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Trompe Loeil: a collection of stories derived from art history

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Trompe L'oeil

A collection of stories derived from art history

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by

Emily DeGeyter

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2016

For my incredible parents, my four insane older brothers, and my amazing friends, Alessia,
Ahsiya, and Alessandra (aka the A-Team)

I love you [all] to the moon – and back
- My favorite tea mug

Mary –

Thank you for your endless enthusiasm and support, I could not have created any of this project
without your wisdom

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The Anatomy Lesson

The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp
By Rembrandt van Rijn, 1631

We are never given their names. Some part of this feels unholy, almost cruel, as if by not naming them they never truly walked among us or breathed as us. Every time our praelector urges us closer, all necks stretched and craning to see the next incision, I find myself distracted by this fact. He always stands just so, apart from the cadaver but still in reach so that it remains clear that he is the master from whom we shall learn. Others, lessers, are commissioned with the act of rendering the corpse for study, withdrawing the skin and bone to reveal the inner-workings. In these moments the nameless body becomes both human in its most honest state and in its most alien. We cannot reconcile the glossy organs with ourselves, but also cannot deny that those tubes and chambers are so essential to all we call life.

In much the same manner, I find I must put to rights their existence. Their features, a crease between brows, a subtle turn of lips, become the only way I know them. Today is the Thinker, with his low brow and deep-set eyes. His face is open, no longer etched with worldly concerns but rather pale and innocent. In death he appears a clean slate save for two, almost three, curving lines that suggest how he may once have angled his gaze against the sun or too-bright candle. Perhaps a worker, a laborer within the fields? Or a Renaissance man who sought the perfection of all studies? I imagine my brow will boast several such creases when I lie upon the table, nameless as all the others.

The Thinker's chest appears swollen as if taking an eternal breath. When the scalpel draws its red line down his sternum, I almost expect a popping noise and a whoosh of warm air as from a balloon. There is nothing. Not even the blood I had always found captivating as a

child, when a cut or scrape remained untended so I could study the source of its flow. No such font of life can be found today. His body has been sucked dry of its nectar, as it were.

C. stands nearest me, and from his complexion (not so far removed from the Thinker's) I wonder if I shall have to be the one to catch him. I, myself, do not share in his ill feelings, but amongst the many faces pressed close around he is not alone. When the saw grates against the exposed bone, a discordance of sound both dulled and piercing fills the room. C. shudders, and though I know the Thinker no longer thinks or feels, I find my hand unsteady just the same.

Sometimes in my yearning to see them all as a part of myself, I grow doubtful of my own ability to do what will be asked of me when I am the one thrusting the saw or prodding the organs. In the moment they become alive, I become something lesser. By a twist in the threads of our fate, I am now the cadaver without senses.



The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp
By Rembrandt, 1631

The Eighth Word

Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds

By John Constable, 1825

&

Joseph the Carpenter

By Georges de La Tour, 1645

Yes, Master.
 No, Master.
 Always, Master.
 Never, Master.
 As you say, Master.

The commission came while Ismail still lay upon the hearth, but he could hear their deep voices through the walls. He knew his master would be angry to have more work when there were so many other pieces left undone. *The essence of great art cannot simply be wrought, Ismail, it must be molded with respect and admiration.* Ismail had seen how respect and admiration formed the soft curve of the Madonna's cheek and downcast eye. He had seen how it brought patrons and coin to their workshop.

By Advent time? It cannot be done.

Thirty Marks.

God go with you, Brother.

And with you, my friend. May his hand guide yours.

Ismail did not open his eyes as his Master stood by the fire.

Have you heard then, Ismail? A new altar scene for the brothers at the abbey.

The abbey. Ismail had seen the steeple of the church through the trees and wondered at its height. On clear nights the brothers' chanting could be heard and he imagined them like angels on their hill high above the village.

Master had no family, he knew. A sister dead from the cold, a nephew too hungry for too long. Ismail knew he was lucky to be his master's helper. His art paid for their world of wood dust and warmth.

Fetch the linden, Little Ismail, the linden shall do.

Linden was best for its purity and delicate grain.

Very good, my boy. And with whom does the Annunciation begin?

Our Lady Mary, Master.

Not so, Little Ismail. Before she was the Madonna, there was God's blessed messenger, Angel Gabriel. To create her, we must first create him.

Ismail knew he would not be allowed to touch the art, but he sat by the hearth, stoking the embered logs to create steady light for his master. A day passed and another and another until time moved only through Gabriel's features; the first day an abstract form; the second, the base; the third, his limbs. On the fourth, Ismail saw the proud nose emerge, the entreating fingers reaching to bless Mary and pass on God's Word.

On the seventh day, his master took them from the workshop. Their walk was short, winding through the copse of birch and poplar encircling the abbey hill. Ismail could not see the steeple, but he heard the bells ringing from far away. They came upon a fallen tree. Notches deformed the trunk, where people cut away the grained flesh to dry for winter supply. Woodchips blanketed the brittle grass like golden fleece.

Master pointed a roughened hand. *Art lies within the world around us, Little Ismail. It is in the grained wood, in the budded flower, in the swirling clouds. Do you see?*

Yes, Master.

Many from the village believed his master was loveless, but Ismail knew they were wrong; he saw it in the way his master molded the angel's brow, the fragile curl of hair framing his face, the arc of his lip. Ismail had never seen someone who loved more deeply.

Advent time approached, but Ismail did not fear. His master always knew when the art was finished and when it must leave for its new home. At night, master threw a dry cloth over the scene and retreated to his stool by the hearth. Here he recounted to Ismail tales of the Bible. Ismail loved David in his battle against the general Goliath, but master spoke most of the angels. How they protected and spread God's will; how they rose in the air, and how they fell from the sky. His master believed Gabriel to be the purest of them all, he who was chosen to deliver God's message to the Virgin.

Can you imagine a finer figure than he, Ismail?

No, Master.

And truly, he could not imagine it.

On the twelfth day, Ismail pulled water from the well in the yard. When he looked up to the steeple through the trees, as he always did in the early mornings, he saw a brother approach down the hill, dressed in their customary brown robes. Water sloshed against Ismail's leg as he hurried back to the shop. He feared master's anger; who disliked showing patrons his art in its unfinished state.

Master calmly swept the woodchips into the corner, a pile of white curls like shorn hair. Dust swirled as the brother passed their threshold. His tonsured hair was a dark halo above his pale brow.

You mustn't disturb us, Ismail. Do you hear me?

Always, Master.

Ismail listened through the door, ear pressed close to the grain as he sought his master's voice. He heard the cloth fall away to the ground, and the shuffling of feet. Time passed in silence until at last, a deep sigh.

Ah, es ist wunderschön, meine freund.

Bitteschön, Bruder.

Advent time?

Advent.

When Ismail entered the workshop again, the brother was gone. Master hunched over the panel. He did not move as Ismail stood by his shoulder. Ismail had expected to see anger on his master's face, but only quiet concentration furrowed the skin between his eyes. They both stared at the scene. Ismail never saw a more beautiful pair of figures, the dance between Angel and Virgin in each contour and fold of drapery. Gabriel's wings arched high over his head, still filled with air as if just alighted.

I must perfect his face.

Is it not perfected, Master?

His eyes do not carry his soul, as they should. They must gleam with God's truth.

Then his master rose and walked from the room. When he returned, he clasped a long tallow candle in his hand. Without a word he covered the windows with a dark cloth and bade Ismail sit on the stool by the altar scene. Crouching down to the hearth, master lit the candle on the warm coals. Bright orange light illuminated his face as the wick flared. His callused fingers pressed the candle into Ismail's hands.

God is in the candle flame, Little Ismail. He watches us all. Have you ever doubted this?

Never, Master.

Ismail stared at the flame, watching how the cool blue merged into white and then orange and red and then nothing. He felt blinded but he could not look away.

Master did not begin his work for a moment. Then his arms braced the gouge against the wood flesh. When Ismail glanced away from the candle, he could see nothing and felt for a moment weightless and formless.

You are my secret angel, Little Ismail. Isn't this true?

As you say, Master.



Salisbury Cathedral from the Bishop's Grounds
By John Constable, 1825



Joseph the Carpenter
By Georges de La Tour, 1645

Young Aphrodite

The Harvester

By William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1875

“You ought to close your eyes and sing.” This was what Harold Nesbitt’s mum said the first time the sirens sounded. He was seven at the time. Harry knew his mum meant to help, but the sirens and panic was always louder than anything he could possibly imagine. And besides, there was a part of him that liked the excitement. This held true until the bomb hit Kensington Way in the park. Harry’s father had no time to find shelter and just as suddenly four became three. Mum wanted to send Harold and his baby sister Ruth to their granny Margaret in Glasgow, but they’d been hit in the north too. There was no place else to send them other than the countryside and mum couldn’t afford time off from her post at *The Sunday Express*, particularly as it was one of Britain’s most patriotic newspapers and a certain degree of British pride and courage was expected, even in a secretary. Without other siblings of her own, and newly made a widow, options were few for Mrs. Nesbitt and her children.

There was a single cellar on their street that belonged to their neighbour Miss Sues. She was an elderly woman who insisted that her name be pronounced “Sue-ez, just like the canal down in the heathen land,” but Harry rather thought it sounded like something to do with bad plumbing. Miss Sues didn’t smell much better either. Harry assumed people aged the same way as cheese, and Harry didn’t like cheese. Miss Sues had a shelter put in that could fit all the families of Camlan Road. The two Rutherford boys, the Samson twins, even the couple that had moved over from America so that the young woman could pursue acting on the London stage. They were all there. On some nights they talked for distraction, on others the rumbling above made them quiet. Harry always sat with little Ruth, folding her hands in his. He felt older in

times like these. He would hum to his sister, but picture the words in his head. This made it easier for him to forget everything on the street outside.

Usually the Nesbitts were home when the air raid warning went off, but on occasion they found themselves packed into the odd tube station or communal shelter. On this particular day, Harry was out with his mum while Miss Sues watched over Ruth. They'd gone to the shops so Harry could get measured for his school uniform, but he wondered if he'd ever have the chance to show it off with all these bombs dropping on them. Harry knew the tube station was safer than the narrow flat of brick and mortar they called home. He knew this, but still the dank walls and sniffling sounds of countless people pressed close all around him made Harry miss the cracked plaster in his room. And the Nesbitts were separated. Harry didn't like to be separated. When they were separated, four became three, and three could become anything. His mum hugged him, her scratchy wool coat tickling his cheek. Harry felt his mum's chest pounding beneath the layers of clothing. The station was dim. He couldn't sing here. Harry closed his eyes and tried to recite the Shakespearean sonnet they'd just studied in his Friday lessons. Poetry was meant to help develop his memory. That's what they said at primary, anyway. Harry whispered the sonnet to his mum and could feel her heart slow.



Harry had once tried supporting a football club so that he might have something to talk about with the other boys in primary. This didn't last long; tickets were too expensive and Harry wasn't content listening to other people have fun over the radio. Another time he tried to start a collection. Granny Margaret had a wall in her flat covered in train tickets and stubs from the cinema. If she ever forgot about a certain trip or film, all she had to do was glance over to the wall and remember. Harry had two train tickets from once when he went north but had never

been to the cinema. He was too young yet, Mum said. He was eight at the time. But Miss Sues, for all her odd smells and cold fingers, had one possession Harry liked more than anything. He noticed her during an evening raid. She hung in the back of a long hallway, the last daylight let through from an open window catching her eye. She made Harry stop. He could hear the other Camlan families ushered down the wooden ladder to the shelter, but he pulled away. This was one of those times; the Nesbitts were separated. Ruth already sat down below, but their mum still hadn't returned from the newspaper. Harry ignored Miss Sues' call. Sometimes there weren't any sounds other than the sirens. Sometimes there was no harm in staying above the ground. Harry didn't really mean to do it. He just wanted a closer look. He never visited Miss Sues' except when the raids came or to pick up Ruth. If they were hit, this was his only chance to see her.

Harry didn't hear the cellar bolt lock. Harry didn't hear little Ruth crying. He only heard the wailing sirens and only saw the portrait. Harry noticed her eyes first. This was true for everyone he met. He always thought the eyes were the most honest part of a person. Things became alive through them, differently from lips and noses. Harry stepped closer until he could smell the musk of oil paint. Flickering light cast through the elm tree on the street made the girl's olive gaze shine. She stared out at him fearlessly, almost, petulantly. Harry wondered if it could have been Miss Sues in an earlier era, but he didn't recognize the straight nose or thin brows. Whoever the girl was, Harry knew that she was the most beautiful face he'd seen.

Mum and Ruth both had light hair, but Harry had gotten his father's brown curls and eyes. The girl in the portrait was dark like him. The edges about her face were blurred by dimness, as if she were only a vision held briefly in place by the sunlight. There were no strokes, no imperfections that he could see. Harry reckoned that if he reached out a hand he would feel

soft, breathing skin. Her lips, curved like a bow, melted into a knowing smile. Harry lifted his fingers to them. They were warm from the sun. He had never touched a female who was not his sister or mum. Harry had never even fancied someone before. He leaned forward to rest his head against the girl's chest. His mum didn't hold him like this anymore. He was too old for that sort of thing, she said. Harry felt the bombs through the canvas in shuddering heartbeats. The girl was alive.

The first violent tremor beneath Harry's feet made him fall against the wall. A second crash sent him under the nearest reading table. Harry hugged his knees to his chest. Perhaps the smaller he was, the less likely he'd be hit, Harry tried to reason. He knew this would make no difference. There were no arms around him this time, no heart beating other than his own to show he was not alone. Harry clenched his eyes shut. There was no excitement in the panic. He tried to count the beats between the sirens and the crashes. Harry tried to recite the sonnet he'd once whispered to his mum, *Not marble nor the gilded mountains. Or monuments?* He wasn't sure how it went. *When statues wasteful war shall overturn.* Had he mixed the words? He couldn't remember if he'd said goodbye to her. *And broils root out the work of masonry.* Did he pick up his room as she asked? *Against death and all oblivious amity.* Or was it *enmity?* He couldn't remember what his father looked like. Harry opened his eyes and looked at the portrait. He could see her perfectly. It seemed strange that the waning sun could shine on her and she could appear so beautiful when people were dying all about her. Had she seen other battles? The girl peered down at him, her lips still curved, her gaze still unwavering. He envied her boldness and loved her for it at the same time. Harry watched her and didn't look away.



“You daft boy!” Miss Sues scolded as she rapped Harry on the ear. He’d never been hit before, but he knew he deserved it. “Haven’t you ever been told curiosity killed the cat?” But I’m not a cat, Harry wanted to say. Instead he only looked down at his shoes.

Harry sat on the steps leading down to the street as Miss Sues talked with his mum. A reddish glow hung over the rooftops, even though it was late into the night. They were speaking about him, he knew. Harry wanted to turn around, but not to hear them better. He wanted to look at the woman again. Her gaze comforted him; it wasn’t angry like Miss Sues’ or hurt like his mum’s, or burning like London. Ruth wouldn’t stop crying, even when Harry promised to sing to her.

“Mum...” Harry started as they finally walked back to their flat. He wasn’t sure what he meant to say. Would she understand that he had to do it?

“Not now, Harold,” she said sharply and he saw the tears in her eyes. Ruth hung onto his hand, still sniffing. Harry had betrayed them both. He knew this. He knew he could never be so reckless ever again. But he wanted to go back anyway.

The same day school closed, Ellen arrived. The first time they met, Harry felt relieved that the smell of cheese did not run in the family. Ellen was two years older than Harry, and had already lost both her parents. Her papa, she said, was a fighter pilot in the RAF. His plane crashed somewhere in the Channel and they never found his body. Her mama had volunteered as a nurse, but was killed by a direct hit at the training facility. They never found her body either.

Ellen was Miss Sues’ only surviving grandchild. Ellen sat in her chair properly, and always addressed Miss Sues by Miss Martha. Whenever Harry tried to call her this, Miss Sues looked at him sharply and reminded him it was pronounced just like the canal down in the heathen land. Harry and Ellen tried hard not to laugh.

Ellen already stood a foot over him, and had narrow shrewd eyes that reminded him of Miss Sues a great deal. She liked to read more than she liked to sing. Harry recited the sonnet to her when she asked if he knew any poetry.

“—*and all oblivious enmity / shall you pace forth; your praise shall...*” Harry paused. Still shall? “*Shall still find room / even in the eyes of all posterity / that wear this world out to the ending doom—*”

“I like that one,” she said when he finished. “Makes you wonder what will be left.”

“Be left?”

“After the war. After the bombs. Do you think it’ll be the same?” Ellen pulled at a loose stitch on her skirt hem. She didn’t go to school anymore either, but she still wore her uniform because it was one of her only dresses.

“I don’t know,” Harry replied.

“And what if we die here? Do you think they’ll remember us?”

“I don’t know.”

“I reckon they won’t even find our bodies,” Ellen said, letting the broken thread float to the wood floor.



Harry asked Ellen about the painting in the hallway. “Just a portrait, I think,” she answered. Ruth sat on her lap, looking at a picture book Miss Sues had found for her in an old chest.

“But is it your gran—Miss Sues?”

“I don’t think so. Mama said Miss Martha was never much of a classic beauty. Mama said she was lucky to get granddad’s looks.” Ellen looked sharply at Harry. “Why?”

Harry shrugged. “No reason.” He didn’t look around, but he could feel the girl’s gaze on him. Both of them were looking at him now. Ellen brushed a stray curl back from Ruth’s forehead, but she studied Harry sitting on the carpet before her. Her eyes narrowed.

Then she asked, “Why’re you here still?” Harry knew what she meant. Loads of people wanted to know why he and his sister were there. Harry once overheard a woman from the local grocer say their mum was “a mad chancer, that one. To keep the bairns around in a time like this.” Mum didn’t hear her say this, but Harry did. And he didn’t know what a chancer was, but he knew what it meant to be mad.

“Mum wants us together. She’s afraid that Ruth and I will be separated if we evacuate. Why are you still here?”

Ellen played with one of the ribbons in her hair. “The same reason, I suppose. I haven’t got anywhere else to go.”

“But aren’t you afraid?”

Ellen paused for a moment. “Sometimes. But I know papa and mama are waiting for me. And explosions don’t hurt, not the same way as a bullet.”

Harry nodded but wasn’t sure he understood what she meant. He glanced over his shoulder at the painting. The girl could still be seen through the doorway into the front room. Her eyes gazed back at him. Harry didn’t understand Ellen because he knew there were things he feared losing. He still had his mum and sister. He still had a home. He still had the girl in the portrait. Harry couldn’t imagine anyone wanting to hurt them. But Harry knew his imagination couldn’t stop the planes from flying or the bombs from dropping.

Harry fell asleep before the first sirens began. Mum had been home late again, but she was there now and carried Ruth in her arms as they stepped down onto the street. The late night

air pressed around them, unusual in its warmth. Tendrils of steam rose from the tarmac. Harry could see the dark figures of the Camlan families emerge from their homes and pass through the wisps like silent ghosts. Tonight there were no words as they hurried to Miss Sues'.

Miss Sues and Ellen met them by the door, already dressed as if they had expected the attack. It was closer tonight, the grimness of their expressions said. Tonight it would not be safe above ground. Ellen squeezed Harry's hand gently.

"Don't worry, Miss Martha says the raids will be over soon."

Harry nodded but his eyes strained through the darkness behind her. Could he really leave the girl there alone? The hallway was too dim for him to see her, but he knew she saw him. Mum's hand on his shoulder made him move again. Feet shuffled down the steps and echoed as everyone huddled within the metal shelter. A candle flickered on a small stool, illuminating their pale faces. Mum pulled Harry down beside her, and pressed Ruth against her chest. Her knuckles whitened as she clasped Harry's hand within hers. Across from Harry sat the American actress. He watched as she drew her shawl tighter around her nightdress. She still had curlers in her hair. She hadn't known the attack would come like Miss Sues and Ellen. The candlelight threw her face into sharp angles. There were no blurred edges or rounded cheeks. When she looked up at Harry, her eyes were wide and dark. The girl would never have let her fear show like this, Harry thought.

Then they realized he was gone. The youngest Rutherford boy, who usually sat between his brother and father, was missing.

"We have to find him, we have to get him!" shrieked Mrs. Rutherford. Her husband held onto her, his jaw clenched and voice firm even though the blood had drained from his face.

"Alice, no—"

Harry stood. "I can get him."

"Harold, no—" Mum tightened her grip on him.

"Don't be daft," Miss Sues scolded, "no one's going up until the sirens have stopped."

"My boy, my boy!" Mrs. Rutherford sobbed. Faces stared but no one moved. The eldest Rutherford boy sat dazed.

"But I know where he is," Harry lied. He had never lied to his mum before. Harry pulled his hand away before she could stop him. Ruth started to cry.

The front door was still boarded but Harry could feel the warm night breeze. The windows in the kitchen had broken. Glass littered the floor like glistening dewdrops, and crunched under his slippers.

Harry found him curled against the cabinets, but he didn't move until Harry touched his arm. The boy turned around before he reached the hatch to the cellar.

"I'm right behind you," Harry lied again.



"Don't worry, the raids will be over soon," Harry whispered to the portrait. The girl stared down at him and smiled. Harry wondered if any girl would ever look at him like that again. He rested a hand against her cheek.

The portrait was too heavy for him. Harry gripped the frame tightly, but the sweat of his palms made it slip. He wiped them on his nightshirt and tried again. The girl didn't move. Tears burned his eyes, even though Harry knew he was too old for that sort of thing. He couldn't abandon her. Harry pressed his cheek against the canvas. It wasn't warm anymore, but he could still hear her chest pulse. A deep boom in the distance rattled the windowpanes. A lamp fell from the reading table, the glass shade shattering. *Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn.*

Why could he now remember those lines he always missed? *The living record of your memory.*

But did he believe this? Perhaps Ellen was right about it all. No one would notice, no one would find their bodies. There was no shelter or hallway. It was larger than the canvas now, larger than the room. There was only the girl and her heartbeat.



The Harvester
By William-Adolphe Bouguereau, 1875

We, The One

The Women of Amphissa
By Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1887

I, Hypatia

The first to wake, I see the bright sun and weight-burdened flower. White on rose on yellow, then blue in its dome. I see our sun but not our city. Faces bend down and watch us from behind bodies and dressings. Waiting, uncertain. Just as I am. Just as we all are. The furs and skins fall away from me. Ivy leaves in braids, undone. Red stains my fingers and under my nails. The color of our King. I feel Him in my belly still, the last remnant of our dance. No one knows Him as we do.

“Are you His?” one asks. I bow my head, and she steps away. When she returns, her arms bear Him to us. The oinochoe tips and another drinks. He is with us in all things.

“You are welcome here. It is not our battle.” She nods with her words.

“Nor His.”

Others waken slowly in groans and fluttering eyelids. The marble walls of the court muffle our sounds, but still more gather. To them the rites have not ended, the spectacle continues.

At my feet presses the mouth of another, an arm overthrown to stop the brightness. I see her parched lips. Burning and broken skin. Her bewilderment shows in her eyes and in the tightening of her limbs as she begins to stir. Veins surge, curling fingers. I see her fear. She bore the thyrsus in our ritual, but now she forgets Him. From her pallor I know He no longer touches her cheeks.

Those close-pressed bodies still do not move. I hear only the murmured thanks as the pitcher pours and pours again into open mouths. One pulls her himation over her brow. Sandals trace in the dust. The same dust on my eyelids and on my tongue.

I, Desma

We sleep now, differently from how we slept under the night. No snow-dizzied limbs, or red-stained fingers. The wind washes Him from me. Dust-clouded faces, dragging pelts, withered crowns. Finally at rest. My others lie on every side. We, His daughters, sisters, and wives. His mothers. We nurse Him and feed from Him and fulfill Him.

I, Callisto

My feelings first are heat above and below. Not cold marble but raw, lashed skin ripened under the sun. Stiffened, swollen. I hear their voices chanting in words. *Your beauty is not yours. We, the one, become Him.* To my right, above me, stands Hypatia. Her face turns to the sky. Reverent smile. Then I see them, the wind-rustled robes and curious gazes. An army that does not carry weapon or shield. One sees me seeing her. Her mouth opens, teeth not all there. My skin throbs, feeling Him still. My beauty is no longer my own. I bear Him, as One.

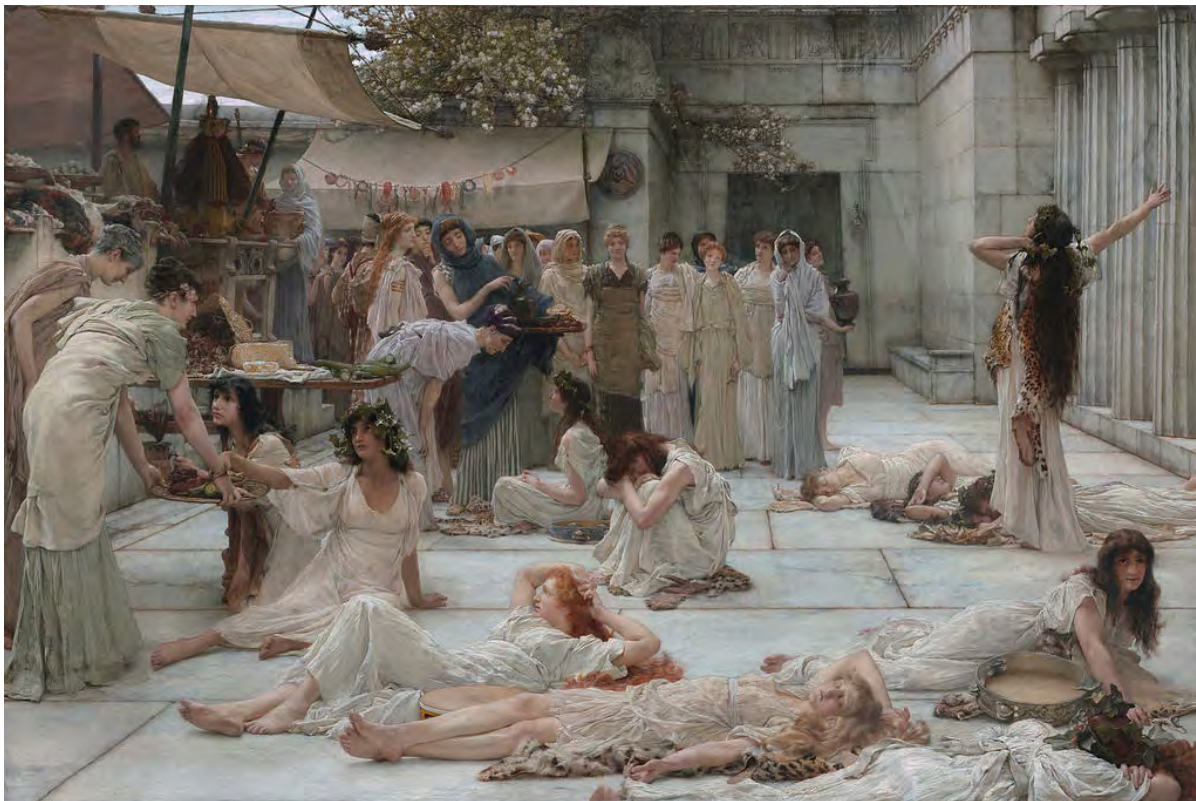
I, Eris

I can see the golden orb, but the darkness keeps me still. Warm pressure, solid voices. I feel them about us without looking. I hear them about us without listening. Guardians of what they do not understand. My fingers tingle, still sensing the flesh and fur beneath them. If they knew, they might fear Him, and through Him, us. I smile and feel skin split. The sting reminds me of His presence. Hand to mouth. I taste red salt, dried.

The ridges over my legs and lower back burn even though they have hardened into silver and white. A *hippotigris*. I laugh, feeling it come from my belly, not mine but His. Bubbling, uncontrolled. With opened eyes I watch the feet withdraw, unsure, afraid.

As they should.

As He would want them to.



The Women of Amphissa
By Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, 1887

The Madam(e)

Elizabeth, Empress of Austria
By Franz Xaver Winterhalter, 1865

They called me Rapunzel once. The whole country recognized me, so it seemed. *Only a goddess could look like that. Only a goddess should.*

Some, I believe, hated me just as they loved me. They saw my image but did not know who I was. When he first passed me he stopped. I could see all of his bright teeth when he smiled. A warm hand touched my head. *How can it be?* Many people wished to feel my hair, but never did I let them. Not until that day.

He stepped into the room and finally I did not feel so alone. *Goddesses are not meant to walk the earth*, he said this but I knew he meant no harm. *You have blessed me.*

When he put my hair between his teeth, he said it tasted of cognac. On that morning it trailed along the floor. I could see the wonder in his eyes. The strands wove between his limbs, surrounded and covered him. *I am made fire.*

He was the first to see the ash. The silvered thread wrapped around his finger. He pressed it between thumb and nail, twirling until the light faded.

Each day more and each day less. I was called Rapunzel once. He laced the string like stars on my skirt. *Oh, what a starry night*, he hummed, diving into the waves and floating away. The strands crowned his head, red and silver, fire and star.

He waded in until we both drowned.



Elizabeth, Empress of Austria
By Franz Xaver Winterhalter, 1865

Only In Eyes

The Young Martyr
By Paul Delaroche, 1855

We all knew death before, but never like this. The first whisper spread through the crowd like a ripple.

They put her to the rocks.

But couldn't she swim?

Perhaps they wouldn't let her.

Thanks be to God that she did not suffer the scourge.

It was then that the voices always fell silent, as if only just growing aware of themselves. To anyone who asked, I claimed that I knew her, but this was not a full truth. We never spoke, for all the years that we walked the same road and bathed in the same shallows and kneeled at the same altar. I knew her, but only in eyes. Every time they glanced my way, or stared back at the upturned faces of her listeners, I felt that I knew exactly what thoughts spun behind those deep blue. We looked nothing alike; I with my dust-blond hair and pale skin that turned red and cracked under heat and cold both, and she with her olive complexion and waist-long black waves. She was a raven or an entity not of this world, and I was a wisp with no shape until her eyes met mine.

Others believed that they knew her, too, from the way she voiced her faith. Her message forgave everyone. Even the Emperor, her eyes said when her voice did not. Then, I wondered if everyone saw her as I did. Now I understood how her gaze shone only on those who looked, and they who killed her never saw its light.

No matter how I tried to forget, my thoughts always returned to her image in death. The truth of it, that I saw the scene from a cliff overhanging the rocks and her body was only another misshapen form marking the river edge, shamed me. Whenever I replayed the moment in my mind, I was down on the rocks pushing hair away from her open mouth and shooing the birds from her limbs. I clasped her cold fingers between mine. Then I would look into her face, or the face that once belonged to her. Nothing mattered but her gaze. They were only shallow eyes in a drowned face, but they stared out in death and I knew they looked at me.

She had a life; she was so full of it. You could see it in her.

But you can't see it now.

Those she called family stood back from the rest, quieter, smaller, unadorned as was their way. They never imagined it could happen to someone so close and real. She completed them just like she completed me, it was clear from the way they stood just slightly off-balance and off-center from the onlookers. When the men came for her body, they watched without utterance. No one cried as though they accepted that somehow, in some way, she never belonged here and it was all a matter of time before she left again.



The Young Martyr
By Paul Delaroche, 1855

By Sea

Clearing up—Coast of Sicily
By Andreas Achenbach, 1847

They all say he left while I slept, a babe only a week old and only a week motherless. He sailed into the sea like a dream and became just as fleeting. My aunt Helen saw no harm in his leaving. Helen-who-was-once-Debra (she liked to believe her beauty rivaled Helen of Troy's and there was no one to contradict her) wanted children of her own, but a botched surgery for ovarian cysts put an end to this hope. So when my father decided that I was one human too many to care for, she cradled me like a mother. My first memory was one of Helen's stories about my father's travels. I was too young to notice much else, too young to care, but soon I was old enough to make stories of my own.

After it became clear that traditional schooling was too much trouble for a girl who wanted only stories and a woman who disliked socializing, Helen of Troy tried to instruct me at home in her cottage on the southeast coast of Nova Scotia. The small house, with unpredictable electricity and whose only heat source was a cast iron wood stove, had three rooms. My room, once a studio where Helen of Troy pretended to paint like the old Romantics, looked out over the rocky beach. The walls were printed with faded roses because Helen loved roses even more than she loved painting. A single picture, one of storm-ridden waves crashing on rocks, hung above my bed. Helen of Troy never told me who was the artist, but her slight blush every time I talked about it left few doubts.

The first story I remember was about those rocks and waves. "That's where your father has gone exploring, didn't you hear?" Helen of Troy said as she cradled my head on her shoulder and pointed with her other hand toward the picture. My eyes followed hers to the painted gleam

of water on stone. “He’s just sailed through a great storm, and found shelter in a cave. Don’t you see the sun through the clouds there?” Her finger traced carefully over the brush strokes. I nodded, still enthralled by the curve of the tinted waves that rose into the horizon. “He sees them too.”

The stories became a game until I was old enough to realize that Helen of Troy had a great imagination in her head and little else. For lessons, I chose my topic from a collection of books in her bedroom. Books were her prized possession, though she seldom read. She said she liked the smell of paper and the look of words, but preferred to conjure up her own stories. Some tales were fantastical and lengthy, others minimal and indistinct. On those days Helen of Troy’s beauty faded into Debra. On those days she only liked to sit on the steps leading down to the ocean, drinking her afternoon tea during sunrise, and falling asleep on her quilted bed before sunset.

“I heard your father was just spotted off the coast of Africa. He’s joined a crew of pirates who now respect him. Soon he may become their new Captain.”

“That’s strange, I heard he was learning how to dive for pearls somewhere near the Maldives.”

“What are the Maldives?” Debra-who-was-once-Helen asked me.

“A land far, far away. That’s why my father is there.”

“Perhaps next he will sail to the end of the earth.”

“The earth has no end, Helen.”

Her cheeks reddened and she fell silent for a moment. “Then perhaps he will go somewhere no one has ever been.”

“Perhaps,” I agreed.

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Every morning, Debra did her best to become Helen. It started by molding with a heated iron her blonde hair into loose curls, which I didn't inherit, and ended in painting colors around her blue eyes, which I did inherit. Helen of Troy always wanted to be the most beautiful she could be, even if no one but myself saw her. After she felt assured of her beauty, Helen made tea. It was the same each day; an unremarkable orange pekoe that she insisted was her favorite. She drank it in the morning, she drank it in the afternoon, she drank it at night. It was an unremarkable cycle.

But then came John.

I felt sure I'd seen him from the road once or twice before, an older man with stooped shoulders and unkempt clothes. We never had visitors, and I only rarely ventured into Liscomb, so people were something of a novelty these days. Groceries and new additions to Helen's book collection were always delivered by post.

"This is John," Helen said one afternoon.

"John who?" I looked over the novelty.

"Just John." He bowed his head slightly. A few grey hairs strayed from beneath his cap. Helen and John talked while I sat and listened. I'd never heard Helen with so many thoughts and ideas of real people and real places. It intrigued me to think that perhaps there was more to her than loose curls and painted eyes.

Finally Helen of Troy decided to tell a story about my father. John sat back in his chair upon the deck, his gaze downcast in quiet respect. I watched him closely. He could have been my father's age. His face was sun-darkened, with lines between his eyes from squinting. Black and brown dirt of inland clung to his jacket and boots. I wondered if my father truly sailed forever, or

settled down in a city or town like John. Perhaps instead of exploring the exotic corners of the earth by sea, my father was a simple man with dirt in his clothes in place of salt and sand.

Perhaps he was no one in particular.

Then Helen finished.

“It’s your turn, John,” I said. “Tell us where my father is.” John let his gaze fall to his cup of tea, which he settled between his large hands as he leaned forward to think.

“Right,” John stuttered, swallowing hard, “as you like.” He squinted out at the waves. “I seen your father out in the desert, riding in one of those caravans with camels and—”

“No, not the desert,” I interrupted him. “My father only sails. And you can’t have seen him, because you’re here.”

John glanced toward Helen uncertainly. “Right, as you like.” He rubbed his thumbs over the ceramic cup. It was one of Helen’s favorites, patterned with budding pink roses. “Then I seen him on the English Channel. He was trying to break some record, I think.”

“Some record,” I repeated, mulling over John’s words. “Yes, my father would, wouldn’t he?” I turned toward Helen. “Is that where my father is?”

“I heard he was searching for stolen treasure in the New World.” She spoke to me but watched John.

“It’s called the Americas, Helen.”

She blushed and looked away from John.

Then John left. Helen sat down on the steps leading to the ocean, and I knew Debra would soon take her place.

“Do you want tea?” I asked.

“No, thank you.”

“Do you want to tell me stories?”

Helen shook her head slightly. “I don’t know where your father is.”

“Neither do I. Isn’t that the point?”

Helen glanced up at me, the colors on her eyelids slightly smudged.

“Maybe you could tell me one?”

I looked past her to the ocean.

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Helen never truly labored, although Debra had once held a post at the millinery in Liscomb. Helen never worked because Helen had money. And she never told anyone about her money, but I knew she had it from when she was still only Debra and belonged to a different family. In some books there were photographs. They were old and blurry, the faces pale smudges in front of a Tudor-styled mansion. A hotel from when their family was on holiday, Helen of Troy said, but I knew I’d seen the house before. My father was one of the smudges, but I could never make out his face. His smile was as any other, his eyes dark in the black and white. There was nothing to distinguish him from the others. He was never called any other name than his own. He wasn’t like Helen. Even only a year older, she towered above him as she stared boldly at the camera. Apart from their gold hair, they hardly seemed a family, but still he had been the only man she loved. I once believed this, and I tried to believe it now.

“I thought you hated people,” I said to Helen one day.

Her eyes widened, their cloudy blue brightening for a moment. “I like *you*, darling.” But I knew she was thinking of John.

“What if he takes you away?”

Helen held my hand in hers. Her skin looked translucent and felt thin like paper. “I’m not going anywhere.”

But on Thursday, Helen left the house before finishing her afternoon tea. I sat on my bed. It was raining outside and I wondered if my father ever sailed through a storm as Helen said. There were only a few of them that I had witnessed. Wind and rain came and went without notice, but storms were memorable in their magnitude. You sensed them before you saw them. I had read this in a book, but I never realized what it meant until I was eight. A squall came up from down the coast. Before it even arrived, the air stilled and the waves deadened. The dark tint of the clouds felt swollen. I remember Helen of Troy going about the house with a purposeful stride I had never seen before but I would come to know well. Debra never walked like this. That first storm ripped shingles free from the cottage siding, and pushed foaming waves onto the deck. Sacks of sand had been placed in front of the doors and the shutters were boarded tight, but still I could feel the house shake. Electricity was gone before nightfall and didn’t return until a week later when the village finally sent men about to visit the more isolated members of the county. Helen lit the cottage with candles and lamps, the rooms filling with the clogged smoke of burning oil and tallow. She knew I was afraid, though I never admitted it, and told stories to help me sleep. She told one of Poseidon, saying that the god of the sea was dueling with the god of the skies, Zeus. They wanted to see who was the most powerful, but soon they would tire and return to their homes in the sea and on Mount Olympus where they would be content once more. The day when Helen went into Liscomb, the Gods did not duel. Rain pattered against the windowpanes and the sky darkened to a heavy grey, but I knew there would be no storm. Helen would not have left me otherwise.

By evening, Helen returned. Her cheeks looked more painted than usual, but her eyes less cloudy.

“Do you want to hear a story?” I offered as she patted the water from her curls. She stopped and smiled at me, her chin tilted down as if she felt ashamed of something.

“Not now.”

“Shall I put the kettle on?”

“I’m feeling rather tired.” Helen touched the back of her hand to her cheek as if to be sure of its warmth. The sun was only just going down. “Until tomorrow?”

Helen didn’t mention John, but I knew she saw him. I wondered if he insisted they go out instead of coming to our cottage again. I wondered if he didn’t like to tell stories. I fell asleep happy that John was nothing like my father.

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John arrived the following week. He’d come from Liscomb, carrying a gift for Helen. She shrieked in joy when she saw the bottle of whiskey, and gave John a peck on his cheek as a deep blush glowed behind her rouge. I’d never seen her drink anything other than orange pekoe before. John tipped his cap down at me as I curled in a reading chair pulled out to the deck. The wind was blowing cool and crisp, as it always did when summer began to fade, and I had a quilted blanket wrapped around my shoulders.

“I’d have gotten you a bottle too,” John joked, “but I didn’t think your auntie’d approve.” He winked at me. I looked back down to my book but I could hear them whispering. John had planned a dinner for them in Liscomb, he said, if she was ready to leave. They wouldn’t be long, he reassured. I knew he was looking at me.

Helen excused herself to get her things. For a moment John only stood there, silent in the middle of the kitchen. Then his boots shuffled across the wood floor as he came over to stand in the doorway to the deck. He pushed his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers. Today John wore a wool-lined jacket and had slicked back his hair. His clothes seemed too clean and unwrinkled. I wondered if he had only just purchased them, or simply never worn the outfit before. Neither of us spoke. John squinted out over the waves and gnawed at his lip with a crooked tooth. I watched him while he watched the horizon. The muted light smoothed the lines in his face until he looked young again. Perhaps this was how Helen saw him.

“Are you married?”

My question made John start, but then he laughed quietly. “Once. She passed when we were young. Haven’t found the right sort since.”

“And my aunt?” Again John laughed.

“She’s a beauty.” He grinned at me as he pulled a hand from his pocket to push back a stray hair from his eye. A few specks of brown dirt fell to the deck. I tried not to look at them. John cleared his throat and swallowed. “What about you? I reckon you’ve a lad hereabouts?”

I thought of Nessie, a local boy who Helen had once charged with walking me home from the village schoolhouse when the act proved too difficult for her. He’d been nicknamed after the Loch Ness monster for his lanky hair and swollen eyes, and had always been afraid of Helen. The memory made me smile, but I shook my head in reply.

John nodded in understanding and gave me a smile that revealed the remainder of his crooked teeth. “Ah, well, you’ve got time.” I frowned. “What about mates? Any of those round here?” I thought of Helen. Then I shook my head again. John said nothing. He looked over his shoulder into the cottage. Helen’s dress caught the light as she hurried by. It was white, but the

sunset made it yellow like it was from another age. I turned back to John. He watched her as she watched no one. Could he see that she was Helen of Troy?

I fell asleep before Helen returned, and awoke before the sun had fully risen above the rocky outcropping to the east. I stepped outside, the wood beneath my feet glistening under the frost. Even the rocks jutting out into the water gleamed crystalline. Golden light outlined the fir trees leading inland. I could smell the cold. Crisp, clean, untouched. Nature simplified every feeling. Perhaps that is what drew my father away and what kept him from returning. Perhaps that is why Helen felt content for so long without the village or John. I turned around to look back into the house. The early sunlight caught on the whiskey bottle. I wondered how much longer she would be content. Helen of Troy was never meant to stay.



Clearing up—Coast of Sicily
By Andreas Achenbach, 1847

How To Fly

The Lament for Icarus
By Herbert James Draper, 1898

My mom said I could never aim too high. My dad said, “Son, don’t listen to your mother.” My parents had the tendency to contradict each other.

“It’s the recipe for a happy and fulfilling marriage.” This they both agreed on, which I thought, in turn, negated their point. But maybe that wasn’t important.

On Monday

Mom: “He’s a grown man now.”

Dad: “He’s still so young.”

On Tuesday

Mom: “He’s my little boy”

Dad: “You shouldn’t coddle him like he’s five.”

I never understood how they did it all, but here I was and here they were, still together. Still in the same house where I was born, still with the same linoleum floors and purple walls.

“It’s blue, dear,” Mom always corrected Dad.

“Periwinkle?” I offered. Mom and Dad shook their heads like I was crazy.

Maybe I was.

On Wednesday

Dad: “Humans should never have started to fly.”

On Thursday

Mom: “I’ve just booked my flight to Tucson to visit Aunt Jo. I love how I can cross the country in only a few hours.”

Dad: "I love how warm it is there."

Mom: "I hate sweating like a pig."

Me: "Pigs don't sweat." My parents rolled their eyes.

July

Me: "I'm moving out."

"Why does my baby want to leave the nest?" Mom asked. Her nose wrinkled like she was holding a sneeze. She always reminded me of a chipmunk when she tried not to cry.

Dad: "I was hoping you'd say that," and slapped me on the back.

"Don't get any rash ideas," said Mom. Still a chipmunk.

"It's time for you to take some risks, Son," said Dad.

So on Friday I left. Mom couldn't keep from crying.

Her: "I'm just so sad."

Dad: "You should be happy, Janet."

Me: "You should be happy, Janet." Mom didn't like that.

August

Mom picked up the phone. "Hello?"

Dad accidentally picked up the other line. "Hello?"

"It's me."

"It's you," they both said.

"I want to come home."

Mom: "You can't."

"I thought you loved me?"

Her: "Of course, darling!"

Him: "We have to."

"What good are you two?"

I imagined my parents shrugging.

"We've done our job."

"What job?" Like it was all a contract.

Dad: "It's time to spread your wings."

"What wings?"

Mom: "It's a metaphor, honey." Their voices didn't sound sweet.

Me: "I know that. What wings?" I imagined my parents rolling their eyes. They thought I was crazy, and maybe they were right.



The Lament for Icarus
By Herbert James Draper, 1898

Night Mythia

Figure dans un Fauteuil
By Pablo Picasso, 1909-10

“I’ll be back by ten,” she says. “Don’t stay up.”

I watch television until nine before falling asleep on the musty couch that pokes into the kitchen of our small apartment. I hear the door open and close at midnight, followed by the usual unsteady fumbling as Mom starts up the stairs one tottering step at a time. A shoe falls. She curses. Then I sleep again.

The smell of burnt bread wakes me. On the counter above my head is the toaster. Mom looks down at me and says, “Morning, sleepyhead,” not caring that I’ve missed the first hour of school. “Why don’t we go shopping today?”

On the way out the door Mom stops to put on cherry lipstick and smacks her lips like she’s a fish stuck on dry land. As we drive, ash drops from her cigarette onto the cushion of the Ford. A red fingernail, the same color as the car, idly flicks it to the floor mat. Mom glances over at me and smiles, the first wrinkles on her face magnified by the sun behind her. People always said she was a beauty in her day but I can’t see it. Now she just looks tired and too painted over like the old porcelain dolls she used to buy me. If I look closely I can see the paste she whitens her face with, and the heavy mascara clumping on the edges of her lashes. It’s like she’s melting.

Mom takes me to the shops anytime she grows bored or wants to feel better about something. She doesn’t go to the same places too often, and in the beginning she would always make sure to come primed in her “posh outfit,” which she completed with her prized red Mary Jane’s. “This way they don’t know us and we don’t know them,” she says.

While Mom looks at the dresses, I look at the jewelry. I never want to wear the stuff, and Mom says I'm too young for anything gaudy, but I always like to run my hands over the rings and necklaces just to feel the cold metal. Mom says that's what money feels like.

Today we're in a small boutique and my eyes fall on a shiny metallic jacket just like the kind Elvis used to wear. The whole thing is over the top but I hold it against me in front of the shop mirror just for fun.

"It's definitely not for the fainthearted," one of the saleswomen says from behind the cash register. She's squat and round, and the tips of her hair stick out from her bun like a porcupine.

Mom hears her comment and comes over. She purses her lips as she frowns down at the jacket clutched to my chest. "I hope you have better taste than that, Sammy." And then as if the woman asked her a question, she goes on, "My little Samantha's at the top of her class," and pinches my cheek like I'm a five-year-old. I don't bother pointing out that I have to *be* in class in order to get to the top of it.

"I'm sure she is," the saleswoman replies, smiling widely without showing teeth.

"Be a doll and grab that dress?" asks Mom, pointing to a long blue satin thing on the top rack and taking the jacket from my arms. She presses the fabric against her, tilting her head like she's thinking hard when I know she's not. The dress looks like the ruffled icing on a cake, but Mom smiles and I haven't seen her smile like that in days. "Danny says he wants to buy me a new dress. He wants me to dress up like those girls in Vogue." I doubt Danny, her new man, meant for her to go to the most expensive shops in the city, but I don't say this.

"What do you think?" I think it's just as ugly as the Elvis jacket, so I smile back at her.

“I think I’ll get it.” Her eyes widen like she’s a kid finally getting ice cream or candy. That’s what this is to her. An indulgence she was never allowed while she was married. An indulgence she needs Danny for.

We go to a few other stores, but by the third I’m staring at my shoes and wishing myself in class. Finally Mom sighs, and looks at her watch. “I’m going to be late to my meeting. Let’s go, Sammy.” She always says this part. Sometimes she puts a twist on it if she’s feeling particularly dramatic.

The shop worker wishes us a safe trip even though we only live twenty minutes away and Mom doesn’t have any work meetings to be late for.

As we drive toward the school grounds, Mom doesn’t talk. She gets this way after we go to the shops, when the excitement has worn off. The thrill never lasts long. Not until her next shopping venture. Usually she doesn’t even keep the things she buys and ends up returning them claiming some malfunction.

“Was this skirt always this sheer, Sammy?”

“Who ever thought this belt was fashionable, Sammy?”

“How on earth did you let me buy this blouse, Sammy?”

Like it’s always my fault. There’s even a rule now; if Mom returns merchandise three times to a single shop, we can never go there again.

She says, “This way they don’t know us and we don’t know them,” but I think it’s already too late.

Pulling the car forward into the parking lot, Mom finally says, “Why doesn’t anything go my way?” This is one of those questions she doesn’t actually want me to answer so I only reach down to grab my lunch bag. It’s already past recess but I know that Mom won’t come back to

pick me up until all the other kids and parents have left, so it doesn't hurt to have a small snack while I wait. She doesn't like them and they don't like her. Divorced couples are a black mark at any Catholic school no matter how progressive they say they are.

The classroom doors are locked between periods to prevent latecomers from disrupting, so I sit in the hallway. I hate this part. Nuns no longer patrol the school, but I know the clerical staff always wishes they could discipline me properly for my "rampant tardiness." Now all they can do is call my mom even though they know she's responsible. The sisters, if they admit to disliking anyone, loathe my mom.

After school I sit on the curb for an hour before I realize that Mom isn't coming. A blue sedan pulls up, but I know who it is before the window rolls down and he calls my name.

"Why are you here?" I don't mean to sound upset, but my voice wavers. Dad smiles grimly at me, and I wonder if he wanted to pick me up or if a frantic call from Mom sent him. We aren't supposed to see each other until the weekend.

"Just get in, Samantha." He sounds rushed, even though he doesn't say anything more as I slowly open the door and throw my pack on top of the old newspapers lining the car floor. A pine air freshener hangs from his mirror, but it's too sweet to remind me of the outdoors.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Your Mother's."

Usually Dad sits in his sedan and waits to see Mom give him a curt wave from the apartment window before driving away. Usually he doesn't even unbuckle before he hugs me. Today he shuts off the car engine and runs his hands over his slacks to smooth them. Today he follows me up the walk and through the door. The lights are off, and I can only hear the old vintage clock Mom once picked up from a yard sale ticking from the kitchen.

“Candace!” Dad calls, still standing on the threshold like a guest even though the apartment used to be his too. When they were married he used to call her Candy.

“She’s probably picking up food,” I lie. I know she’s with Danny across town. Sometimes she doesn’t even come home for dinner.

“Your mother leaves you here alone?” Dad nudges a cigarette butt on the floor with his boot. Some dried cement falls off the toe. Mom used to hate it when he tracked in dirt from the construction site. Even with his head ducked and his hands in his pockets, he fills the doorframe. When I was younger I thought he was the strongest man in the world, with his huge chest and arms.

I nod my head, looking out the window.

“You’re only a kid. Jesus, she’s crazy.” I fight a smile. If only he knew.

For a moment we both just stand there.

“C’mon then,” Dad finally says. “I’m taking you back with me.”

I don’t move right away.

I can’t remember how many times I wanted him to say those words but right now I only feel angry. When Mom pressed for custody all she said was that she wanted me and loved me and he said nothing and then they both signed the papers and it was done. Mom told me over pancakes that I would only see my dad once a month from then on. He didn’t even call to tell me himself.

Dad lives in the next neighborhood, but it takes us an hour to get there through all the traffic. His apartment has only one bedroom, and a single cushion chair that he sits in while he watches television. There isn’t even a table for eating. I throw my bag on the rug by the front door. I wonder how long it will be until Mom calls and I have to pick it up again.

Dad doesn't have a VCR yet so we settle on watching music videos on MTV. He closes his eyes whenever he listens to songs and taps a hand on the armrest. Dad says when he was young they had to go to concerts to see the bands perform but now everything is on television. His favorite memory from the year I was born was when he went to hear Aerosmith live. "Well that, and then of course you, Sammy," Dad teases. He pinches my cheek playfully like Mom does but this time it hurts.

I put down my bowl of pasta just when the phone rings. Dad turns down the volume on the television before picking up. He doesn't even say anything before she starts. I try not to listen but she's yelling and the show has gone to commercials. I've already put my jacket on before Dad hangs up and looks at me.

"I'm sorry kiddo, let's go."

The smell of pine makes me feel sick so I roll down the car window even though it's starting to drizzle outside. Dad says nothing. This time he just hugs me and drives away before I even reach the door.

"Oh Sammy, where've you been?" Mom asks, standing at the foot of the stairs. I don't bother asking where she's been. Her hair frizzes in the humidity, and her eyes are red like she's been crying. I doubt the tears were for me.

It's not very late but I don't want to talk. "I'm going to bed," I say, pushing past her. Mom doesn't reply, and I hear a match strike as she lights a cigarette. The musky tobacco is just as sickening as the sweet pine.

On the way to school Mom doesn't mention the shops and doesn't smile. I see the yellow boutique bag in the rear seat, the receipt taped to the handle. I wonder what excuse she'll use this time. Today I don't mind when she drops me at the curb.

My friend Sophie finds me before class. People say we look so similar we could be twins. Sometimes even our teachers mix us up.

“Did you know Theresa’s parents are divorcing?” Sophie whispers, since we’re not supposed to talk in the hallways. I shake my head and wonder if she said those same words to someone else when my dad moved out. “She had to leave Theology because she was crying too loud when Sister Agatha kept going on about the sacred bond of family and how all the sinners were washed away in the Flood.”

I didn’t cry at all when my parents separated. During the first few months Mom would sit in front of the television for hours, watching infomercials about beauty products and cutting pages out of old fashion magazines.

“This is our second chance, Sammy,” she’d say, putting down her scissors for a moment to take a drag.

Then the trips to the shops began. When they were together, Dad never understood why Mom wanted to go to all the boutiques for her clothes.

“Why can’t you just order things from a catalogue? Shops are a waste of time.”

“Is it because you’re embarrassed of me, the woman who you got stuck with who can’t even keep a receptionist’s job?” She started chipping away at the polish on her nails.

“Don’t be stupid, Candy.” But I don’t think Mom ever believed him.

Sophie keeps talking even though I’m not listening anymore. She thinks she knows what’s going on, but it isn’t true. If people really knew us, they wouldn’t mistake us at all. Our math teacher sticks her head out of one of the classroom doors and gives Sophie a sharp look that makes her shut up.

I've only eaten half of my rationed sandwich when Mom arrives. She waves at me like I'm not the only person left sitting on the curb. Today she's painted her nails bright fuchsia.

Mom drops me at home and then says she has to run out for errands. She doesn't like telling me when she's going to meet Danny.

When I throw my bag on the counter, I notice the mail. There are two letters marked from school. One is another notice about my lateness. The other is a bill. I can tell by the first sentence, which says something about the charity of Christ and how we must all have faith in him even through our hardships. Then they ask us for money. Mom has a shoebox for these kinds of letters under the kitchen sink. She gives the collection to me to give to my dad on the weekends when I stay with him. Now he doesn't even act surprised when I hand him the box for women's size seven Mary Jane's.

The phone rings.

"Oh hey, kiddo," Dad says. He sounds tired. "Is your mother around?"

"She's running errands," I reply without thinking. I don't like lying to him but it's gotten so easy. Maybe this is how Mom feels when she talks to me.

"Oh." There's a pause and I can hear the sports announcer through Dad's receiver. "I'm sorry, Sammy." I don't think he's talking about yesterday.

"I know."

He sighs. "Well I'll see you soon, hey?"

"Yeah."

I finish the rest of my sandwich before Mom gets back. I hear the engine shut off and the car door close and then her heels clicking on the walk.

“I come bearing gifts,” she singsongs, placing a plastic bag filled with cartons of Indian food on the table. She’s smiling and her cheeks are red like she’s been drinking.

“I want to live with Dad,” I say as Mom throws her jacket on the couch. Her smile disappears.

“Why would you want to do a stupid thing like that? He left *us*, don’t you remember, Sammy?”

He left *you*, I want to reply, but I know it will only make things worse. “It should be my choice.”

“Well it isn’t.”

“Can’t I just see him more?”

Mom opens her mouth like she wants to say something but stops herself. She takes a breath.

“Let’s just eat, Sammy. We can talk about this later.”

“I’m not hungry.” I can tell she doesn’t believe me, just like she never believed Dad.

“Fine.” Mom drops one of the food cartons on the table, and some of the coconut curry spills.

She flips through the April issue of *Cosmopolitan* while she eats but I don’t think she’s actually reading. The clock ticks.

When later doesn’t come, I’m too afraid to ask again. The television is on but I’m not paying attention. Mom stands in the doorway and watches me. I don’t want to look over even though I can feel her there.

“Why don’t I read you a story?” she finally says, sounding calm again. “You used to love those when you were younger.”

When I don't answer, Mom tries, "Don't we have fun together? Who will go shopping with me if you leave?" She smiles, and I notice how her lipstick is smeared, melting.

I know she's trying to be nice in the only way she can, but she still doesn't get it. She thinks she's doing the right thing.

"If I live with Dad, you can stay with Danny. Isn't that what you want?" I know it is, even though Mom would never admit it. Her grin fades but I don't think she's upset.

"Oh, Sammy." She sighs, sounding tired. "This isn't your fault."

I don't think even she believes herself this time.



Figure dans un Fauteuil
By Pablo Picasso, 1909-10

Oculus

The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning
By Camille Pissarro, 1897

The first time Joseph climbed into the attic, he counted thirty-three chimneystacks from its singular small, round window. He looked at them as a young boy, idle when rain dyed the streets a darker grey and shiny hats bobbed in their attempt to outrun the downpour. The street houses with their narrow windows and steps became gaping black eyes and open mouths in an unchanging expression that always seemed to mirror Joseph's mood. He wondered, looking at this scene, if he would ever reach that fated number. His mother had died when she was only twenty-four, and his father a month before his thirty-first birthday. Joseph felt even less hopeful of his prospects when it appeared that the stacks grew in number every year. He was still young, according to the date so boldly printed on the newspapers each morning, but Joseph held little trust in this fact.

Joseph never had his image taken, nor any other art form in which he might freeze the present moment for another day, a reality that was regretful to him. He once attempted drawing the view from the window, hoping in some way that this might prevent more stacks from filling the skyline, but found he possessed no skill. It was nigh impossible to capture the figures of the men and women strolling along the sidewalk, or the toss of the horses' heads as they trudged the muddy way. How did one express the glinting light on the lamppost as the oil flickered to life at nightfall? Or the wind-borne leaf on its journey through the air? That young girl's laugh could never properly be rendered by Joseph's hand, surely.

To Joseph, the small door at the end of the hall that led to the attic always held a degree of mystery. However when he ventured up the steep ladder and found the room to be a rather

small and unremarkable space of low-hanging rafters and cobwebs, his attention turned to the world outside the window. From this height, Joseph felt like a hidden guardian, unseen by the masses below. Finally he could observe each man and woman as the true person they were, with no façade or disguise. He wondered if when the day came for him to ascend to whichever afterlife existed, he might still be able to look down at the crowded road. There was a calming effect in watching the movement of others while standing in stillness and silence.

In being orphaned so young, Joseph could never evoke the image of the apartment where he was born or the tones in his father's hair. But his mind clearly remembered the dormitories of St. Jérôme's where he lived for near a decade; the way the cot springs broke in the middle, causing the mattresses to drag on the floor, or the way the windows looking out to the street were always barred. Twenty boys boarded with Joseph in the same long room, with precisely forty centimeters between each bed. Some of the boys had parents still, they said, but Joseph knew they were no better off than he. Joseph could perfectly recall each fracture in the plaster above his head, and the way the streetlamp made it appear like a gruesome grinning face. He could perfectly recall the musty corridors and the yellow cabinets in the kitchen where the nuns and nurse aids often sat talking in low tones over cups of tea. The boys were never allowed there, but a wide crack near one of the iron hinges made it easy to hear the goings on within. St Jérôme's claimed to care for all the boys as its own children, but Joseph knew no true mother would say the things the nuns said of them.

St. Jérôme's stood four storeys tall and Joseph boarded on the second floor until he was finally moved to the third when he turned twelve. The top floor had long been abandoned, but during a particularly slow day Joseph found himself wandering up the stair to the final storey. Numerous doors lined the hall, many of which remained unlocked to reveal haphazard stacks of

metal bedframes and stained and ripped bedclothes. In one room an old wooden chair missing a leg leaned against the wall. Joseph's findings felt somewhat paltry in comparison to all the stories the boys told amongst themselves about the wicked ways of the nuns and missing children in the night. The only space left unexplored lay behind a white painted door at the far end of the corridor. It appeared all too short and narrow for any grown person to step through without stooping, but Joseph lifted the latch all the same. He could remember even years later, how he felt in that moment both like he was being trapped and finally leaving behind all the mundanity of St. Jérôme's. It was as if that new space was yet untouched and untainted, a secret known only by him.

Every Sunday the nuns ushered the boys across the boulevard to chapel, and on odd holidays they were allowed to visit the park or museum, but otherwise the boys learned to find entertainment among themselves or in the small selection of donated board games. The older boys strode the halls restlessly, counting the days until they could leave St Jérôme's and stretch their legs. Sometimes they would lean out of the tiny washroom windows, the only ones without bars within the regular living quarters, and call on girls passing on the street below until the nuns were made aware of their transgressions. These were only short-lived respites, and Joseph found himself venturing away from the group more and more. He could sit for hours in front of the attic window, watching how the shadows cast by the surrounding buildings stretched and shortened with the sun. Joseph quickly discovered that the round window swung outward to let in fresh air, but no human body could possibly fit through the opening. This did not disappoint him as it once might have.

On the day Joseph was set to break forth from the cage of St. Jérôme's, he had very clearly in his mind divided reality into the interior world of the children's home and the exterior

world of everything else. This proved, however, to be a miscalculation from his very first step. The uneven stone underfoot, and the smell of horse dung lining the central way of the street, overwhelmed Joseph's vision from the attic window. The passing faces ignored him, not caring to look around themselves. In that moment, the crowded road became something less than the road he saw from the attic window, and Joseph wished himself back to that low-stooped room despite all the excitement of starting afresh.

For a number of years, he did not return to St. Jérôme's, set upon the idea that his discontent might pass. He began a small job at a nearby church, which called for him to sweep under the pews and dust all the appropriate reliquaries and altar paintings between masses. The work was slow, but Joseph found within it a similar opportunity to look upon the faces of the assembled and see them without guard.

Time passed while Joseph held this post, and he did not venture far from his new home though the memory of the attic pulled insistently at his mind. He often lay awake at night, the dim light from the street a splash of yellow against the wall of his small bedroom, longing to dream about that view. Joseph found himself wishing to be a boy once more; not in seeking to climb through the barred windows to break free, but rather that he might again feel the solitude of gazing upon the unassuming world from his oculus.

One day, Joseph climbed the bell tower, but although the horizon felt endless and pure at this height, he could no longer distinguish or hear the people below. Everything appeared blurred, as if clumsy daubs of paint took the place of all the stray cats and pigeons and workers Joseph so loved to watch going about their business in the street, until even the chimneystacks became lost amongst the dark rooftops, only unfamiliar specks without matter or consequence.



The Boulevard Montmartre on a Winter Morning
By Camille Pissarro, 1897

Bella Fiore

Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes
By Artemisia Gentileschi, 1625

Massimo never believed he would have to kill, but when the moment came he saw no other way. Catalina slept soundly that night, and he watched her pale eyelids flutter briefly as if in dreaming she still knew what he had done.

Their father's blood stained the hem of one of her favorite smocks, a skirt embroidered with bright poppies. More flowers for his *bella fiore*. The dyed needlework made no comparison to the deep red of the new stain, but Massimo knew it would soon fade into muted brown, as everything did. His fingers worked deftly as he tore the fabric. Perhaps rats had been starved enough to eat the rough linen. Perhaps Massimo would confess that he had been reckless with his steps and torn a hole. Catalina would only know that the poppies had been stamped and would not return.

Even in the dim moonlight, Massimo saw clearly every vein in his father's neck as his pulse began to fail. The first gush of blood, almost theatrical in its urgency, had slowed to a sluggish trickle that pooled like a halo around Giovanni's grey hair. A strange calm weighed down Massimo's limbs until he wondered if he might not join Catalina in sleep, but the cooling body before him drove him from his knees. Bruises had already formed upon his legs and ached with the effort. Injury more severe might have befallen him if his father had not already been slowed by drink and opium. The stiletto, while heavy and trembling in Massimo's hand, cut cleanly before his father could utter alarm to wake Catalina from the straw cot across the room. Giovanni's pale eyes did not even have time enough to search for his attacker before their light failed. Massimo felt thankful he did not have to see them, but even more thankful they would

never again look upon Catalina. Massimo bore his weight into Giovanni's chest even when he knew his father could no longer fight. Still he pressed, feeling the broken flesh open and devour his hand as he drove the knife deeper until all that remained was the soft earthen floor and his blade. All Massimo could recall was that he had not expected the warmth, as if holding his hands out to a coal fire while his body remained cold.

Massimo did not return home until the sun began its ascent. The hut held the dusky light of dawn, as slivers of sunlight pushed through the shutters to capture dust motes in the air. He stepped quietly, kicking rushes and fresh dirt over the ground so that it appeared he had spent the night upon the hearth. Massimo looked to his sister still asleep with her light curls a perfect crown. A flower amongst the weeds. Catalina would never again wilt as long as Massimo lived, but he wondered how much longer she could survive without the sun.



Judith and Her Maidservant with the Head of Holofernes
By Artemisia Gentileschi, 1625

The Baptism¹

Abbey Amidst Oak Trees

By Caspar David Friedrich, 1809-10

In front of them sat the New One. His pale hair was parted and slicked back but his close-set eyes wandered over the words scrawled across the blackboard with nervous urgency. A finger pulled at the collar around his neck, already stained with sweat. Perhaps he could sense what they were thinking, passing along in their shielded glances when the professor turned his back. Every lesson was a countdown and he knew it. Barnes had seen it done dozens of times before. This would be no different. The New One would fight and then he would surrender and then he would be one of them. Absentmindedly Barnes pressed the tip of his pencil into the soft pine of the desk, carving out the number 54. The unsteady strokes looked like a crude scar, but he knew it would only be sanded away during the summer holiday. An elbow nudged Barnes in the side. The Baptist smirked at him from across the desk, lips curled cruelly, and raised his thick dark brows toward the anxious figure in the row in front of them. He waited for Barnes to grin back or say something, but Barnes only shrugged. Everyone knew the leader as John the Baptist. None of the students called him by his Christian name. The Baptist was the largest of the lot, barrel chested with shoulders better suited for field work than a classroom. The boys of the Lower Sixth looked like mere children next to him and he always liked to remind them of this.

“Look at the little shit,” the Baptist muttered under his breath, leaning close. “He’ll drown in his own sweat before we even get to him.” Professor Croft paused in his lesson to give the Baptist a sharp look over his spectacles. Barnes said nothing, and stared out of the window.

¹ This piece was written for a workshop prior to senior year and its 10 pages should thus not be assessed as part of the Senior Project.

“You’re a quiet one today, Barney.” The Baptist ran a hand over his wavy black hair that always seemed in disarray.

“Have you got any fags?” Barnes finally said, ignoring his comment.

The Baptist snorted, hiding his face behind the lesson book as the professor glared at him again. “Yeah, *bumped* them off one of the babies. We’re all set.”

Professor Croft marched down the aisle, for a moment looking like the war officer he had once been, and closed the Baptist’s book with a loud crack. “That will be quite enough, Grant.” Barnes noticed the New One glancing over his shoulder at them. He flinched, beady eyes wide, as if someone had hit him and turned about in his chair. Perhaps he wouldn’t even fight.



It was after midnight before they finally sat together again in the dormitory. Curfew began at eleven, and the room was doused in murky shadows. McKlenish swore under his breath as he stubbed his foot against a chair. There were shuffling sounds as they all found a seat to wait. It would be any minute now.

“They say he’s from a house of girls,” Ackerman’s voice broke the silence. “Six of them, in all.”

“And the father?”

“A grocer with three shops.” Ackerman sniggered in the dark, hands fumbling with a matchbox. A small flame interrupted the blackness and the smell of sulfur and tobacco hung in the air.

“Already sounds like a nancy—” offered McKlenish too loudly. A sharp elbow to the ribs cut him short.

“Put out your cig and shut your mouth,” Barnes whispered roughly, ears straining to listen for any sound within the hollow silence. There was only their breathing, short and restless. Somewhere down the corridor a floorboard creaked. Probably the matron as she slipped down the headmaster’s office for his cache of whiskey. It would be no difficulty to pass her by unnoticed. Within an hour she would be snoring in her chair, wispy grey hair clouding about her face as drool pooled at the corner of her puckered lips.

“Stop being such a fucking prat,” McKlenish said sulkily and Ackerman rubbed out the embers on the bottom of his shoe. They knew Barnes was right. The matron had the nose of a bloodhound, and she wasn’t pissed quite yet.

A pale, ghostly shape appeared in the window. It smiled, splitting its face in two, eyes glinting.

“You lot ready?” the Baptist asked from his perch sitting on the ledge. He looked like a gruesome gargoyle as the moonlight marked his hunched silhouette.

Outside the stone-faced dormitory the world seemed drained of all color and sound. The lawn gleamed white and silver as if snow had just fallen, but there was a heaviness to the spring air. To their left spilled yellow light out of one of the chapel’s windows, an unblinking, watchful eye. They stole across the lawn, the moonlight bright enough to form long thin shadows behind them. Dew glistened on the low-cut grass like a blanket of diamonds that shattered and seeped into their leather shoes. Barnes knew he would have to oil and repolish them before lessons in the morning.

The New One boarded on the first floor, a corner room that had two dark windows. They crouched beneath the shrubbery, clutching the cool metal torches to their chests. Now it was Barnes’ turn. He stared up at the paned glass, recognizing the knot forming in his stomach.

“Can’t we just take all of his clothes or make him steal the communion wine?”

“Afraid of getting your delicate little hands dirty, are we *Barney*?” whispered the Baptist. Even in the pale morning light Barnes could make out the scornful twist of his mouth.

The Baptist added, “Don’t cock this up,” as Barnes crawled towards the window.

Barnes spat over his shoulder as he wiped clammy palms upon his trousers. He should have worn his old pair with the slightly frayed hem.

The latch was unlocked, as Barnes expected. It was always unlocked if the New One truly wanted to join them. The window swung open easily. The room in front of Barnes felt like a chilled cavern where every sound echoed into eternity. Drip, drip, creak, creak. Everything looked untouched, as if no one truly lived there. Drip, drip, creak, creak.

“Where are the others?” asked a hollow voice from the shadows. The New One stepped into the moonlight between the stalagmites of armchairs and reading tables. His face blanched as his birdlike eyes moved quickly over Barnes to rest on the crumpled cloth in his hand. “How far will it be?”

“Not far.”

“How long will it take?” The New One straightened his vest.

“Not long.”

“Can you tell me anything?”

Barnes only held out his hand, and the New One understood.



“You always know how to lure them out. It must be those girlish features of yours,” the Baptist teased. He reached out a thick hand and tousled the pillowcase. A muffled protest sounded from within.

McKlenish slapped Barnes gently on the back. "At least you look like you belong here." He meant it as a compliment.

The New One followed obediently upon their heels as they went. He rested a hand on Barnes' shoulder, his movements stiff and unsure. Barnes could hear his heavy breathing. It warmed the back of his neck but Barnes did not feel reassured. Trees sprouted up about them as the dormitory and academy faded behind. Fallen branches cracked underfoot. A soft breeze sifted through Barnes' hair, smelling faintly of earthen musk. They were getting closer. The darkness was almost complete now. Ahead, the Baptist flashed on his torch and a warm beam of light split the night. Barnes' foot nudged against a liquor bottle that had moss growing over the faded label. Dozens of others glinted under the passing torchlight. How long had people been coming here? How many John the Baptists were there before them? How many would come after? The New One stumbled on a bottle and gripped Barnes' shoulder tightly.

Then the Baptist stopped. They had come to the swamp bordering the river. Sedge and bracken formed knolls of muted green that stretched on until it met with the water. "Bring him here," the Baptist instructed them, solemnity lowering his voice. With whitened knuckles upon either arm, Ackerman and McKlenish ushered the New One forward to the edge. The Baptist lifted the covering and shone the light on his face. The New One blinked rapidly in the brightness. His once neatly oiled blonde hair was disheveled. He glanced between their faces uneasily.

"Where are the rest?" he asked in a hesitant voice.

The Baptist gave no answer. The New One let his gaze settle upon the moss-covered ground.

Handing the torch to McKlenish, the Baptist placed a fag between his teeth and lit it. With eyes closed tight in rapture, he inhaled deeply. Then he blew the smoked into the New One's face, making him cough. Barnes suppressed a yawn. The whole thing was childish, really, but the Baptist insisted upon it. Stooping down, the Baptist unlaced his shoes and rolled up his trousers so that his legs shone pure and white in the dim light. Turning his back to them, the Baptist stepped down into the marsh, flicking the cig away into the gloom. The brown water swirled about his feet. With each step, the mud made a sound of resistance. The New One gulped but followed him without a word.

"Thank Mary we only have to do that once," McKlenish muttered. Ackerman leaned back against the roughened bark of a tree and laughed, arms crossed over his chest.

Ten paces out, the Baptist turned around. He towered over the New One, and clasped his meaty hands onto his shoulders.

McKlenish fixed them within the torchlight. The artificial glow cast outlandish shadows over their faces. For a moment they only looked at each other. Then, "I christen thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," and the Baptist pushed him into the sludge. The New One had not expected it, his arms thrashed out wildly. But it was always like this. They would fight and then they would surrender and then they would be one of them. The Baptist hauled the New One to his feet. He spluttered, mud matted in his pale hair and dripping down his face. A look of relief passed over his features. He was part of tradition now.

"With earth and water be purified," the Baptist cried out, a strange fervor in his words. With the full weight of his body he plunged the New One back into the mud. McKlenish chuckled uncertainly.

"Added a spin to it, looks like," Ackerman joked, but Barnes stepped forward.

“All right, the joke’s been had. You can let him up.” The Baptist didn’t move. His hands held firm as the New One squirmed beneath him with new frenzy. Mud and water splashed the Baptist’s uniform and face, but still he didn’t let go. “Grant—” Barnes leapt into the water, knocking the torch from McKlenish’s hand. Everything became swallowed in blinding darkness. The water was cooler and thicker than he expected. His shoes stuck in the mud but he wrenched away desperately. One foot came free and he fell forward. Pain shot up his knee as it hit a stone hidden beneath the sediment. Gritty clay entered his mouth and nose. Ackerman shouted his name, and finally the light reappeared. Barnes could see the Baptist lit up in front of him, arms straining. The Baptist didn’t seem to notice him there. Barnes pushed himself to his feet. “What in hell do you—” He stopped. The Baptist had stepped away from the New One. The madness in his actions seemed to have vanished like a distant dream, draining him. Wide eyes looked down at the unresisting form with a mixture of revulsion and disbelief. Barnes felt his arm, as if he didn’t control it, reach out and touch it. The thing was warm. What had he expected? Somehow it no longer seemed real that it had ever breathed at all. Pale hair glinted through the mud.

“Help me, goddamnit,” Barnes heard himself say to the Baptist. In heavy silence they dragged the form to the marsh edge. Ackerman and McKlenish stared down at them with incomprehensible horror. The torch hung limply from McKlenish’s fingers. The Baptist fell to the ground numbly, his body slicked and molded in mud.

“What were you thinking? You fucking shit.” Barnes hardly recognized the faraway voice that came out of himself, but the Baptist didn’t stir, gaze transfixed by his mud covered hands. “You’re a fucking sick bastard. Fuck.” Barnes felt something welling up inside of him as the choking hold of panic and fear filled his mouth with its metallic taste. He bit his tongue to keep himself from screaming. It was hard enough to break the skin. The warm salty blood made

him gag. It dribbled down his chin, and he wiped it on his uniform without thinking. “It’s a joke, it’s all a fucking joke—Jesus.” He was the only one speaking. He could feel McKlenish, mute and ashen, beside him. Ackerman sat down hard on a rotting tree stump, clasping his hands together as if in prayer. None of them wanted to look at it lying there at the edge of the marsh, a statue cast in clay. “What a shit, a little fucking shit.” Barnes couldn’t stop the words from spilling out of him. “Now the fucker can’t talk. Can’t even look—”

“Stop it.” Ackerman pushed himself to his feet. He swallowed and ran his fingers through his hair. “We’ve got to do something.” His voice sounded distant and choked. All around them tree boughs creaked in the wind.

“Like shit,” Barnes said, afraid he would start to laugh.

“We can’t leave him here. They’ll find him.”

“Then where?”

Ackerman thought for a moment. “The river. We’ve got to carry him to the river.”



With a trembling hand Barnes passed his fingers over the unmoving gaze. The lids wouldn’t close. “Fuck, fuck, fuck—”

“Leave it, you idiot,” Ackerman hissed, the whites of his eyes glistening like marble in the dimness. “Grab his arms.” Barnes did as he asked, trying not to look down into the face. His hands could hardly find a grip through the slick clay that coated their skin.

“Just go,” Barnes gasped under the weight. McKlenish looked ill, but he put his arms under the torso as he choked back a sob.

The Baptist followed with numb steps, shoulders stooped so that he appeared like nothing more than an old man.

Four times the body slipped like a broken doll to the ground. Twigs and leaves stuck to the mud so that it was hardly recognizable. It could have simply lain there like a forgotten liquor bottle and no one would notice until they stumbled upon it. By the time they dropped it on the shore of the river, exhaustion had turned their limbs into lead. The Baptist hung back from the rest, his face hidden by shadow.

“Now what?”

“Now we take him out there.” Ackerman motioned toward the middle of the river where the current formed silver ripples in the brown water. No one moved.

“What if they find his body?” McKlenish asked, coming up to their side silently. He spoke in a whisper but his voice echoed eerily over the water. Mud dripped from their fingertips. No one said anything, but each felt a shiver through their body. They didn’t want to think of it.

“I need a fag.” Ackerman’s voice was steady, but his fingers shook as he tried to light up. The wind blew out two matches. He threw them into the river, swearing under his breath. The third flame held. Ackerman balanced the cig between clenched teeth that gleamed like bone in the moonlight. Barnes could see the muscles of his jaw working. The smoldering tobacco flared as he took a long drag. Smoke curled into the air, hung there, and then dispersed as a fresh breeze blew. Everything was black and blue save for the smoke and their faces.

Ackerman let his half-finished cig fall into the water. Without a word he grabbed the ankles and stepped into the water, his mouth set in a grim line as he looked expectantly to Barnes and McKlenish. They moved forward. The body slithered between the reeds and into the river like a grey snake. Barnes pushed the shoulders while Ackerman towed the body behind him into deeper water, head bobbing, as they slowly swam out farther. The chilled water weighed down their knit uniform. Barnes could feel the current gain strength and pull at them insistently.

“Here,” Ackerman finally gasped as he treaded water. Fingers loosened and the broken doll floated away from them like a shadow. They watched until it disappeared and then turned for the shore. For a moment Barnes wondered if he could even make it back. The water pressed close, choking him with its coolness as if one soul would not satisfy it.

When they finally turned back to the dormitory, the Baptist did not follow them. The water had cleaned away the clay, but still it stained their vests. Barnes felt the mud push between his toes with each step. It would still be there in the morning. He would have to take a bath before the bells were rung.

“At least...” McKlenish swallowed hard. “At least there wasn’t any blood.”

“How can you fucking say that?” Barnes murmured, but knew that the shiver over his skin was one of relief. His eyes burned but there were no tears. And there wouldn’t be any tears, only the shaking and beating of his heart in his throat.



Barnes could feel him there like a ghost. The same ghost that had sat next to him for the last week. The Baptist stared ahead unseeingly from his seat, skin a sickly pallor and eyes reddened. There was something pathetic in his unkempt curls and restless fingers. For the first time he looked truly small. Barnes wanted to shake him and scream, to tell them all what had really happened. It wasn’t just another student who couldn’t stand the pressure. It wasn’t just another student who was too weak. He bit his tongue and almost enjoyed the sore pain. Barnes hardly noticed when the professor stopped his lesson. He stood before him now, furrowed brow behind his spectacles. Everyone stared except for the Baptist.

“It has been a difficult time for us all, Barnes. But it is good to see how much you cared for him. Sometimes these things can’t be helped.” His fingers squeezed Barnes’ shoulder and then he walked to the front of the classroom, the floorboards groaning under his weight.



Abbey Amidst Oak Trees
By Caspar David Friedrich, 1809-10

Widow Maker

The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp
By Rembrandt van Rijn, 1631

She hears them first when she is too young. The voices, the quiet shuffling, the sudden light in the hall. Someone she doesn't recognize. Her friend lies on the floor asleep, not hearing what she hears. Whatever it is can wait. In the morning she's not quite sure if anything happened. Other people will talk but she won't understand.

The second time she is awake. How did he get from here to there? She can't remember that part, like it's a dream. Everyone acts as if it's done and over. *It's not the same without him.* But he isn't actually gone, she thinks. The room feels a little less crowded, a little quieter. It doesn't make sense with all the people standing around. She counts time on her fingers.

When the third comes, she calls the hospital and he isn't there. *It's nothing to worry about.* He's back already; it isn't like the other time. It won't happen again.

Her family doesn't talk like others do. When they call, she remembers it all for the first time in years. Every five years, like clockwork. There were so many people around every time before then, but now she's alone. This time, this time. That's what her head says. She feels so far away. He could be gone already and she wouldn't know. That's what her head says.

She's old enough to drive; she's old enough to remember everything. When she stops home, she wonders if the dog knows. Those perky ears say no. She plays music as she goes. But what if this is how she remembers him? What if now he becomes a song that she used to listen to in middle school? She doesn't play music as she goes.

She's glad she's not the first to arrive. Can they see how her eyes look? It's stupid, but she cares. It's a private thing, even though strangers surround her. This section of the hospital is

for dying. She leans down and kisses his cheek. “Love you, dad.” It shouldn’t feel as strange to say as it does and she hates it. He’s making the nurse laugh even though he looks feeble in the hospital gown and with all the wires and machines. Every so often his face freezes, and she wonders what he’s thinking in that moment.

“I can still feel it,” he says, hand on heart. Like a gear has slipped. Like it’s broken.

Her brothers stand around. The room is quiet until the machines beep. She watches the clock. At 2 o’clock he was dead. Not really, but it felt that way. And now he’s been reborn and it’s only 3:41. When he stands to use the bathroom, the nurses stand to watch for blood under the curtain. He’s not supposed to do this so soon after surgery, they say. He could bleed out. This part they don’t say.

She enters again when they withdraw the screen. His cellphone rings. It’s jarring and he picks up quickly. The IV tubes tug at his wrist, caught on the bedrail. She helps him untangle while he talks. He always speaks so loudly, almost like he’s yelling. She feels embarrassed about how she feels embarrassed.

They call it the ‘widow maker.’

Yeah it was close.

I’m totally fine now.

She knows she should feel relieved, but for some reason all she can think is how he shouldn’t be laughing. She counts time on her fingers. Every fifth. Where will she be the next time it happens? Because it *will* happen, that’s just how it goes. Where will he be? It’s stupid, but she wants to be married before he leaves them for good. Not so he can walk her down the aisle like in the movies, not so they can dance. She hates dancing. She only wants him to know she’s found someone and is happy. He never believes her when she says this. He asks, “What do you

plan to do?” like she can write an outline for the next ten years. She wishes she could, if that would make him happy, but right now all she can say is, “Don’t worry. I’m doing what I love.” He grew up in a different time, when this wasn’t a thing people said or understood. She wonders if he regrets that.

But what if that never happens? What if, one day, he just disappears? Because it *will* happen, that’s just how it goes. She can’t fathom it. Right now she knows she’s lucky, there’s no reason to cry, but she wishes she were young again and couldn’t remember.



The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp
By Rembrandt van Rijn, 1631

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