoon up to see what caught in its shallow dip. There were a few slices of mushy carrots, some translucent cubes of onion. When still, oil beaded to the top of the soup. I stirred again, then stopped a few more times to see what the spoon caught. I made out pieces of chicken meat and bits of herbs. I stirred vigorously again. On my next scoop of the spoon there was a bone, small and gray, resting in the dip. That couldn’t be right, I thought. I picked the bone off the spoon and set it on the stovetop. I scooped a few more times until I brought up another bone, then another. I felt like an archaeologist, placing the bones haphazardly onto the stove. I imagined putting them back together in the wrong order, the chicken redesigned to stand on one leg, the wings sprouting from the head and butt; I could make it any which way, claiming it was a prehistoric animal, some link lost throughout evolution.

Señora reappeared in the room with a book in her hand. When she saw the bones scattered across the stove she let out a small gasp. “Oh, Jemma,” she said, and came over. She picked up the bones and dropped them back into the pot.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I thought you had put them in there by accident.”

Señora just shook her head and resumed stirring. “It’s okay,” she said. “But they are an important part of the soup.”

She handed me the book. It was about the Maya, but in Spanish. I flipped through the pages. It had a lot of grainy color photos of the low flat tropics and close ups

of Mayan hieroglyphs. One chapter showed ancient temples rising up above the trees, stone pyramids jutting into the sky.

“Take it,” she said. “It will teach you both language and culture.”

I see her first. I clear glasses from the bar and when I turn towards the windows, there they are in the parking lot, illuminated by the restaurant floodlight. She is standing at the bumper of Dad’s truck, arms folded tightly in front, her jean jacket cropped, showing a strip of blue T-shirt beneath. While she waits for him, I catch her in a moment where she thinks she is alone. Her eyebrows are drawn together and she has lines around her mouth. She faces into the wind and it sweeps back loose strands of her pretty blonde hair. She looks older than twenty-five. Then Dad steps around to the back of the truck and she relaxes into a smile, looking up at him. She is young again. He talks and puts his hand on her shoulder, motioning across the street. She nods, concentrating. Then he puts both hands on her shoulders and turns her towards him. He keeps talking and she smiles and nods, never unfolding her arms.

I carry the glasses back to Raúl. He is whistling as he racks plates. I must be slamming the glasses down too hard because he stops. “What’s wrong with you, Woman?”

I glare at Raúl and shove more glasses his way.

“Whoa. Sorry.” He holds his hands up. “You look pissed off.”

“My dad’s here with the new girlfriend,” I say. I lean against the dishwasher. The plates clink softly together inside and the noise sounds strangely homey. “I don’t want to meet her.”

“Mind if I look?” Raúl asks, like I just told him my new pet parakeet is in the next room.

I wave my hand towards the swinging door. “Won’t cost you anything.”

When he returns, I am still leaning against the dishwasher. The cycle had ended and steam escapes from all around the edge. “Wow,” he says. “She looks like she is fifteen or something.” He shoos me aside so he can open the machine. Steam stings my face and I am surprised that Raúl can reach in and touch the rack with his bare hands. The thing has to be a hundred and fifty degrees. “Cute, though,” he says.

I groan and walk towards the back door, pacing. The chefs are busy dipping baskets into the fryolators, slicing lemons for garnishes. It’s not a busy night and the waitresses linger at the bar, chatting. I peek through the window of the swinging door and see the hostess seating Dad and Sharon, his hand lightly touching her back. The hostess nods to something Dad says and points towards the kitchen. Raúl is whistling again, stacking the steaming plates.

Dad and I didn’t see much of each other this past week. But then again, that’s normal. When I was young the bus dropped me off at the mill after school and he would come out to meet me, sometimes covered head to toe in sawdust, his curls layered with a near-white dust, and an imprint around his eyes where his goggles had been. I would point and say, “You look like an old man.” But once I turned ten I took the bus home, made my own dinner, and watched TV until he came home.

All week I ran into Billy Rexroth in the halls, his bulky frame lurking near the lockers. I figured he knew about Sharon and Dad, but we never spoke to each other.

That week a phrase came back to me that Dad had said numerous times before: “The Rexroths run this town from the bottom up. Without that family the whole local economy would collapse.” Sharon, supposedly, worked in the office of the mill, answering phones, filling out orders for shipments throughout the Northeast.

After I heard about Sharon Rexroth and before I met her, my urge intensified to finish those things my mother had started. I lugged the old cardboard box of books up to my room. Each night I took *How to Read the Stars* outside with me. I grabbed the old afghan from the couch, my ratty wool hat, and carried it all up to the little hill behind our house. I wrapped myself in the afghan and lay across the parched grass. I watched for hours, the stars traversing across the blackness. Soon I could make out Polaris, Betelgeuse, and Kochab without looking at the book. Nightly I watched the Big Dipper rotate. I would wait for it to stand on end, the imaginary contents dripping down its handle and spreading across the horizon. The sun would nearly be up before I finally went inside to go to sleep.

The door swings open and the hostess walks into the kitchen. She ignores Raúl and me, as usual, and goes over to flirt with the chef. She grabs a few fries off the plate he’s serving up, complaining about a customer.

“I think it’s time,” Raúl says. “Grab the trash and meet me at the dumpster.” And he slips out the back door.

When the door closes the hostess looks over at me. “Oh Jemma, your dad is here.”

I begin to fiddle with the garbage bag near the dishwasher. “Right, thanks,” I say. “First, I think I’ll empty this and take a quick breather outside.”

She shrugs, stuffing another fry into her mouth. “Whatever,” she says. “I think he’s with a friend of yours or something.” Before I can answer she turns back toward the chef, laughing about some customer who complained the fish tasted “too fishy.”

I tie up the bag and drag it to the door, trailing mystery juice that leaks from one of the corners. Outside, Raúl stands on the far side of the dumpster. I heave the bag in, splashing a few drops of juice down the front of me. I go and stand next to him, and we are silent for a moment. It is nearly dark, the air biting. He pulls the Cuervo from his apron pocket and unscrews the cap, the plastic ring cracking as it separates. He offers me the first sip.

I tip the bottle back and try not to gag. I hate tequila but never seem to remember until it is too late. I wipe my hand across the back of my mouth and hand him the bottle.

He looks at the label. “Cuervo gold,” he says, “The color of the Maya.” He swigs. In the dim light his throat is bobbing with each gulp. I think back to the map, the flat expanse of the Yucatán Señora told me about.

“Does Señora speak Mayan?” I ask Raúl, as he hands the bottle back.

“Yes, some. She has forgotten a lot of it. They still spoke it in the village she grew up in.” He coughs and pounds his fist against his chest. “It is the *lingua madre* of Mexico. Of the *real* Mexico,” he says.

I choke down more shitty tequila and it occurs to me I haven’t eaten anything tonight, a buzz already falling over me. Dad and Sharon suddenly seem far away. Warm light spills from the restaurant’s windows. There’s something freeing about the darkness.

Lingua madre, the mother tongue, I translate. Or mother language. There it is again, one word with more than one meaning. I lean against the dumpster and look up at the stars.

“Look,” I say. “The Big Dipper.” The constellation sprawls on the horizon. I lean in close to Raúl. His body seems to radiate heat. But he laughs, and I can tell he is shaking his head.

“You fucking gringos think you know everything,” he says. He hikes up his pants and sits down on the gravel. “Maybe the Greeks or whatever called it a dipper, but to the Mayans those stars were a giant bird.” I sit down in the gravel next to him and wait for him to say more. I want him to lean in, put his nose to my hair. I need to know that he likes me, that I’m okay.

“And throughout the night the bird falls. You can see it, the stars move. He falls out of a tree. This is supposed to be the very stupid Seven-Macaw.” Raúl takes the bottle and sips more tequila.

Suddenly the back door opens and the hostess leans out into the dark. “Guys?” she calls. “You out there?” But before we answer she goes back in, letting the door slam behind her. We look at each other and shrug.

“Why is the bird stupid?” I ask Raúl.

“Well,” he says, “he thought he was so fucking beautiful he was good enough to be the sun. But he was just a dumb bird with fake shiny teeth; he thought he could trick everyone into thinking he was the sun. His fat ass sat up in that tree and kept the real sun from rising.”

Raúl's shoulder is touching mine. I can smell a faint whiff of his shampoo. "What makes him finally fall?" I ask. We've probably only been out here for twenty minutes, but it feels like forever. I lean against Raúl, soaking in his warmth.

"Some hunter shoots him out of the tree. Some Mayan god. When you can't see those stars anymore that means he's been shot. The sun can rise." Raúl reaches his hand and moves it across the horizon, demonstrating the way the constellation rotates through the sky. "The Maya believed that each night the sky tells the story of creation and the morning is like the beginning of the world. They believed the whole history of how humans came to be here was told right there in the sky."

It is funny to think how one group of people can look up and see a bird and another group looks up and sees a ladle. What does it matter trying to figure all these things out if it's just going to be wrong to somebody else? The constellations are only ideas, like the books in my mother's box are just books, not pieces of her. The tequila rushes through my blood and I think about the small woman inside with my father. She looks so fragile, so unlike someone I can imagine being my *stepmother*. But then, I can't really imagine anybody being my stepmother. Or my mother, for that matter. What do I really have to compare anybody to?

"Do you believe it?" I ask Raúl.

"Believe what?"

"That story. Do you believe that's how this world was created?"

He spits air out, almost in a laugh. "No," he says. Then after a minute, "Well, it's as good as any other story I've heard, I guess." He laughs. "But a bird with teeth? I don't know where they came up with that."

“Yeah, that’s kind of stupid,” I say.

The back door to the kitchen opens again. “Where the fuck are you two?” the hostess yells. “Get your asses in here.”

I don’t want the moment to end. I like the warmth of the tequila. I want to hear more stories and I want him to teach me the stars the way he knows them. But I know we have to work, that Dad is waiting for me. I don’t have to like Sharon, but I should meet her, I guess.

Raúl and I stand up, brushing the gravel off our butts. We turn and walk back towards the light of the restaurant.

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