

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

THE NOBODY OF THE PLANET

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SPRING 2018

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in English and English Secondary Education
with honors in English

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ABSTRACT

This collection of short stories explores the theme of what it means to be “wanted” as a woman. These stories offer a variety of feminine perspectives, including narratives told through the eyes of male protagonists. Each story serves to complicate the narrative by spanning race and age considerations. In the end, the question of “how does being a product of a gender driven society influence the story that women are able to tell” is answered through a series of complicated and sometimes perplexing narratives that blur the lines between poetry and prose. All of these stories are imbued with tones of loneliness and desire. This desire exists as its own entity that transmutes over the course of the collection. The act of being a woman is called into question by the very need for validation separate from love.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep gratitude to Professor Bill Cobb and Professor Charlotte Holmes for their patient guidance and useful critiques of this research work. I would also like to thank all of those involved with the Hemingway Letters Project including Verna Kale, Jeanne Alexander, and David Eggert for providing the inspiration for the story “Why We Don’t Talk.” Finally, I wish to thank my parents for their support and encouragement throughout my study and for my grandmother who unintentionally taught me how to breathe life into my writing.

The Nobody of the Planet

Priyanka Lakshmi had the shortened hourglass figure of a woman whose time was running out. The moon stretched its reach into her room and illuminated her bottle of Kingfisher from the inside out with its milky whispers. The label had started to become unattached with its upper left edge folded over from sitting out too long next to the candles that she blew out once the moonlight entered her room. Priyanka had grown used to sitting in as little light as possible. The darkness was obscuring of both identity and past. These two entities had become intertwined, crossing over and over one another like the henna lotus flowers that her mother had once painted on her arms and legs.

These days, she was covered by either anything or anyone. Men's kisses were curled tongues around the backs of her knees and inner elbows. She never let them kiss her anywhere else. To kiss was to feel, and to feel was to know why the girl who lived on Brindavan Street never turned away a man whose touch might bring her freedom. In some ways, she was similar to the girls who spent nights on high heeled shoes down at the corner by the fish market. They were desperately fishing like the men who spent their days on their own high stilts staring at the water. All hoping for something to pass by so that they might catch it. These women and men spent their nights fishing together, hook and bait, and left in the morning when the sun arose and the men went back to make their wages so that they might be able to afford to go fishing again the next night.

Priyanka was not one of these women. But she was slight of hand in the width of her palms, and in her means of trying to gain freedom. And so she posed as a woman of the night by way of a sign on her door advertising sex in order to draw the men her way. She was honest with the

men who came to her bed, except for the image of what she truly looked like and what she really was. “*I am the universe,*” she’d say, and they’d follow her story past the stars and into the milky white galaxies of her Kingfisher bottles. It wasn’t until the men burst into flames that they realized the truth.

“*Pyaar sari dunia ki raaz dikhaega. Love will reveal the secrets of the universe,*” Priyanka whispered to the flickering light of the candle. The force of her quiet breath caused the flame to lean back against the candle’s wick. But it corrected its posture back to its upright dance upon the closing of her lips. Fire, or *Jmvi* as her mother called it, was the most forgiving of all the earth’s elemental lovers. It was also the most dangerous.

When her apartment building in Delhi was devoured by flames, she too was ravished by the burning light. It flickered across her skin along the lines of her henna. The flame meandered slowly along each petal of the lotus flower until her skin became all at once a glowing golden lotus. Only the skin marked by henna on her arms and legs was given this treatment of the burning lotus. Her face was not spared from the marring effects of an accidental fire caused by Timir Tarak’s neglectful discarding of his cigar onto the dry mulch of the flowerbed beneath her first floor window. The only places left untouched were the insides of her elbows and backs of her knees because of how she had held herself tightly like a lost and scared child as she waited for a death that never came. Gone was the only picture of her father before he left for a war there was never any hope of winning. Gone was antique citar whose melody lulled her to sleep night after night. Gone was her mother. Gone was Priyanka Lakshmi’s beauty.

And so, she lived in the near darkness, hidden away by Timir’s guilt in the attic of his home. Even he had never seen her in complete light since the fire. But he brought her food each

morning by way of leaving it outside of her door. And every night he collected the wooden plate with only the exchange of “sadaa sukhi raho.” And every night she replied “jeete raho” in rhythm with the gentle clicking of the grandfather clock across the hall. Despite the accommodations of a prisoner, she was free to leave anytime she wished. She was bound only by her circumstances of disfigurement and the burden she now carried.

Sixty moons had passed since the making of Priyanka’s fate. Timir had died of lung cancer caused by years of smoking cigars. He left the deed to his house to the sole survivor of the apartment fire. And while she was not thrown out on the streets, she began to starve slowly and deliberately with no one to bring her food and no chance of understanding from the village people. The hourglass figure of her youth remained intact, but began to grow smaller and smaller. It was as though the fire was still burning away at her body like she were a candle. There came a time when she openly welcomed the embrace of a dark and solitary death.

“Hello? Is anyone there? I saw your advertisement on the sign outside,” the man said while sliding off his shoes by the door as he entered Priyanka’s dimly lit house. It was an automatic gesture for him, like buckling a seatbelt upon sitting down in a car. He was broad of figure, but narrow of mind. Priyanka could tell by the way he groped around in the dark without taking the time to let his eyes adjust. In her eyes, he was a hasty man with little patience for contemplation on the best way to navigate the unknown. She had seen his type before. But he was the only visitor in over a month and she was growing desperate.

"I am here. Please, follow me upstairs to my room and I will give you what you came for," she spoke quietly from the opposite side of the room.

The moon's light coming through the windows began to grow brighter as if she had summoned it with the sound of her voice. And so she blew out the room's sole candle in the same breath as her request of the stranger. She was not ready to be revealed.

The man blindly groped up the staircase in the same way he had entered her home. The heavy sound of his footsteps against the painted wooden floors indicated that Priyanka had been wrong in her initial assessment of his figure. He was not only broad, but immensely large. She only hoped that he would not crush her increasingly diminishing figure beneath his own if he accidentally stumbled in the dark.

"What is your name?" he asked. This was as much in interest of sparking conversation as in wanting to use the sound of her voice as a way to orient himself in the darkness.

"I am nobody. I am the universe."

And with that, she removed her clothes. As he kissed the insides of her elbows and the backs of her knees, she began to tell him her story. She was unlike any prostitute he'd ever met. But he was not the type of man who sought company as a means of control. He was a quiet fisherman just looking for some company. And so he let her whisper her story as they drank Timir's last bottles of Kingfisher.

"When the fire burned the lotus flowers upon my skin, it also burned a hole inside me. The hole was dark and expansive and so I began to fill it with the stars and planets of my own imagination. Comets became my thoughts, and the moon became my soul. I am the universe, and the universe is me. I am trapped here alone inside of my own self, and I exist alone on a planet I have created. I am physically here on earth, but I have been trapped traveling among the stars

for decades. The passing of time has not aged my physical self, but I am like a large blue star, and I have burned hotly from the inside out for too long. There isn't much time left. I need you to free me."

The fisherman stumbled backwards upon his heels. He was simple, and none of this made any sense. But, his simplicity had made him kind, and so he asked:

"How can I help?"

"I need you to love me. Not in the way that storybooks depict romance, but I need you to see me in the light, and accept me as beautiful. However, I must warn you that you are not the first man to try. If you see me and find you cannot accept me as I am, then you will burn until you are as empty and as dark as this room."

"And if I should accept you? What will happen to me?"

"I'm not sure. No one has ever been successful."

The fisherman did not hesitate. She knew from his first steps into her home that he was not a man of hesitation. They never were. And they had all died in flames.

"Please light the candles. Let me see you," he gently urged. He wanted to know the truth about this mysterious woman and her incomprehensible cosmic secrets.

One by one Priyanka lit the candles that were placed around the small bedroom's four walls. With each successive lighting, the milky white light of the moon's reach was replaced by the orange glow of the shortened candles. Her arms were the first to be revealed. They were covered in old and intricate burns. Next her face was revealed. It was so badly marred that it was a wonder she could see at all. On the last candle, she hesitated. She was sure that after this, with her body fully in view, he would cry out in horror and burn like all the others. Priyanka lit the last candle, and then closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable. But he made no sound.

Confused, she turned around to where he stood. His eyes were the same color as the swirls of the Milky Way that she had created in her universe. The fisherman was blind.

“Well, what do you think of me?”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.”

And with that, she opened her mouth and revealed the entire universe before swallowing him whole. Priyanka Lakshmi was finally free, and as the last wax of the room’s candles dripped down onto the wooden floors, she left her physical body behind forever.

“Pyaar sari dunia ki raaz dikhaega.”

Love will reveal the secrets of the Universe.

The Neighborhood

This morning
I balanced acquisition
on the lop-sided left wheel
of a tricycle
I tucked curiosity
along with my hair
in the nook of
my brother's baseball cap
I grasped idleness
in the climbing
of a hidden
mulberry tree
I threw adventure
with the flat edged stones
across the unpredictable
stillness of a creek bed
And when that didn't work
I wore disappointment
like trees wear leaves
shrugging in the fall

The Bird Cage

I have always been entranced by consistency in a person's features. And yet, there is a slight deception in the impossibility of this. Ms. Browning wears the same blue eyeshadow, year after year.

At first, the unnatural shade was forgivable. The youthful pout of her mouth was charming enough to make any onlooker think it was just an experimental mistake. Her eyes had always been an unremarkable shade of brown, like the leaves on the trees outside of the house she spent her entire adult life working in. When I hired her, I enjoyed her attempt to make her average features noticeable. As the years went on, first ten, then thirty, then sixty, it became more and more of an act of rebellion. The blue power began to draw attention inward to her sharp protruding nose and sagging pout. Ms. Browning's eyes became small and beady like a blue jay's.

The wrinkles around her eyes now look like the jay's small thin legs, pointed outwards. In total, it is as if there is a bird trying to escape from within her. The only outward indication being the picture of her face that time has painted. It's refreshingly contradictory, this face of hers. The inconsistent consistency of a woman who never changes her makeup preferences, even when time changes the canvas she has to work with.

Out of all of the people who come and go from my house, Ms. Browning, the homely woman from Harding village, has always been my favorite muse.

"Have ye eaten today, Miss Alice?"

"I had an apple this morning, Ms. Browning, thank you."

And with that, she left. Pure eloquence, that woman. Her desperate need for glasses was evidenced by the squinting twitch of her eyes. The twitch became even more pronounced when

she looked at me. When I was young and used to write every day, I would ponder this look of hers for lack of something better to focus on. Why me? Did she look at everyone this way? There was never anyone else my age around for comparison. Well, never anyone else since Miss Elizabeth Henley moved away.

Elizabeth and I had the kind of relationship that went right past friendship into something deeper, a sisterhood if you will. Our parents were just as close, if not closer, and were the kind of literary explorers who would fabricate stories of far-off adventures and dangerous quests. Stories of leopard hunts in Africa, cannibals in the Amazon, prayer temples in Nepal: all these things and more permeated our shared family dinners. Man hunting animal. Man hunting man. Man hunting religion. Or any variations on these themes were to be expected. My brother, William, was destined to be a writer and would sit enraptured by the words spinning around the table, night after night. He would look wildly around, as if he could make the phantom words real by staring at them long enough.

As time passed, and Elizabeth and I began to frequent these dinners less and less, William served as a means for summarizing that night's missed events.

"Did mother spill any gravy on her skirt this time?" I asked.

"Does she ever not?" William replied.

"Tell us about the stories. Where did they go tonight? Antarctica?" Elizabeth asked.

“Why don’t you start coming to dinner again and find out for yourself?” William turned his face away, no longer joking. “What is it you two do out here anyway?”

They both looked at me, the oldest sister and thereby the wisest. I stuck my bottom lip over my top as if deep in thought, to buy some time while I fabricated an answer. How could I tell William that he was not invited to stroll in the gardens situated between the two houses with Elizabeth and me? How could I tell him what it was we talked about out here? How could I tell him that he needed to be a good brother and quietly listen to the stories that his sister two years his senior had decided to forgo for her own adventures?

“Alice? Did you hear what I asked?” My few seconds of borrowed time were up and William had begun to grow impatient with his ever-growing exclusion.

I shifted my lips back to their resting position, and told William the only thing I knew would keep him from continuing to ask questions.

“There once was a man and he—”

“—What was his name?” William interjected.

“Do you want to hear this story or not?” I waited until he had firmly planted himself under an oak tree next to Elizabeth. I stood up in front of them and began my story again as William placed his head on her shoulder and she ran her fingers through his curly red locks.

“There once was a man, with no distinguishable name, who lived on an estate much like this one. He wanted to be close to the ocean and told his friends and family that the salty air would do him some good. Every morning for many years he left his house to walk in his gardens before the sun came up. He knew all of the Latin names of the plants.” As I said these words, I began to point around the garden patch where we were situated.

“Quercus Robur- Oak tree. Campanula- Bell Flower. Larkspur- Delphinium.”

“Alright, now you’re just showing off,” Elizabeth teased.

“I am not. Anyway, so this man, he was very good with names. He named everything. When the sun would rise over the ocean mid-way through his morning walk, he’d call it Fate.”

“Fate? That’s a little lame. That’s what mom and dad say in their stories when they can’t think of anything else.”

“Shush, William, let her tell the story.”

“Thank you. This sun, it was like his wife. Consistently and patiently waiting to greet him morning after morning. You see, he was a very lonely man. He only had one servant named Ms. Browning. And before you interrupt again, the answer is yes. This is our Ms. Browning. She started working for him when she was ten years old.”

“So this was seven years ago?” Elizabeth asked, placing the story unnecessarily in the construct of time.

“Yes, he lived here outside of Harding for many years. And in addition to his vast knowledge of plant species, he also had an obsession with our Ms. Browning. Well, not an obsession necessarily, but a certain dependence formed by his limited social interaction. He relied on her for everything- cooking, tea, laundry, and conversation. She never said more than a few words past the necessary greetings, but this was enough to keep him from falling into loneliness. He thought of her as his little bird, perhaps due to the shape of her eyes. She was never allowed on his morning walks and in fact she had far too much work to do to make this possible anyway. But sometimes she would let him paint her. She had exactly the right shape of face back then, a round and bright child’s face. The man had painted many children over the years, but she was by far the most interesting.

Over time, he must have painted hundreds of pictures of her but her nose never turned out the same in any of them. It was always easy to tell which of the pictures were of her though because she was the only one he ever painted in a bird cage.”

“A cage?” William said while leaning forward, now fully engaged in the story.

“Yes, but never the same cage, he only flirted with consistency in this respect. And she only sometimes posed for him. Often instead he’d follow her around his house and take note of what she was doing before going back to his library to paint her likeness. There she’d be putting the dishes away and he’d paint it down to the minutest details. Ms. Browning was aware of this to some degree, it’d be hard not to be since they were the only two people in the house. But she was young and had never known any differently so she accepted this as normal. At that point, her glaucoma was undiagnosed, and as her eyesight began to slowly worsen, this man found it easier and easier to catch her at unguarded moments. Eventually, he had an entire wall of his painting collection decided solely to Ms. Browning.”

“So what happened to him? Why does she work for my family now?” Elizabeth asked hesitantly. She tilted her head to the side, still trying to decide if she should believe this story. Or if, like both sets of our parents, I was fabricating for the benefit of keeping the daily dullness away.

“Would you believe that she killed him?”

“She did what?!” William sat up straight. “Alice, she’d be in prison if she did.”

“Not if she never got caught,” Elizabeth said, catching onto the joke.

“How’d she do it?” William prodded.

“One day, while he was in the middle of his daily reminiscence with the sun, she followed him outside. Then our Ms. Browning took his elbow in hers and guided him towards the sand path that led from the edge of the garden down to the sea.”

“Wait a minute, I thought she was practically blind?”

“William, please, for the love of God, let me finish the story. You’re always interrupting.”

William repositioned himself away from Elizabeth, making his frustration at being called out known by both his distance in physical proximity and the sulking expression on his face.

“So as I was saying, our murderous governess was walking her former employer to the ocean when his eyes were overcome with the reflection of the sun’s light on the water and he fell to his knees before falling on his side and taking his last breath. Ms. Browning let go of him as he fell. He never got back up. She walked back up the path leading towards the garden and house and sat back down inside before continuing with her extensive list of chores.”

“Well that was a terrible way to end the story. At least try to make it believable. He died because he was blinded by his sun that he insanely thought was his wife? It wasn’t even a good death scene. Is the moral of the story that all wives eventually kill their husbands? Because that’s a pretty accurate description of women from what I can tell,” William said as he began to stand.

“You would say that, wouldn’t you,” Elizabeth quipped before she too stood up and walked briskly back through the garden to her house. As she walked out, she quickly closed the intricately flowered garden gate behind her.

“What’s her problem?” William asked with his typical obtuseness.

“Why did she leave so suddenly? Elizabeth slow down!” I ran after her.

From that day on, it was just William and me. I tried going over to the Henley’s estate almost every day for the first few months but was always turned away by the main actor of my story, Ms.

Browning. Sometimes when I turned away I could feel her pity beating down on me. I'd turn back and she'd be standing there, the homely blind woman, who I made up ridiculous stories about would look at me accurately as if I had lost my only friend in the world.

For the first time I could remember, we the Bailey's were no longer invited over to the Henley's for dinner. With fewer people to distract my parents, I was no longer exempt from their nightly stories. And with William as the only captivated listener, my parents slowly began to lose the sense of validity they once gained from regaling their neighbors and their servants with stories of their false valor. At the time, it didn't make sense to me. William was being insensitive, but he was not intentionally rude. Without Elizabeth's company to occupy my days, I drifted further and further into my hobbies. I took up painting, perhaps inspired by my own story. Or perhaps inspired by my ever encroaching boredom. I painted what I could remember of Elizabeth's face. She was quite beautiful, my Elizabeth. The scoop of her chin was the hardest to capture. Was it really that it protruded or was it more subtle? Did she really have the beginning of a few extra rolls of skin underneath it or was that just jealously skewing my memories of my old friend? I painted constantly, fixated on nothing else but the perfection of an image of a person I knew less and less each day. Hours upon hours were spent perfecting the image of a single golden eyelash. After a few months of unanswered letters and half-finished portraits piled up high enough in the corner of the sunroom to pass for a table, I forgot what she looked like. Was her hair really that soft and shiny or was it slightly more brittle from all of the afternoons we spent sitting by the ocean together? Were these memories even real? Or were they, like the paintings, fabricated images as well?

Twenty moons later, and the game still hadn't changed.

“Do you have any eights?” William asked.

“Go Fish,” I answered without checking any of the cards in my hand.

“That’s impossible Alice, you’re cheating again. You say ‘Go Fish’ every time.”

“I can’t help but be bored of a game that we play every single day. Is this what you did when Elizabeth and I would go out to walk in the gardens?”

“No, sometimes I’d follow you out there.”

“You’d do what?! William what the heck is wrong with you?”

“Well, you never included me in anything. It was always just you two. I was curious so sometimes I’d follow you out there. Don’t worry, I never told anyone about what I saw.”

“And what did you see?”

“Enough.”

“William, what are you talking about? What did you see?”

“I saw mother out there.”

“Yeah, so?”

“With Mr. Henley. Didn’t you know? Isn’t that why you two always went out there after lessons? To watch them?”

I desperately attempted to glean more information from William by pinching his arm and twisting his ear, any and all tricks that I had learned from my years as an older sister, but William knew them all by now and was practically immune. He shut up and sat down, resolutely refusing to answer my questions once he determined that I had no idea what he was talking about. Further

prompting resulted in his last-ditch attempt to pretend like I was imagining he had said anything at all. Just as I was about to scream at his obstinence, he began to write feverishly on the back pages of some stray papers on the desk in front of him. Later that night he slipped the pages under my door. I finished my candle later that night trying to decode the contents of them.

Dear Alice,

Forget all of this. It's best if you don't know the truth about our parents. Elizabeth knows, it must be why she closed the gate that day in garden. I'm so sorry. I thought that was the reason you two were always sneaking off without me. It was the reason why I stayed at dinner. I had to keep an eye on them. To make sure that nothing else happened. Please don't tell anyone if you figure it out, I have already given too much away. It broke Elizabeth. I thought she stopped coming over because it was too hard for her, knowing what you both knew, and she finally broke. I am sorry that I was wrong. I assumed that you two told each other everything. I feel that mother is not guilty in this matter. Along the way, I probably misinterpreted the situation. I have tried telling Elizabeth all of this, but she is refusing to hear me out. She knew before I did. But I think maybe she hadn't fully processed what this meant for both of our families, for her reputation and any of her future marriage prospects. If anyone else found out about this both of our families would be ruined. I have already promised Elizabeth my hand in marriage in case this information gets out. I don't think we would be able to deny it as a rumor. She is still thinking it over. I am trying to convince her that I am not some pesky little brother. I am a man now and it's up to me to save her from the embarrassment. If the information concerning mother gets out then a potential engagement may add timber to a growing fire. But at least it will save us both from loneliness. I wish that I could find a way to save you too. Please accept the potential that things are going to change. I realize

that this is a hard thing to ask of you without offering to tell you why. I am begging you to keep what little you may know to yourself. Perhaps we have nothing to worry about.

Love,

William

The morning after reading the letter, I walked barefoot through the house and took pleasure in the grounding of each footfall. This must be what being a ghost is like. Haunting the halls, fingertips touching each wall without leaving a mark, I am already gone. William has betrayed me. How dare he refuse to tell me what had happened. If it is something that will affect both of us so drastically then I deserve to know. I know better than to ask my mother. She's already wrapped up in this mess somehow. So I go to the only person I can trust.

When I enter his room, he is sitting by his window overlooking the garden. At this angle, he has a full view of the oak tree that Elizabeth and I once spent our days gossiping under. And just beyond that, the sand path leading down to the beach.

“You know, this garden is a botanical miracle. English flowers shouldn't be able to blossom here in such close proximity to the salty ocean air. It reminds me of a vineyard your mother and I visited once in French Polynesia. The vineyard was situated on a coral atoll, the only one on the entire earth. No one thought it was possible to grow such delicate plants in such hazardous conditions. Until one man decided to try. And it worked. Isn't that type of miraculous determination beautiful?” My father said all of this without once turning to look at me standing in

the door frame. It was hard to say if he had even heard me come in. Perhaps he talked to himself like this all the time. Who is to say what others do when they're left alone? I suspected this was the reason why I was here in the first place.

“Father? It’s Alice. I need to speak with you.”

“Ah, Alice come here sweet darling. Come and sit here with me. I’ll get you a chair.” After some shuffling and my father’s labored grunting as he attempted to move a chair before calling out for a servant to help instead, I was finally seated.

“I need to talk to you about something,” I blurted out quickly.

“Yes, you’re right. We haven’t talked in quite a while. Dinner has been so quiet lately. Did I ever tell you about the time that I had to convince a group of Buddhist monks to let me interview them? It’s a fascinating story. I told them I was a reporter from a major newspaper in England. Don’t ask me what newspaper outlet I claimed it was, my memory is far too foggy for that and besides it’s not really integral to the story anyway. Am I rambling again? Anyway, so there I was. Your mother and I had just started courting so she wasn’t with me. That would have been far too scandalous for everyone involved on the expedition! Can you imagine? But to get to the real essence of the story, I was there doing field research on religious customs and—”

It was hard for me to listen to him going on and on about scandal and intrigue as if it was a thing of the past. When all along, he had a window looking right out to where William claimed the latest disgrace had been taking place. While my father spun his tale, I looked around the understated room, making sure to avoid the windows. I came in here only on very rare occasions. It was my father’s study and the physical manifestation of all of his claims and stories. The far wall was dominated by a large map of the European continent. The edges of it were fraying and water-stained. There was something about the numerous creases and tears in the map that made

me think it had seen far more adventure than my father ever had. Off in the corner of the map was a green sea monster with fierce teeth wrapped around a sinking ship. My father, upon finishing his story, noticed that my attention had drifted and walked over to where I stood facing his map.

“These sea serpents were often depicted by cartographers during Medieval and Renaissance times to hint at what might be hiding under the surface. They were mostly used as an educational tool, but an inaccurate one as I’m sure you can imagine. Luckily, we know now that there aren’t any creatures like that in the sea. Or at least ones that would bother us. In fact, some of the monsters were drawn by explorers who wanted to dissuade others from traveling in a particular section of the ocean. It was a good way to keep others from finding an island you had already discovered. In other words, it was a good way to keep a secret. Secrets are funny things, aren’t they? Meant to be kept?”

“But father, don’t you think some things are worth knowing?”

“When I was younger, I used to think there was a distinction between types of secrets. For instance, secrets about the world were meant to be found and shared so that no one need ever wonder all that humans and God were capable of creating. On the other hand, I know to a certain extent what humans are capable of. I have seen things that would shock you. People I thought were one thing turned out to be capable of great harm and destruction. But you see, there is no such thing as a secret that is meant to be shared. Everything is so wrapped up in everything else that the connections, like these serpents and the faces in your paintings, are impossible to decipher completely. It is far better to keep from taking chances and to just assume that every secret is meant to be kept. Sometimes it is less about the harm done by the secret and more so about the harm caused by the person who does not allow it to remain kept.”

“So you’re saying that knowledge is meant to be suppressed?”

“No, not necessarily, knowing how the world works is one of life’s greatest joys. But you see my darling, many of those joys can be discovered between the bound pages of a book. The author has already betrayed those they love in publishing it. I’m sure not intentionally. But storytelling by necessity requires one to give part of themselves away in the making of poetry. And as I mentioned before, everything touches everything and everyone else. It is why I never tell you my own stories. I borrow them from the shelves here in this very room. Do you want to go to ancient China? Here is an account of a young girl binding her feet in order to make them smaller. Do you want to go to Greece? Here is a list of mermaid and other mythological sightings. Perhaps you want to stay right here in England? Here are tales of the Tudors and King Henry’s many wives.

Everything that has already been written is enough to have an accurate knowledge of the world. We have run out of stories. History just keeps repeating itself. Why should I bother repeating it at risk of revealing too much about those I love and myself in the process?”

My father gathered his books back up in one sweeping motion with his arm holding them close like he was cradling a baby. And in a way, I think these stories of his were his children. He had not written the words but he had given a piece of himself away anyway in an effort to make them his own. He had given them his time and the delicate touch of his fingers turning their pages. He had read with them through their trials and tribulations to the very end. Once, he revealed that he never stopped reading a book once it was started. My father was an optimist and he always held out hope that the story would get better and that at the end the story could redeem itself. He never held out the same expectations for his children of flesh and blood.

“Father, what is going on with mother and Mr. Henley?”

“I’m afraid that’s a secret meant to be kept.”

“Can you at least tell me how it ends?”

“Poorly, like all true stories.”

My father, turned back to his cradle of books and placed them deliberately one by one back into their proper places. There never seemed to be any particular order to them. To see the tops of the shelves required me to tilt my head completely back. *War and Peace* lived between Dante’s *Inferno* and *The Odyssey*. A sea of stories at times larger than the one outside. If I stared too long at the titles sometimes it seemed like the colorful rows of books were undulating like the waves. But they each had their designated places in the enigmatic workings of my father’s thoughts. It was his way of keeping the world outside his window at bay.

It was a hot day in August when my mother packed her bags for the Henley house in London. She would have to avoid society, of course, since no one could ever know that she was now allowed in Mr. Henley’s bed. A proper ending to the affair that began behind hedges, and in the later hours under my favorite oak tree. It was Ms. Browning who finally told me the truth. She decided to stay behind to look after my old friend Elizabeth and Mrs. Henley. But they too eventually moved away to another house by the ocean and left her behind. Elizabeth came down to see William and me before they moved away to live in the gift her father had imparted to his favorite daughter and the woman he would always be married to in name.

“How did you find out?” Elizabeth asked one day while we sat by the ocean.

“I cornered her one Sunday on her way back from church. She didn’t say much, but she confirmed my suspicions, and that was enough.”

“I am sorry that I stopped replying to your letters. I suspected that maybe you had known before me and had kept it hidden since you were always the one to figure things out before me. And when

William made that comment in the garden about women killing their husbands, you laughed. I should not have cut you off like that. We needed each other. And William, thank you again for your willingness to save me from some of the shame. I love and will miss you both dearly.”

“Can I get you anything else, Miss Alice?” Ms. Browning asked as she placed my lunch of crackers and jam on the wooden table before me.

“No thank you. Did any letters come from Elizabeth or William today?”

“I can’t say they did, but don’t worry. I’m sure one will come tomorrow.”

“Ms. Browning, can I ask you for a favor? Will you let me paint your portrait again?”

“Of course, Miss.”

I spent the first few hours trying to mix the proper shade of oil pastel blue. While most of my painting had been perfected down to an almost exact science, this was the one element that I struggled with every single time. The only thing I could remember was that it was some combination of Prussian Blue and Zinc White. But today she had applied her makeup haphazardly, the blue eyeshadow heavily applied in the creases with lighter shades of blue fading slowly up to her eyebrows. Each day it became more and more apparent that her eyesight was now completely gone. Ms. Browning was the only servant who understood why I stayed here all these days. Others would inquire why I never married or why I stayed here even after my father died and William moved away to the London to be with his new wife, my old friend. But Ms. Browning is the only one who knows the secrets of the garden just as well as I did. To some, the fact that her eyesight

disappeared for good after she saw my mother's sin out there among the flowers might be an indication of some act of God. But it was no heavenly act, rather an entrapment of circumstance. She knew her way around our house almost as well as she knew the Henleys'. And when they sold their estate, I hired her immediately. She is the muse I paint over and over in an attempt to capture her bluejay face. I savor her inconsistent consistency. We are kept caged here by the necessity of past secrets and their transformative power.

Bottled Up

The man stood facing the hotel and looked up at a room on the third floor where a single light was still on. In the dark, the light was harsh and artificial in its singularity. Even the lights of the hotel's sign had long since burnt out and were accounted for only in the gentle humming of the sign's last attempts to light itself. He wondered if anyone could see him here, misplaced among the cars, staring up at the room he had just left.

Earlier that night he had chosen to close only the first of the three curtains in the room. He had wanted to look out at the lights of the neighboring highway through the filmy white fabric without being blinded. To him, the white lights and familiar sounds of the occasional truck speeding by were the only reminders that he was not alone in this unfamiliar place. And because the woman in his bed had a childlike tendency to fall asleep with the lights still on, she was only just now waking up. From behind the sheerness of the curtain, her silhouette appeared to him like an elongated hourglass with softened edges. This figure was his wife and the woman he was planning to kill. Not actually, of course, for he prided himself on his principles of nonviolence. But figuratively, for this woman, their child, and his life with them ended as he broke his gaze from the window and turned to the car next to him. It was tan in color and solidly—made, discrete in all aspects. He discerned that it was a Honda but couldn't tell much more about it, for he was never the type of man who cared much about cars in the way that other men do. But most importantly, the car was unlocked. He knew it would be. That was the thing about stealing a car from a hotel parking lot out in the middle of the desert, no one gave the threat of theft a second

thought. And especially not here, in this hotel with its own tv channel and line of shampoos and conditioners.

He recalled a moment earlier that day when his daughter, upon entering the room, ran into the bathroom and dumped the hotel toiletries down the porcelain sink. She'd then refilled the empty containers with water and placed them into the outermost pocket of her pink duffel bag. He had known she would do this. It was not the first hotel they had stayed in on this trip. After the first time, when the woman had asked her why she was doing this she simply shrugged high enough so that her shoulders brushed her ears in a fashion that revealed her age as she pretended not to know. But two days before, after passing another one street light town along the unending desert road in their old station wagon, he had glanced back at the girl in the rear-view mirror. He saw her pull what had once been a conditioner bottle out from of her duffel bag onto the seat beside her. She had slowly unscrewed the top off it and proceeded to dip her index finger into the tepid water inside of it. She then stuck her finger just slightly out of her open window and flicked the water off of it using her thumb. He thought he could hear her singing quietly under her breath, but the sound of the wind blowing past the open windows was loud enough to block everything but the hint of a melody from his ears. He considered that perhaps she was trying to wet the desert sand. For when she realized her flicked drops of water were only hitting the side of the car and not the ground, she screamed so loudly that he had no choice but to make his own shoulder on the side of the empty desert road. Before he had fully stopped, she pulled the latch on the car door and jumped out, leaving it gaping open behind her. The man, her father, had wanted to leave just then, drive off with the woman in an attempt to wake her up, and make her see. But

she had already fallen back asleep with her mouth hanging open like the door. And besides he knew she'd never leave without the girl who was at that moment pouring the water from the bottles she had collected onto the unforgiving dryness of the desert sand. After their contents had been sufficiently emptied, she left them there in the mud as if to mark the spot as her own. She had then resumed her place in the back seat of the car and closed the door. He didn't have the heart to tell her that in a few hours her muddy mark would be covered over with sand. He knew that children never forgive the person who first shines a light on the truth of their impermanence.

This scene occupied his thoughts as he slid into the Honda's gently worn seats and started the engine with the keys that had been carelessly forgotten and that were still tucked in the folds of the passenger seat. The radio began to play a tune upon the engine's return to duty. It was one he didn't know well enough to place in it the short time that it took him to turn the radio off. He preferred the deafening silence of a quiet car. After this he took a left out of the parking lot and merged out onto the highway whose lights he had briefly fallen asleep looking at. A few hours into his drive the sun began to rise in the brilliant way that only sunrises viewed alone seem to have. He thought them like a good woman, not willing to be shared. And off in the distance he saw the word DINER against the orange hue of the sun just as his stomach grumbled and his nose remembered the smell of hash browns. He wondered if anyone would question the fact that he was traveling alone in a stolen car from California. And if they would guess he was running away from the woman he had missed even while they were still together and a girl who poured water unto sand.

It was only years later upon receiving a letter from the girl, now grown, that he learned she had only wanted something to grow in the presence of her parent's wilting marriage. He decided to risk it. He pulled his hat down over his hair and placed both hands into his pockets so that his elbows stuck out unobtrusively. As the bell rang above the door announcing his arrival, he sat down in a booth and disappeared behind the menu like a ghost of his former self — overlooked and eventually forgotten like the bottles in the sand.

The Nature of Love

If there is a pinprick of light left
On the corner of Malatalia Boulevard
Then come to me and breathe slow
Promises of sweet honey between
My ear and yours
And when you wilt under seasons
Meet me at the corner
And I will love you
As you love the lilies blooming
On an autumn night
Not quite gone
But almost.

Why We Don't Talk

That winter, there had been some discussion of divorce. Sheila's belly, that she refused to call her uterus, betrayed itself by looking three months larger than it was supposed to. We lived in a small town and had to travel to Philadelphia for the appointment. The baby doctor, appropriately, had a rounded baby face free of wrinkles. How old must he have been? Twenty-five? No, that seems too young. But he was young. He smiled at us when we walked in to his white and beige office and told us to call him "Johnny." Clearly this was a man who did not know the tortures of a pregnant wife.

In my memory, Sheila was kind to the doctor. She took his hand and kissed it before placing it over our growing child. Smiling at each other, they looked the perfect family. I twisted my watch around my wrist with an anxious wish to return to my home office where I could continue not writing my novel. My first book had been a *New York Times* Bestseller and had earned us enough money to both stay home for the next year. Sheila quit her job as a travel agent specializing in trips to the African continent as soon as she found out.

"Eight weeks, perfectly healthy."

On the drive home, Sheila insisted we listen to Brahms' *Lullaby* on repeat. I hinted that the sound would make me fall asleep at the wheel on the turnpike. She hinted that I should stop being so selfish by crossing her arms over our blueberry sized baby that looked more the size of a coconut. The baby doctor mentioned that she should "play classical music to stimulate the baby's intellectual development" by placing headphones over her stomach. She was the last of her friends to get pregnant. She had a twenty-eight-item list of dumb things she saw other mothers do.

Number fourteen: Alice placed headphones over her stomach like she didn't realize that her protruding torso was not actually a second head.

According to Sheila, she was smarter than Alice. So, the entire car had to listen.

“Who knows, maybe this will stimulate your own intellectual development. Heaven knows that'd help us all,” Sheila grumbled.

We returned before too much of the day had passed to the one bedroom house that our real estate agent had labeled “quaint.” For no good reason, I told Sheila that the stretch marks on her hips really turned me off. It was okay to say this because they weren't because of our coconut baby. Sheila had been fat since the second day of our honeymoon. She said that she didn't care what I thought and that she'd try turning on the television instead. Steve Harvey's voice filled the house with a different kind of family feud.

I made myself comfortable by placing the soles of my feet against the wall in my office. Once, Sheila and I had worked on converting this walk-in closet into a usable work space. When half of the shelves made their new home in our backyard shed, Sheila began the next project of starting a family. She began this endeavor by decorating my office with pictures of cartoon elephants. Why were nurseries always decorated with elephants? During those months, we argued on this point constantly. The distraction kept me from writing and gave me a tangible excuse to pass on to my editor. I argued in favor of cows. A baby should grow up looking at pictures of familiar animals. Elephants are too exotic. Sheila said they reminded her of her own childhood.

“That's exactly why we should go with cows,” I said loudly enough for her to hear as she closed the door behind her.

If you spend too much time thinking of elephants, then you start wishing you were somewhere else.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote that no art should be created in less than nine months since this was the exact amount of time needed to create human life. My literary agent did not know much about Hemingway, never having read any of his works. He had been an English major at Juniata College, class of 1974, and had graduated without reading anything other than novels by Charles Dickens. So he was an expert in pretending to know things that he didn't.

“And that’s why I need at least nine months to write this book.”

“I’ve never read any of his dribble. However, I consider myself to be very open-minded. I’d like two hundred pages of your story on my desk in seven months.”

“But Max—”

When Sheila and I sat down to dinner, we acted out our favorite play. I called it “Shifting Blame.” We always began with the uncomfortable shifting of weight. Pressure moving from the left to right foot. Not anxiously, but rather as a way to prepare for the weighing of options that would occur when the play commenced. The baby doctor told Sheila that the baby was now the size of a cantaloupe. This cantaloupe made it more difficult for her to act in the play. She could not easily shift from one foot to the other in the rhythm with which we had grown

accustomed. And so, she said, "I want a divorce." She held her stomach and stood up from the table. And so she said, "I want a divorce." She held her stomach and stood up from the table.

My literary agent had given me seven months to write my second novel. I dedicated the novel to Sheila and wrote the first line.

Fine, go fuck the doctor.

Sheila and her scratchy leg hair decided to give our marriage one more chance. Perhaps she was afraid of being a single mother. She complained of being cold and suggested that I buy her a space heater. Until then, she promised she would keep this extra furry layer over her entire body.

The second time she complained of the cold was in a doctor's office. Unlike the baby doctor, this doctor displayed his qualifications on the wall behind his couch and did not ask us to call him by his first name.

Arcadia University— Master of Science in Psychology.

Arcadia was a mediocre university, even back then, but we had already driven into the city and had paid him for the hour.

"When I look at my husband, I feel cold and empty. He's never given me anything besides this child. This has been a huge weight on our marriage."

"Phil, earlier you mentioned your wife's 'weight problem.' Is this what you were referring to?"

“No, I was talking about the fact that she weighs 207 pounds and is only five and a half feet tall.”

At this, the psychologist changed the subject.

“How long have you been trying to conceive?”

“Too long, we waited too long.” Sheila whispered from behind the hands covering her face.

Sheila found my one-line novel written in her honor. The day before I had reinstalled the shelves in my office. She had been able to get in to the closet, but the baby and her already large shoulders prevented her from being able to move herself back out again. When I found her, she was sobbing like a pathetic animal. She was crouched in the back corner holding her legs. They were spread, supporting her heavy stomach. She rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. Her blonde hair was matted across her face, held there by the salty tears she had already cried. She wore one of my old t-shirts from an AC/DC concert that we had snuck out to go see in high school.

“For the love of your damned God, stop sobbing. You’re getting your snot all over my t-shirt.” I closed the door.

My literary agent called during a snowstorm.

“Hey, I need you to send me what you have so far. The draft’s due in one month. The file you sent was only one line long. Where’s the plot?”

Once again, Sheila had ruined the private sanctuary of my office. Once she moved my desk from the room to the shed, she was able to move in and out without getting stuck again.

Instead of elephants, she framed inspirational quotes and hung them on the wall. She had learned how to print using silk screens in a class at the YMCA. The quotes made the room look smaller, as if it was closing in on itself. I thought I might die in there surrounded by thoughts of “Cupcakes are muffins that believed in miracles” and “Behind every great man is a woman.”

Another day I came home and saw that she had painted the closet walls yellow. The baby doctor knew the gender of the baby, but Sheila asked him not to tell us. If it was a girl, she said she wouldn't push when the time came. I told her she damn well better push either way. Sheila was too old to pretend that she didn't know how the world worked. When a baby decides it's coming into the world, there's nothing a mother can do to stop the inevitable. Perhaps that's what scared her. Once the baby left her body, it would be the one calling the shots. As way of explanation, Sheila said “a girl shouldn't grow up thinking she's in charge. Every mother has to tell her daughter that eventually. I don't want to have to be the one to break the news. Boys are easier than girls. The bell always tolls in line with their demands.”

I spent the afternoons working on my novel. It was now two lines long.

Fine, go fuck the doctor. He can have the baby.

Ernest Hemingway said that art would take at least nine months. At that point, we were married seven years. I was still waiting for our marriage to turn into something to appreciate.

Hemingway's editor, Max Perkins, probably never told him to add plot. He didn't let other people push him around. Perhaps that's why he married four times. In 1959, he was invited to an exhibition in New York City. The Metropolitan Museum of Art displayed Joan Miro's *The*

Farm. The painting was on loan from Hemingway's house in Cuba. While there his wife, Mary, said that she would never give up the painting and intended to keep it forever. Hemingway told the MOMA director he was interested in selling and not to listen to a damned thing his wife said.

Sheila went into labor in the baby doctor's office. He tried to carry her across the street when the contractions were only twenty minutes apart. By the time they finally made it past the speeding cars, the doctor had given up and shouted for a wheelchair. Sheila gave birth at Mercy Hospital while she gripped the doctor's hand with uncommon strength. The baby was still the size of a cantaloupe. Sheila cried, the baby did not. The doctor looked at us and spoke of "unimaginable tragedy." Two days later she returned from the hospital with the photos that the nurse had taken.

"She had your nose."

When the baby didn't cry, I ran from the room. The hallway reminded me of the first time we visited the baby doctor. I couldn't see past the sterility of the walls. A new mother and her husband walked by me. They carried their red faced newborn.

"Congratulations. Don't worry, the shock of being a dad wears off after the first few days. This little guy is our second."

Another doctor was in the room when I returned. The baby doctor had apparently left to have dinner with his wife. Sheila looked as if she couldn't decide whether she wanted to cry or open her mouth to yell.

“I was going to be a stay-at-home mother. Who am I if not a mother?” The new doctor nodded his head when she shouted this at him. He had heard this before. Loss makes people profound. It’s as if they’re trying to make up for the part of themselves that’s no longer there.

I wonder when your child stops being yours. The baby in the photograph was blue, but had two closed eyes, a nose, a tuft of blonde hair, and a mouth with two tiny pursed lips. Sheila instinctively cradled her, the baby that she would only have for three hours before two men from the morgue came to take her away.

Once the hours passed, the baby disappeared under a cloth. In her place came paperwork. I did not leave again.

I sat holding Sheila’s hand and thought of the prominent vein on our daughter’s forehead. We did not speak. We had nothing to say before this, and we had nothing now. This was our last chance, the connecting thread of a life between us. An accident only in timing.

My literary agent called to tell me they would extend the deadline given the circumstances. He had only one request.

“Write about your daughter.”

In high school, Sheila and I were in the same English class for all four years. She read my first short story and declared it “obtuse.” I was staring at her long blonde hair resting on top of my desk when I first heard the name Ernest Hemingway. Our teacher held the chalk as if it were a pencil and it screeched when she wrote on the board.

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

The urban legend claims that Hemingway wrote these words as part of a bet with other writers. At the time, I didn't understand how six words could constitute an entire story. I could see no characters, no plot, and no deeper meaning. I didn't yet know what he said about art taking nine months. Maybe that's why there was no sense behind these words. The doctor had spoken of "unimaginable tragedy."

"Sheila, I'm sorry."

Our neighbors must've been busy because they never called to lessen our grief. Sheila's friends all had happy, healthy toddlers that could be seen waddling around the park with Spiderman t-shirts and Disney princess backpacks. We had the yellow closet and two boxes of diapers that we had bought prematurely. The two of us existed as best we could. We had only each other. And so we were lonely.

"Do you want to watch the news?"

Grief doesn't disappear, not really. I grieved for the child I never wanted and Sheila grieved for the old stability of our marriage. Sheila mourned gracefully. When she cried, her skin began to glow. There was no evidence of the Sheila that I had found sobbing uncontrollably in the closet. Sheila made lasagna for the neighbors as if they were the ones grieving. Within three weeks she began wearing heels and expensive dresses. When asked how she was feeling by family members, she replied, "I'm good, how are your kids?" She did not fall apart into tears when we found ourselves alone.

In the spring she saw me writing a story about our daughter.

"That's not how it happened."

When I showed her the first draft of the novel, she crossed out almost every single line in red pen. She kept only one paragraph.

Sheila's love for our baby was captivating; it was as if the baby was not just her world, as people tend to say, but rather her entire universe. One autumn night, I found her sitting alone with her knees curled under a wool blanket next to a faintly lit table lamp. She stared out the window and ran her fingers across her stomach. She said "I am counting the stars, and the planets, and there are many. But, there's just one of you. And I love you more than I can fathom."

Under it, on the same page, she wrote This is the story. You loved me once. We went on midnight walks in Fisher Park and stole ice cream cones from Sadie's on Sunday afternoons when Alfred left to take his bathroom breaks. You kissed me for the first time under the apple tree in your front yard. Afterwards, you picked an apple from the tree and held it up over your left eye. You told me that I was "the apple of your eye." I thought you were the cleverest boy I knew. And I wasn't surprised when you wrote your first novel as a satirical recounting of the early years of our marriage. Everyone thought that it was fictional and they loved it. That's the thing about fiction. You can say whatever you want and it doesn't matter because most people can't tell which details are true and which are not. In the first novel, you stretched the truth. But in this one, you wrote a memoir and cast me as the incompetent fool. I am not the reason she died. At some point, you must have known this. When you saw me sitting on the chair, you thought of me as a woman that could be loved. But in this story, you made yourself the victim to hide the truth. We are both the victims. The cruelest thing you ever did was pretend not to love me in order to sell more books. None of this happened the way you describe it. You didn't hold my hand through the birth and cut the umbilical cord. I never cried in your arms and told you that it was all my fault. You wrote that I went into labor when I moved your desk outside to the shed. You called this a "double injustice." I don't understand. To the world, you will be remembered as a

writer. And a good one at that. But to me, I will think of you as the boy who picked me an apple and made me smile. You are the man that I spent seven years holding every night. I will not miss your company, you were unkind towards me when I needed you the most. But your breathing still - reminds me that we once had a life together between us. I want you to know that I forgive you.

The closet is now just that. Shelves have been returned to their proper places once again and my clothes take up both sides. I asked to keep the house in the divorce. Sheila agreed. Even now, she'll call me on the telephone to see if I still live in the one bedroom house on 231 Lexington Drive. When she calls, we don't speak. In her breath I hear my own. I take these phone calls in the living room because it's the brightest room in the house. On fall days, I sit at the window and watch the trees shrug off their changing leaves. We stay on the phone for hours, listening to the other breathe. Usually there are other sounds in the background. A washing machine churning at the end of its cycle. The ringing of a bell on a child's tricycle. Creaking floorboards from our shifting weight. Sometimes I press the phone against my heart. I don't know if she can hear it beating. The sounds of our breaths remind me that we are both still alive. The telephone cord is our only connection.

Te creo. Tú crees.

Emilia crouched down on the balls of her feet as if being lower to the ground, and thereby farther from the sun, would help her to escape this oppressive heat. No, oppressive was the wrong word. The FARC had cleared out only days before because of the implementation of the new peace treaty. The villagers of San Basilica de Palenque were celebrating. The sounds of the drums echoed the throbbing call of dehydration in her head.

The night before she had reached out for Lee's hand, but found her gesture prevented by slippery mesh netting. She struggled and found the netting had moved over her face due to her panicked movements. She could breathe, but it was as if she was covered by an extra layer of skin that wrapped itself more tightly each time she tried to move. To avoid waking up the other three researchers in the room, Emilia wrapped her hands around her throat and physically pushed down her cries as they tried to escape. Lee woke her the next morning with the sound of his deep and familiar chuckle.

"Em, the netting is to keep the mosquitos out, not keep you in," he said while laughing.

Two beds over, Ian also woke to the sound of Lee's voice. After checking both birkenstocks for spiders, he made his way over to check on Emilia. Of the seven person research team, Ian was the only American. He was in Colombia to study the pollution of water sources in rural South American villages. Emilia wasn't quite sure why he had been grouped with the rest of the foreigners. They were here as part of a linguistic research team. Everyone had their own independent projects. Emilia was studying the small linguistic markers that differentiated Spanish from the local Palenque. And Lee was working closely with the elderly, and only, town musician to study how Palenque changed when used as a form of oral storytelling. The musician, Santiago, advertised himself as an "authentic griot" on a website he only had access to when he

made the two hour drive to Cartagena. He was the main draw in the small village that was still recovering from its time as a slave settlement.

Maria was the first researcher to have discovered Santiago and San Basilica. After a night out in Málaga, she returned to the house of a shadow of a man whose name she could no longer remember. But she remembered that he had a claw foot bathtub in the middle of his kitchen that she spent the evening soaking his book collection in.

“I’m done with words!”

She had shouted as she ran naked around the stranger’s apartment.

“Adieu, Voltaire!” “Ciao, Dante!” “Auf Wiedersehen, Remarque!”

One by one she let the pressures of grad school escape her with each thrown book. After the bookshelves were emptied, she slid across the wet floor to his turquoise hybrid Victrola CD player. Upon checking to make sure that her host was still passed out on the couch in drunken bliss, Maria pressed play.

“Oh God!” she thought. “How erotic!” Santiago’s music played and filled both the room and Maria. Maria soaked in the words and claw foot tub until the sound of a dog barking two stories below broke her thoughts. She pulled herself up, patted the stranger on the head, and took three hundred dollars from his wallet. Maria deposited the money and booked the next flight to Colombia.

That was three years ago. To extend her time in San Basilica, Maria applied for grant money under the guise of continuing the linguistic research she had begun during her studies. Emilia and Lee just happened to be the latest grad students to sign on to the project.

After untangling herself from the mosquito netting, Emilia brushed past Ian and Lee and sequestered herself inside of the hut's only bathroom. The mirror was rusting and the bathroom had one boarded up window, but Emilia could still see the finger length bruises she had left on her neck the night before. The reflection pursed its lips and Emilia silently hoped that Lee had not noticed. She was suffocating herself. Wasn't that the reason they had packed up their one bedroom flat in Adelaide? She hadn't even cried when Lee's mother picked them up on the way to the airport.

The flat came back to her in flashes. Papers spread out on the yellow linoleum kitchen table. Lee's husky voice singing along to Frank Sinatra's cover of "Yesterday" as he washed the dishes. The half-opened bag of cheezels chips. Jimmy and Charlene. A Cat's meow.

Emilia opened her eyes. The flat was gone and her arms were covered in long scratch marks. Did she do that? She didn't know.

The village celebrations from the day before had carried into the next and Emilia resigned herself to another day without work. Some of the interviews she had collected had already been discarded since drunken ramblings did not provide for good linguistic research.

"*Em, wait up!*" Maria shouted from the hut she lived in by herself. Maria pulled her clothes up as she stumbled out of the doorway. She hurried over, pulling her hair back with a blue

bandanna that read "I'm pretty fly" next to a drawing of an airplane. As always, she was barefoot.

"Santiago told me that you missed the bonfire last night," she stated without accusation. "I was there of course, but had to leave early to visit my brother in Cartagena. He flew all the way from Spain but outright refused to come to San Basilica. Can you believe it?"

Emilia scanned her eyes over the uneven dirt roads, wild pigs grunting as they sunbathed, and thatched roof huts that seemed to undulate in the heat. She could believe it. With Maria, there was never any need to respond. She spoke quickly, almost violently. The long ago formed hatred of words meant that she liked to get rid of them as soon as possible. She had little interest in taking any more in.

"And all he wanted to do was visit the tourist sites. For goodness sake! Those damn tourists are so slow and take a million pictures. And then they have the audacity to buy postcards. I mean, why even bother taking pictures? Those philistines wouldn't understand Colombia if it smacked them in the face."

Maria often forgot that she too was a visitor.

The two women passed a small house on the east end of the village. Seven minutes later they had walked around the rest of the small community and once again made their way past some of the houses that were caving in from the outside. Maria had now moved on to discussing her brother's proclivity for Murillo's canned lamb. Emilia looked up at one of the houses. It was unremarkable in every way. Ian sat on the last wooden step with his palms prone on top of his thighs. His blonde corkscrew hair was wild and free of his usual baseball cap. He was shirtless. For a moment, Emilia was so enraptured by his distinct lack of chest hair that she failed to notice the woman sitting beside him. The woman's skin was vibrantly black. It was entirely without

imperfection. Emilia couldn't tell if she was completely naked or covered in a thin layer of tight fabric. She studied the woman's bald head and endlessly smooth limbs. She found herself wanting to touch the woman to see if she existed.

With the fluid motion of water, the woman placed her hands on top of Ian's and kissed him firmly on the mouth. In the distance, a baby cried.

"Did you see that?!" Emilia exclaimed, still not sure what she had witnessed.

Maria finished her sentence before turning, perplexed at why she had been interrupted.

"Ian meditating? He does that every morning."

"No, there was a woman...with beautiful skin...and she kissed him..."

Maria raised one eyebrow so high that it disappeared under her bandanna.

"Maybe we should get you out of the sun. You're not used to this kind of heat yet."

Emilia closed her eyes. The flat. Four empty shot glasses. The burning embers of an untended fire. His hand on her knee.

Santiago didn't live in the village. He said he existed only in his music. But for the moments when reality came knocking, he had a small hut in the woods with a door. Emilia knew that Lee would be there. Every morning, Lee took the forty-minute hike up the mountain to sit with Santiago. On the rare occasion when he was entertaining tourists, he was easy to access. The words flowed out of him with great weight. He told stories of how the large rocks outside his hut once spoke to his ancestors. The rock told them the stories of their past and of how they came to be. The only thing the villages had to give in return was jaguar meat. This is how the practice of

hunting began in the village hundreds of years before it became a slave settlement. Santiago had a story to explain every practice and tradition. And though they didn't quite believe him, the tourists would lean back and close their eyes as he spoke to them. They desperately wanted to believe that there were other forces at work in the world. It's much easier to believe through closed eyes and mouths set in concentration that the world isn't yours. And once the fallibility of one's parents becomes obvious, this need to believe becomes consuming. It was the only thing keeping Santiago in business.

Emilia had only made this journey up the mountain once before. In college, she had been an avid hiker but trail markers had not yet made their way to this part of rural Colombia. Before his first day of research, Maria had made Lee a short list of directions to Santiago's hut. The directions were to begin climbing in an upwards direction until you smelled the scent of the yellow parasol flowers. And once it became noticeable, but not overwhelming, one had to stand still and listen for the sound of the tambor alegre drum. Maria claimed that the music would lead him the rest of the way, as it had originally led her. Needless to say, Maria usually led the tourists up the mountain instead of letting them fend for themselves. But the journey was not easy going. Emilia found herself reaching out for the steadying arms of outstretched tree branches. In some places, she had to use these same branches to physically pull herself up the trail.

"At least the temperature is dropping," Emilia mumbled to herself.

The mention of the word "dropping" caused her to look over the right edge of the trail. Below her was a steep and precipitous cliff edge. She thought she could make out the figures of Ian and Maria in the distance. One of the figures removed something blue from their head and pointed up in the direction of the mountain. Emilia kept moving. After a few more minutes of climbing, she

sat down to rest on a large rock just off of the trail. She took a swig of water from her Nalgene and pulled her sports bra away from her body to help dry out the sweat that had accumulated there. After adjusting herself a few more times on the uneven and mossy surface of the rock, she heard the soft thumping of a tambor alegre. And though she remained on the rock, the sound began to grow louder and louder as if it was moving towards her. She stood up slowly and moved in the direction of the sound as if to meet it halfway. She wasn't sure how much time passed before she came upon the small hut.

Santiago and Lee sat outside around a small fire pit. A clothesline with only two thin white shirts connected the hut to a nearby tree. Behind the hut, a half-finished wooden and wire fence lay on the ground. A few days before, Lee had explained that he worked on this fence when Santiago went into one of his trances and was "unreachable." He had already made a small sign for the fence that read "*Keep out Capybaras.*" Lee had a tendency to focus on the small details that went into the way that something looked. He viewed practicality as a suggestion. Emilia knew better than to point out the fact that capybaras couldn't read. The half-finished fence had actually increased the number of capybaras that tried to steal food out of Santiago's garden. It was as if they were trying to stock up before Lee completed the fence. Emilia wished she could tell them they didn't need to worry. Lee wasn't good at finishing things.

"Hey Em, what are you doing here" Lee asked with the end of his sentence and his eyebrows raising at the same time.

"I came to see Santiago. I need to hear one of his stories. I also came to see your fence."

"Santiago? Well, you're out of luck. He's somewhere else right now. I just wish that he'd show me where he goes."

Emilia looked across the fire pit. Santiago was sitting with his eyes closed while his cracked hands hitting the drum that he held between his legs. There didn't seem to be a set rhythm, but Santiago did not stop. Never raising his hands above chest level, he hit the drum with great force. The full power of the instrument was behind him. It was almost as if the drum were playing him, instead of the other way around.

"He told me that he can hear and feel the voices of all of his ancestors when he sings. He claims that he doesn't know how to play. He actually thinks that they are the ones moving his arms and mouth," Lee said with his usual sprinkling of doubt.

"I have to climb up here every day and he never gives me anything to work with unless the tourists are here. And it's not like I can submit an entire report about an old recluse who thinks he's possessed by music loving spirits," Lee said.

"How old is he?"

"Did you just hear what I said? It doesn't matter. He's making this stuff up. Who cares how long he's been doing it for?"

"I believe him," said Emilia.

Lee pulled his head out of his hands and looked at Emilia. She was disheveled and her long hair stuck out in the places where her hairdresser in Adelaide had accidentally cut certain strands too short. He noticed that freckles had found refuge along the upper plains of her cheeks and across her nose. Had she always had those? She seemed slighter than usual and her collarbone stuck out like bird wings ready to take flight. Slight scratches ran up the length of both of her upper arms, and bruises formed continents against the ocean of her skin.

"He's ninety-seven. What happened to your shoes?"

"My what?" Emilia looked down. "Oh, I must have lost them on the way up the mountain."

“How does a person lose their goddamn shoes? Your feet are covered in dirt. You have to stop pretending like things just happen to you,” Lee began to speak faster and faster as the pace of Santiago’s drumming picked up. One trying to drum the other out.

“If you weren’t so naïve, we wouldn’t be in this mess,” Lee said.

Emilia focused on the soft curling of the fire’s smoke. It wasn’t enough. Eyes closed. His lips on her neck. Choking on cologne. Where is Lee. The hum of an answering machine.

A guttural cry forced her eyes back open. In addition to the tambor alegre, Santiago had now begun to sing. In the off beat between thumps, he issued deep bursts of emotion from his throat that didn’t take on any discernable form. In his voice, Emilia heard heartbreak and loss. She felt the music reverberating through the earth. Without her shoes, she felt the ground raise and lower as if it were breathing in rhythm with Santiago’s diaphragm. He began to sing louder, this time blending Spanish and Palenque until they became one. Spanish colonialism and the African slave trade preserved in the movements of the earth. Emilia did not realize that she had been dancing until Lee grabbed her from behind and pulled her back to reality.

“Lee, I understood him. He told so many beautiful stories about San Basilica and how the people made this land their own.”

“What are you talking about? He hasn’t said a word.”

“They were forced here, but in their isolation, they found an escape. This music, it’s their voice. And in some ways, I think it’s them. For the first time since we arrived, I heard Spanish and Palenque that wasn’t separated. The two languages were blended. They were part of the same identity. This changes everything.”

“Emilia, you imagined the singing. I don’t know if it’s because your research isn’t panning out or what this is about. But it didn’t happen.”

“And I’m telling you that it did! How could you not hear him?”

“And I’m telling you that Maria says he hasn’t sung since his wife died last year. I highly doubt that you can hear him and she can’t. That woman uprooted her entire life for his music.”

“He was married? He sang of a woman in black. Do you think that was her?”

“I thought you said he sang of the village’s origins. How did he also have time to sing of a woman in black?”

“Lee, he’s been singing for hours.”

Lee scoffed. Emilia was clearly losing it, he thought. Santiago had only drummed one song. It was the same song he played repeatedly every afternoon. He had heard it enough times to know that it had a distinct beginning and end and that it didn’t include any words. What else had Emilia been misperceiving? Together they thought of the small house with the yellow linoleum table.

“The light’s gone. It’s too dangerous to climb back down that trail in the dark,” Santiago inputted, his eyes now open. *“You two can stay here with me.”*

And in that manner, it was settled.

The inside of the hut was only slightly more remarkable than its exterior. The entire living space was about the size of their old bedroom. Its walls were the color of faded parasol flowers. In the corner sat a dusty mattress. There was no other furniture.

“It’s not much, but I’m always traveling to visit my family. It suits me. And it makes the tourists think I’m poor so they give me more pesos. I’m the richest man I know. Tea?” asked Santiago.

“This is the most I’ve ever heard him speak outside of his stories” Lee whispered to Emilia. Santiago took a small brown pot out to the still burning fire outside. He came back inside a few minutes later with a wink and the tea. Emilia tasted brown sugar dispersed in the hot water, but not tea.

“Where did he get this water,” Emilia whispered in Lee’s left ear.

“There’s a lagoon further down the path. Sometimes I fish for him there.”

Santiago seemed to understand the conversation in a language he could not speak.

“Don’t go to the lagoon tonight. The fish you caught for me was black in the middle. That means that the door to the other world is still open. If you go to the lagoon, your spirit might get lost in the dark. My wife is still trying to get Ian back. He was here last night, but I’m not sure where he is now.”

“Santiago, don’t worry. I saw Ian this morning,” Emilia said.

“Did you speak to him?”

“No, he was uh, preoccupied.”

Santiago nodded. He seemed to understand.

“I told him not to go, but he went anyway. My wife’s sister really likes green eyes, and I think she’s been keeping him there.” Santiago looked first at Emilia, then at Lee. Both had green eyes.

“Don’t go to the lagoon. Besides, it’s polluted. That’s why Ian was here. All of the fish show up black in the middle. They’re not good for eating.”

“Then how do you know that the door is open,” Lee asked, playing along.

“Hard to tell. Better not to go. How’s the tea?”

Santiago did not sleep. After the last trails of brown sugar water had finished running down his face, he took the end of his dirty white shirt and patted himself dry. He did not speak again. His bare feet tracked the dust back from the inside of the house to where it had originally come from. He rested his hands on top of his only instrument, but he did not play again. Instead, he sat waiting with his eyes closed, but focused on something Emilia and Lee could not see.

“He’s looking in the direction of the lagoon,” Lee said.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.”

They tried to fit comfortably on the single mattress. But after two elbow jabs to the face, Lee moved ten feet to the other side of the hut.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to hold you? Then we could both fit,” Lee said.

Emilia turned her eyes away so that she did not have to see his pleading ones. She woke to the feeling of five thin fingers roughly shaking her shoulder.

“Lee, please go away”

“It’s Maria,” she said in a rush of lisped Spanish. “I spoke to Ian today. You were right to think something was wrong. He wasn’t answering any of my questions. This has happened before. I started up the mountain as soon as I realized. The last time it happened, Santiago said he’d ask the spirits to let the woman come back. A few days later, she started to speak again. She told us she had wandered into the lagoon and traveled to the spirit world. But, she never left her house. She was physically there the whole time. I don’t know if I believe it, but Santiago does, and I trust him.”

“But I saw you speaking to Ian hours ago. It’s the middle of the night. What took so long?”

“After I smelled the yellow parasol flowers, I listened for the sound of Santiago’s music, but it didn’t guide me. I took a few wrong turns and got lost. I’ve been wandering around for hours. Do you know where Santiago is?”

“He’s not outside?”

For the second time in the sun and moon’s daily dance, the two women walked together. Lee did not wake. He slept through the accidental slamming of the door behind their quickly exiting silhouettes. Or, if he did notice, he chose to ignore it. Lee was good at that. In the dark night, Maria cupped her hands behind her ears and listened for the sound of music.

“This mimics the shape of African serval ears. It’s how they’re able to tell when a predator is approaching from miles away,” she said. “I can only hear the sound of Lee breathing. Are you in a fight? When I was waking you up you said to go away when you thought it was him.”

Emilia put her hands up to her ears and tried to listen for Santiago. Praying that his presence would distract Maria from continuing.

“I mean, I know it’s not any of my business. But I want to help. Did he forget your birthday? Anniversary? Did he insult your mom? Let me tell you, if a man ever insulted my mom I would beat him with his own arm until he cried. Okay, so not your mom. My brother dated this girl once who was...”

Emilia sat down on the nearest rock. She took Santiago’s drum between her legs and rested her body against it. With eyes closed, she began to play. She did not know how to play. But when the memories came back to her she lowered first her left and then her right hand as she had seen Santiago do. With each thump, the images came back to her. Lee and Charlene in the

kitchen. His hand on her leg. Crawling upward. Her jumping up and pushing him away. His denial that he had been hitting on her. Lee and Charlene coming back, aguardiente drinks in hand. The incident already over, there was nothing to say. Lee's best friend Jimmy. Jimmy and Charlene. Lee and Emilia. Jimmy and Emilia? Where were the boundaries when the fence was half-finished? Who do you believe when you love them both? What happens when you can't choose? Who suffers when you're stuck in a state of in-between? What if you can't find your way back from the lagoon? Do you forever exist, not speaking?

Each question escaping her in a series of guttural cries. She began to play faster, the doubts and fears escaping her through her hands. She watched them hit each drum, and bounce upwards. Never to be seen again. In her head, she forgot it all. In the distance, a woman in black kissed a green eyed man and let him go. She saw the lagoon lapping at the water's edge. It breathed in and out. She did too. A man in white sat with his rough hands resting on the gunnels of a small wooden boat.

Te creo. Tú crees.

I Let

the wind romance my dress, flirting with the hem
so that it looked like a calla lily kissing
the grass petals of the earth muted in
the springtime waltz, softly whispering
ballet slippers out of rhythm
made beautiful in the musings of
the sunlight reaching past the trees
through the earthy fingers, picking
gently like the thorns of the rose I
touched on my cheeks, the budding of
virginal lips touched only by
the taste of this moment

Dangerous Love

In high school, we wrote a list describing the perfect man. The list, fourteen lines in total, manifested itself during one of our business lunches. Ana had given the secret nod, titled head to the left like a questioning dog. I had nodded back, chin tilted forward to convey my seriousness. Ready to begin, we lifted our pens in one hand with grapefruit soda in the other. We drank the soda with forced seriousness and only partly tried to hide our pursed lips from one another. It was too tart, but the teachers all drank it so we did too during our official meetings.

“First on our agenda, the matter of Ian whatshisface.”

“Samson.”

“Bea, I know. But to say his full name would be to acknowledge that he is a person, which in fact he is not. Ian is a butthead. As I was saying, Ian is on the agenda because he has completely ruined my trust in boys.”

“Why’s that?”

“His inability to wear anything besides khaki pants with white shirts. Has he not seen the news? He’s an unintentional neo-nazi. And to think that he and I once shared a prolonged gaze in Mrs. Stoke’s tenth grade geometry class. I could never date someone that clueless.”

“Ana, I’m sorry about your new realization. But why does this warrant a business lunch?”

“Because we are going to make a list of the perfect man so that we never unintentionally fall for an Ian whatshisface again. Plus, it will give us a guideline by which to live our love lives. *Seventeen* magazine just had an article about this. It was called “Dangerous Love, No Thanks” or something like that.”

We both still had our pens poised. Only Ana’s touched the paper.

1. Must not wear khaki pants with white shirts
2. Must be willing to trade his life for J.J. Abram's writing hand
3. Must have seen the Legally Blonde movie spin off exactly zero times
4. Must be able to cook chicken parmesan
5. Must be no taller than Mr. Funghi, the gym teacher
6. Must detest crossword puzzles
7. Must be willing to do my math homework
8. Must know the state song for all fifty states
9. Must cry while watching the Sarah McLachlan SPCA video
10. Must be able to spell "hippopotamus" backwards
11. Must have a favorite kitchen utensil
12. Must be willing to talk to my grandma for me whenever she calls
13. Must be okay with the fact that I wear a night retainer
14. Must like small dogs named Kim Kardashian

Ana tried to adhere to this list for about two weeks. I've held onto it for twenty two years just in case I find her one true love someday. My husband's snores drown out the sound of a train passing outside our window. Maybe I keep Ana's list because it reminds me that I should have made one. He sputters, spit making its way down his face. Is this dangerous love?

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- Linked Student Teaching Placement included training in classroom management techniques, preparation of lesson materials, effective communication, and a variety of other tasks.
- Subject matter includes World Literature, American Literature, and Journalism across a wide range of student ability levels

Editorial Intern at the Hemingway Letters Project (The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA)

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- The Hemingway Letters Project seeks to collect and annotate all 6,000 of Ernest Hemingway's letters under the direction of Hemingway scholar Sandra Spanier and the permission of Patrick Hemingway
- Searched, catalogued, and transcribed newly found letters for the fifth volume of the project

Research Assistant at Quality Talk (The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA)

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- The Quality Talk research project is aimed at promoting and enhancing higher level thinking in science and language arts classrooms
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Tutor (State College Area School District, State College, PA)

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- Weekly tutoring, taught English vocabulary to a high school ESL learner from China
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