

Rogue Taxidermy

by

Joss Lake
Class of 2008

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in English

Table of Contents

PART ONE: Diagnosis.....2

PART TWO: Treatment.....17

PART (three)Y.....81

PART FOUR: Eve’s Story.....107

PART ONE: Diagnosis

There is a house in the distance, but I can't take you there yet.

You see, if I moved in straight lines, I never would have ended up in the house. And if I hadn't ended up in the house, I couldn't have written this. I couldn't narrate anything other than a heap of empty images before I entered the house.

My Problem

I would really like to get to the house. But I have to get through a doctor's appointment first. You see, I had a problem that had been neatly stuffed into an acronym, ADD, and was always surging out of its poor casing. If anyone had asked me for a better label for my problem, I would have suggested that "being present" was my issue. But it seems to me that the present itself was always my problem.

As I sat in the doctor's office during my first appointment, I had to wonder how anyone could "be present" in a sleek psychiatrist's office surrounded by an assembly of high-end chain stores that call themselves "The Grove," while a forest is nowhere to be found? In the house, I would find someone named Sylvane, and her name was not a total lie. She lived in a room that reminded me of a cabin in the woods. My name is not a total lie, depending on how you look at it. I don't want to look at it right now. My name is Eve.

I do hope you will like the house. The house belongs to Shard, although it had once belonged to his parents who were murdered by a medieval weapons collector-thief. I'll get to new pronouns and medieval weapons eventually; be patient.

"Wouldn't it be better if you got to the house, already?" you ask.

No.

I have to tell the story as it happened. I did not make a sylphlike leap into the house. Although my fragmented thoughts were mobile, my existence felt slow and heavy to me. Getting to the house was not easy; staying in the house was even harder.

As I sat in a sleek modern chair in Dr. Richardson's office, I couldn't even raise my eyes to meet his gaze. My eyes could climb no further than the glasses he wore on a necklace strung with black, oily beads. I was ashamed of facing him, of failing to render my secrets legible, of letting him read my own discomfort. I could not even look his framed pictures in the face because they were facing away from me. I stared at the metal edge of the desk, and occasionally, at his glasses necklace because it was strung with oily shimmering beads.

I would have liked to say that I didn't need to look around, that any office in The Grove was neutrally coiffed and vacant, like a desert that has become a building. But I could not even meet the glare of the office-desert. I did not delight in the perverse pleasure of visiting a doctor for an ailment that could never be contained in an acronym. Instead, I agonized over how the doctor, who had marked himself as a doctor for People with Problems (with a number of abbreviations on his nameplate, which read Dr. Richardson) looked at me. I was disgusted by what he might have seen.

I stared at the glasses necklace so it appeared as if I was engaged with Dr. Richardson, who was giving me a spiel about his role as my "guide through the process of self-healing..." While he spoke, I tried to figure out the progression of my "problem." I recalled how I had bolted from the present while having sex, if you could call it that, with this kid Andrew Molena. I had left the white couch in my

basement, the scratchy stubble on his chin that rubbed against my cheek, and the smell of Axe that made me want to attack him with one. In order to separate myself from the unbearable present that consisted of having sex with Molena, I had imagined a miniature universe awash in fog, guarded by ravens and fueled by a metallic river that might have occupied my vagina before Molena's abrupt visitation. As I lay beneath him, I knew that I wasn't supposed to be thinking of the miniature universe and expected that I was breaking some unspoken rules and that surely, there would be retribution. I imagined retribution in the form of a machine that would monitor all of my thoughts. The machine was all the more detestable because I had once heard a penis referred to as a "machine." So let's call the machine a tracking device, shall we?

I suppose that I only wanted to conceive of myself through the scattered data collected by this hypothetical tracking device, data presented in numbers and fragments such as: *Tracking Update: 12,054. 02/25/04. Subject: EH. Thought Status Alert: Unproductive Digressions. CODE 03HJF. O-I I Location: Ms. Rhine's biology classroom. Lecture on meiosis and pluripotentiality. Thought Contents: EH muses on the idea of pluripotency – the potential for many outcomes – but not in biological terms.*

Do you see how terrible that is? I did not believe that narration was possible. I didn't think there was anything within me that could fit together into a story. Not only was I incapable of narrating the broken heap of my self, I couldn't narrate any other stories, either. I didn't think anyone cared about my story, excepting the hypothetical audience that would scan and hunt and stalk my broken thoughts in order

to come up with appropriate vengeance because I had betrayed the delicious, sensual fruits of the Present.

Dr. Richardson interrupted my reveries by readjusting his glasses, which made the black beads of his necklace glint, and asked,

“So how are you feeling today?”

I could not pull myself together to give him an answer. The question was a problem. First of all, my emotions didn't seem to belong in the office. They were locked away somewhere else where they had solidified and were no longer moving. Even when I wasn't in the office, I kept my thoughts roaming all over the place so I wouldn't have to deal with my feelings. I'm sure there is a technical term for this process of avoidance. In the office, my rich, unhealthy feelings felt like the fats clogging a coronary artery so that it can barely move anything to the heart. The fats are hard on the outside and soft on the inside. Sometimes, their hard casing breaks open, exposing the soft interior. You'll have to wait a while for my hard casing to break. It certainly didn't break in the office. If I had any way of accessing that distant artery of impenetrable feelings while I sat in the hard metal chair, I would have been indignant instead of reticent. I looked beyond his shoulder to a bookcase containing pristine volumes. If I could have pulled myself together, I would have asked the doctor,

“How can any answer integrate the artery (I would have to explain my brilliant metaphor to him) that is so enraged that you have reduced my thought process to a single acronym, ADD,

with the artery that is content to perform as a person with ADD and shoot heterogeneous thoughts at you,

with the artery that hates how I perform myself in the Grove, in the office, at school,

with the artery that desperately needs to escape from my immediate surroundings,

with the artery that is excited by the prospect of a breakdown after so many years of trying to appear well put together,

with the artery that dreads any questions requiring me to give a straightforward account of myself?"

But all my emotive arteries were disconnected and stiff. I could not bring them together into an enraged question. Sitting before Dr. Richardson, I didn't ask any questions that would have caused him to reevaluate the way he spoke to me. I wanted to tell the doctor that he should take the hint from a movie I once saw and ask me indirect questions, instead of saying, "How would you describe your mental and emotional status at this very moment?"¹

Needless to say, I told him nothing. I replied to his "How are you feeling today" with an empty response.

"Okay," I said.

He nodded and put on his glasses.

¹ In the movie, a man asks his lover questions about when she was locked in a basement after she found her traitorous ex-lover killed. Instead of asking directly about her emotional status in the basement, the lover asks, "Was the basement cold?" and gently calls forth the wetness of the walls and the deadness of her mind.

The First Appointment “Only Scratches the Surface” of My Problem

I shall state the obvious and disclose that during our first appointment, the doctor and I didn't get anywhere. He used some metaphors I didn't approve of, such as “(I'm sure that if you cooperate), *we will get to the bottom of this.*” Metaphors are not to be trifled with, Milan Kundera writes, and although I don't agree with him on many things, I do agree with him on that. I wanted to tell Dr. Richardson that my problem did not fit his spatial model: my problem was not hiding deep inside my innermost soul waiting for him to plunge inside of me and rip it out.

But I couldn't really argue with Richardson at that point, as I refused the responsibility of narrating myself. After he promised me a prescription of Adderall at our next appointment, I exited his office and found myself in the corridor. I couldn't find my way into the waiting room. The doors were all unmarked. I passed a kitchenette on the left side of the narrow hall. It reminded me of my fourth grade classroom, which had a kitchenette behind a partition in the back of the room. When my teacher got frustrated, she would yell, “Get your warm body behind the partition!” I didn't really mind an occasional trip behind the partitions, but I couldn't stand the reference to the warmth of my body. Part of the joy of becoming a spaced-out tomboy was that I could avoid thinking about my warm chubby body that was losing its boniness. Walking down the corridor after my first appointment had ended, I felt my chubby body emanating heat. I felt no joy.

As I passed the kitchenette, the receptionist emerged and pointed me towards the exit. She had loaded her eyelids with purple shadow. At least I was not the only

one who needed to obscure my eyes in the office. I left the office building and drove home, a place beyond the Grove, a place where leaves still fell.

The Second Appointment, Which Did Not Exist

My wandering mind and I never made it to our second appointment. As I drove back to the office, I saw a limping crossing guard in an orange vest directing traffic and my mind flew back to the days I had spent in Amsterdam, a place where *oranje*, that glorious color, had abounded.

When I almost ran over the crossing guard, he yelled, “Hey lady, what’s your problem?”

Obviously, I could have screamed “ADD!” towards his beard, which billowed in the wind. That was the sanctioned response, the one carrying me into the place called The Grove. I could have halted at “Hey lady, what’s your problem?” But his call fired me up, it didn’t slow me down. The call evoked different scenes, including:

-a silent figure floating against the leather of the driver’s seat, unable to turn the heavy wheel, nearly an apparition

-a wafting spirit of a person not allowed to be crude, say “fuck you” or draw crazy lines between him being allowed to call me a lady (even though I am not a wafting spirit and bear no resemblance to such a character) and him being allowed to guard the crossings and the traffic

-someone running over this orange uniformed man not even so much for revenge as for the sensation of interrupting the traffic patterns so carefully manipulated by the wisps shooting out of his beard and curling subtly along the street,

through the electrical wires, over hedges and even between crevices of toes crusted with athlete's foot.

Maybe you're thinking, "Why didn't you forget the traffic guard and just go straight to the appointment?" And to you I ask: Have you been listening at all?

The accusation of "lady" made me silent even as it infuriated me. I couldn't get over the embarrassment of the word. If there had been no "what's your problem," I might have mobilized against the "hey lady" forever, stockpiling every type of barricade against that sticky word that tried to pull me towards its dry white powdery breast. My fury that everyone felt qualified to address my "problem" propelled me not forward, but somewhere. My "problem" was all that kept me from collapsing into a pile of defenses because while I knew my problem would explode an acronym, I had no idea where it would end.

It would end in the house, of course.

Instead of going straight to the appointment, I circled around the block. When I came back to where the crossing guard was flashing a red stop sign, I yelled out, "Hey lady, what's *your* problem?"

His mouth dropped open and his sign drooped. I thought he was going to smash it against my car, but he halted. He moved out of the way for me. Then I was ready for the second appointment, which I would never make.

The Tangerine Expedition

In the waiting room before my second appointment, my eyes darted around. My eyes could roam because there was no doctor in the waiting room to bring on my shame, only a frightened older woman lost inside a *People* magazine. She peeled an

orange with pointy fingernails. I wondered about her defect: maybe it was the oranges. Like that song:

“Hey remember that month when I only ate boxes of tangerines. Tangerines. So cheap and juicy! Tangerines.”

I hoped she only ate oranges. Or even only tangerines. I wanted to say “hey you should go out on a sailing expedition. You could protect yourself from scurvy. And who needs a doctor’s office when you could sustain yourself in a tropical orange grove or peeling an orange with pointy fingertips on the bow of a ship, dropping the peels into the surging seas below instead of carefully depositing them in a napkin on your lap?”

I looked over to the receptionist who sat behind the plastic window that was plastered with all sorts of instructions on colored paper. Her eyes were still coated with heavy purple makeup. I tried to recall the number of offices in which I had witnessed the hygienically coiffed middle-aged man-doctor and the make-up drenched woman-assistant configuration. But this mindset upset me, so I thought about someone who had avoided the Office Configuration.

The Immigration Office in Amsterdam

So two years ago, during a brighter epoch, my scientist parents took me to Amsterdam so they could work with a Dutch lab on new robotic technologies. Before then, I had idealized the Traveler who could simply leave everything and in a quicksilver flash, begin anew in a foreign land. When my parents and I tried this maneuver, we ended up in a Dutch immigration office. There is nothing quicksilver about an immigration office. The Amsterdam office is no exception. Three hours of

pretending to ignore stoic Surinamese families, fidgeting expatriates, and the man across from me wearing a Cambodian flag t-shirt. I wondered if this wardrobe choice would influence his immigration chances. At one point, a hummingbird flew into the massive waiting room, but it didn't influence anything. Except maybe me. By the time we got to door A12, I was so weary that I didn't notice how the immigration officer had avoided the Office Configuration. When I finally gazed at her, I saw a buzzed head, sharp grey eyes, a velvet maroon blazer with a name tag reading "Carolien" on it. At first I thought her look of faded glamour belonged in a music video. But she was too far gone. Her coffee breathed hints of liqueur. What sort of border war was she engaged in? I doubted that the geopolitical boundary of Holland could have made her hands shake as she held my birth certificate. Her power was hardly bureaucratic in nature, either: If she had tried to tear off the document's corners, I would have probably started to lose appendages. The status of my mortality would have become uncertain, so great was my estimation of Carolien's power. Though she was falling apart, Carolien wore no make-up. And she was neither assistant nor authority. She was some nearly severed tentacle of the vast Dutch bureaucracy and a scar ran across her lip. Don't worry; Carolien will return later. I will need border guards later. Did you think the house would be a safe haven? It's not.

An Apology for a Non-Story

I wanted Carolien to be seated behind the doctor's office window, but instead, the same receptionist was guarding the border between waiting room and corridor. The clock read 12:25. My high school had a half day that Friday and my mom

thought the free afternoon was a perfect opportunity for me to deal with “my problems” again. I wondered how soon the receptionist would call me to the window. Below the clock was plastered an Adderall poster. The more I stared at the advertisement of a white, freckled, and under-achieving boy on the waiting room wall, the more I knew that medication was the last thing I needed. So I plotted a film that more accurately represented my problem. I apologize for what comes next. It is hardly a story. It is a hollow advertisement not for Adderall, but for my own dysfunction. These images were thrilling to me as I sat in the waiting room, unable to do more than create a vacuous thicket that imitated ADD, that tried to smother the yearning that the images threatened to discharge.

The Advertisement

The set, ablaze with the glare of costume jewelry, froze when a strange wind blew Polly into the doorway. Barefoot, wearing a loose white t-shirt and white shorts, with her hair in a neat straight ponytail, Polly looked like a twentieth century gamine trapped in an anachronistic palace. The cameramen rode their dollies through the set walls and were not seen again. The director wheeled himself into the shadows. The makeup artists powdered themselves into oblivion. Only Elizabeth was left motionless on the throne, her cropped auburn hair fueling a fury that had obliterated the movie set. Polly the gamine could barely breathe: Elizabeth’s presence filled the room like treacle. (Somehow the camera would capture the idea of presence as treacle). As the walls shed candelabras, tapestries of blood spurting from hunted unicorns, and fire tongs, Elizabeth’s immobility became cataclysmic. The dead maroon rug under her feet dissolved along with a cascade of royal petticoats. Elizabeth’s bare vitality

glared at Polly and provoked her. From underneath a white body suit that did not quite match her own skin color, Elizabeth removed a yellowed parchment and a flowing silk cloak that rippled in the empty windless room. Elizabeth stretched out her false bare arm and pressed a silver knob, ejecting a metal extension that placed the scroll in the gamine's hand. "Find the bird. Or die. E."

Polly stumbled into the courtyard, weighed down by Elizabeth's signature – three prongs rising horizontally from a curved spear. Then, Polly saw an inflated mermaid raft with real starfish clinging at her breasts floating in a fountain.

"Aha, digression!" a disembodied voice rumbled.

Polly went on, walking in the shadows of black and white Russian émigrés dancing ballet on a stone wall that a hidden projector had turned into a screen. The dancers and then a deflated burnt orange tire hanging in a tree provoked another cry of "digression!" that she could not locate. Ignoring the cry, Polly walked to the edge of the courtyard, past a centimeter-wide river flowing with a silvery substance like the gut of a Jelly Roll pen, and saw a slice of yellow through the cloth-like leaves of a weeping willow tree. On the screen flashed scenes depicting the wrenching monolithic hunger of those who sought a single object: Holy Grail. New land. Forbidden love.

As the image of two illicit lovers embracing appeared on the screen, the thought of Elizabeth made Polly digress. She wanted to bolt back to Elizabeth's throne, throw herself down and remain prostrate forever. These thoughts were so potent that the hidden voice could not even muster a "digression;" these thoughts were building towards obsession. Polly walked away from the screen, if only to find

the bird so she could return to Elizabeth. A branch manifested itself in the distant mist. Its leaves parted, revealing a mistle thrush.

The mistle thrush looked as if it had been extracted from a plastic bird identification slate. Its synthetic body quivered but its head did not turn to look down at her. Further on, a wave of black hovered in the air, a seagull without features beating its featherless wings. A man in a Big Bird suit was squatting in a bush and the camera zoomed in on his fungus-scarred toenails creeping out the sides of the costume. A nearby owl looked comfortingly real except for its tweed blazer and the spectacles teetering on its sharp beak. Warped branches stretched out into the distance: Some were strung with verdant holiday lights in the shape of holly leaves; some had barbed wire thorns protruding from their bark. As Polly bent over to examine a hologram that was growing out of the grass,

the large receptionist with pools of purple eye shadow interrupted the film, which was just as well because I was starting to lose control of Polly. I merely wanted her to fail to find a bird, a creature that might not even survive anymore in our forests and groves, a creature that might have already morphed into a hundred cuckoos nailed into the alcove of a clock, but the fantasy was slipping away from me. Polly was betraying her mission as well as my narrative. The receptionist with heavily shadowed eyes beckoned to me and I approached the protective window.

The Softness of the New World

The receptionist stood at the door between the waiting room and the corridor. Her purple eye shadow was in full bloom. She posed my name to me as a question, then pointed me straight towards the office door, and went back into her office. The

hallway path itself must have been part of the treatment: discipline your body in a straight line and the mind will follow. I stepped past the white kitchenette and was lifted from the path. No, lifted is too light a word for the power that overthrew me. The unseen force thrust me from the path and, loosened from the reality of the office and of my advertisement, my mind went blank. There were no hyperactive images of monolithic hunger or of bird metamorphosis delusions during my flight. Propelled through the corridor by a grip that had enveloped my knees, my body did the thinking as it moved along the wrong trajectory.

When my head hit the ground, all the sharp contours of the hallway collapsed into a bog. In a bog, islands of floating moss band together to form a thin surface above the waters. In a bog, you might slip under the unsettled soil.

In the softness of this new world, a chin lay on my hip. Never before would I have permitted such an invasion, but I didn't have time to call to my defenses.

With Molena, I had enlisted:

-The raw terror of eternal solitude

-A thousand films that had already sketched out the entire process of unfulfilling teenage sex

-Half a bottle of Brut taken out of the refrigerator (my parents didn't care, and might have been pleased if they knew I was using it to numb myself for their colleague's son)

-The fact that he saw something in my body while I saw nothing in his.

On the ground with my assailant, I could not separate myself from what was occurring. We lay entangled on the carpet that had looked flat and dull from above

but was actually composed of millions of rough, colored threads. With another body wrapped around mine, I couldn't move.

Later, my assailant would tell me that I was only submerged with her for five seconds. In those five seconds, the fake birds flew off. The whole dizzying cinematography of my mind crumbled into a vast diversion that lost all profundity, although I didn't know it at first.

Sometime after those five seconds, my knees were released from the grip. The chin rose.

“Oh shit, I think I concussed you.”

I turned to the person whose chin had just left my hip, whose words sounded like an incantation. Looking did not resolve anything. As my assailant rose, two breasts carved tiny mounds into a loose grey sweater. I was submerged and the breasts were pointed towards me and I was unsure how to handle their presence. I wanted this apparently female assailant to stop moving, to remain with me in the bog where she was a force. I did not want to consider that she had just tackled me in the middle of an office hallway and that the office had just become more than a devoid plane on which to enact new and intangible fantasies.

PART TWO: Treatment

“If you go into his office with a stunned concussion cloud hanging around your head, he’ll call the medical authorities on you. Come with me,” my assailant urged, lowering her arm into the damp, thick quagmire that she had created in the hallway.

“It’s a bog, not a cloud,” I said, as she pulled me up.

I wanted to say, “If this were a cloud, I would be long gone. I would have dispersed into the air, blown away. I would not be stuck in these unclear waters that only seem stagnant, that stir with more than ancient peat moss, that have swallowed borders and their patrols,” but my assailant’s look was a question that I couldn’t turn away from, couldn’t speak to.

“Ok good, if you can form a coherent... uh, somewhat coherent sentence, then I’m assuming that you aren’t concussed, which is even more of a reason to come with me.”

The Elevator

My assailant led me out through the waiting room, past the pile of orange peels, down the hallway and into the elevator. She leaned against a side wall of the elevator. I walked in behind her and stood at the wall across from her. With her arms folded over the gray sweater, my assailant commanded the elevator while I tried to focus my eyes on the corner next to her. I couldn’t look down, but I couldn’t look directly at her. I felt that the fury of my thoughts had somehow reached this force of a person. I cursed myself for having conjured an absolute female monarch in my

advertisement, although I wasn't sure how much control I had ever had over that fantasy.

Farewell to the Grove

In the elevator, we said nothing to each other. The space was too full. As we walked out the sliding doors into the parking lot, the assailant said,

“Ok, Eve Hennessey. Here's the part where you have to promise me that I'm not kidnapping you.”

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know how she knew my name or if I could assure her that she wasn't kidnapping me. So I avoided these issues and asked,

“What's your name?”

“Thanks for your promise. I'm Mela. Now get in the car,” she said, opening the door of a black Camry.

She turned on the car, rolled down the windows, and then we were on our way out of The Grove. We drove a few miles away towards some of the neighborhoods that supplied the Grove shoppers. I had done this drive before, but with Mela next to me, it seemed like we were entering a new city. Let me be clear: I did not want to jump out of the car. I wanted to be sitting next to her, sneaking glances at the light that struck the tips of her cropped hair.

“I'm taking you to see Shard, in case you were wondering,” Mela said.

Shard. Obviously a taken name. But from where? From a piece of blood-marked earthenware smashed onto the ground? From a novel thrown across a room, breaking the coherence of a ceramic bowl holding artificial fruit? And what had

Shard replaced? Probably something smooth and empty. Lynn, I supposed as I opened the car window.

“Shard is a healer of sorts,” Mela continued and seeing my look of panic, added, “Don’t worry, Shard won’t scan or prick or evaluate you.”

I didn’t know if I wanted to visit another “healer.” As Mela steered the car through the empty autumn streets, she asked me something that tore through my stomach.

“What are you thinking about?”

What kind of question is that? Ludicrous. Especially when posed to someone who had just narrowly escaped medicalization due to supposed attention deficit disorder. Well, I was wondering who had thought to name the street we were on Monogram Avenue. I was also considering how flaccid my cheeks might look to Mela.

I answered with a pathetic, “Nothing much.”

After I spoke, a wave of terror rushed over me. People are always deliciously terrorizing themselves with fantasies that a Big Brother regime will one day read their every thought. Yet I was locked in the horror that mine might remain concealed forever.

The Horror

I feared that one day, on a bus or other form of transportation that would inundate me with people, all of my unuttered words and cries and nearly inhuman moans would start to swell. Instead of spilling out from my mouth or pores or the

crevices between my nails and my skin, the swelling would turn inwards. The desperate thrust of the unexpressed would crush my internal organs.

The Car

As we drove through the entrance to the subdivision of Oaken Manor, I wondered how many healers resided in the upstanding brick houses. The silence of the streets was probably conducive to a healing atmosphere, but the neat piles of leaves, the understated Halloween decorations, the coiffed dogs in their knitted sweaters? Mela drove with only one arm on the steering wheel and kept the other one hanging out the window. I tried to look out the window so Mela would not suspect that I needed to keep my eyes on her. Mela tried another question, which drew my eyes back to her,

“How did you end up in that office?”

Respectacular

One autumn afternoon I had sprawled out far too comfortably on the floor of our living room. The room was surrounded with plush eggplant-colored couches, but I burrowed in the thickness of a rug. On the mantle of the fireplace sat black and white pictures of relatives from another age. A fire crackled. On the walls, abstract paintings of dots and lines and shadows did little to inspire me. I preferred reading about Mongols trampling across the earth. My blue notebook and I were embedded in the deep red rug that might have been traded in a Mongolian capital. I thought about my AP World History class and how I felt so volatile as my own monologues thrashed around inside of me during those daily forty minutes. I fancied that a confidante would enter one day, a transfer student no doubt, who would freely

announce her secrets to me. In honor of her, I wrote out a homework assignment. If my confidante had existed, I would have been less terrified about the prospect of venturing beyond the realm of sanctioned answers. I would have been able to walk along the edge of the impermissible knowing that if I jumped, she would go with me. Or so I thought.

Eve Hennessey

September 25

AP World History – Mr. Archel

Chapter 6 Responses

1.) How may the Bubonic plague have spread to Europe via Mongol military tactics?

*Eating the intestines of fried rats that had scurried in foreign ship holds
shitting on European soil as an offensive strategy
birthing flowers of the black death.*

2.) What Mongol policies and practices embodied the horrors of human conflict?

Killing.

3.) Was Ghengis Khan interested in more than booty? Explain.

No. Booty was all.

*He sought the finest booty,
particularly European booty,
the booties of the fair queens who lacked the thick dark body hair of their Mongolian counterparts.*

And smelled of vanilla.

Hence the long trek.

4.) How did Marco Polo's expeditions contribute to Mongolian knowledge?

Ask Italo Calvino, he will tell you

5.) Even at its height, the Mongol empire displayed signs of decay: what were these weaknesses and how did the rising West avoid such pitfalls?

Slanted eyes, tiny ponies and worst of all: nomadic brains

They simply kept moving

Did not halt

in stone and steeples.

The act of formatting my digressive thoughts into a homework assignment sent a rush through me that was thwarted only by the prospect that a secret confidante would never arrive. I didn't have a problem with solitude, but I worried that I would

succumb to death having never been anything other than an empty spectacle,² having never confessed my secrets to anyone. I panicked as I looked into the fire. If a medieval weapons collector-thief had come down the chimney and stabbed me with a 14th century greatsword at that moment, no one would have known that I had more than muted disdain for everything around me. At that brilliant moment, with fire reflecting into my eyes, I decided that I would turn in the homework assignment and forsake my spectacle status. By handing in the assignment, I would be retiring as a spectacle, I thought. I would stop preserving the faded, brilliant, synthetic luster of my public persona: quite presentable, really. I had imagined myself to be deploying the tactics of early homophile groups, those connoisseurs of dissimulation: wearing the mask of respectability to kiss ass while saving one's lips for one's lovers. Of course, I didn't know about the early homophile groups until after I had entered Shard's house through an entrance smelling of incense. Suffice it to say that all my loneliness and all the years of constructing a spectacle out of myself were responsible for my hypothetical homework assignment, as well as all my self-defense mechanisms (to use a term the psychiatrist would understand): a sweaty mound of metaphorical armor sticking to my skin, a thousand wasted glances into a mirror that revealed nothing but poorly straightened hair, a pair of expertly faded jeans, a weak smirk.

² Just the thought of that old part of my self that I would like to amputate harkens me back to pseudo-academic practices which are worse than unnecessary. As one could assume without this note, a spectacle is obviously a respectable spectacle, or a respectful receptacle, or a spectacle that has been repeated for years...

A Brief Cinematic History

It's not like I had even wanted to make myself a spectacle, or that the pleasure of being viewed as a spectacle ever outweighed the sorrow of it. I started off as a spaced-out tomboy golden child who basked in glances of approval. And somehow, the glances intensified and soon they were all over my body and I spent years waking up before school to try to disfigure myself. Ew, no, I don't want this to become some teenage confessional omigod I had an eating disorder and used to puke salads into a toilet that barely flushed, omigod I am Ophelia crying tears into the river of female pain, omigod I shall reclaim my Self from those teen magazines that tell me How to Please My Man While Losing Fifteen Pounds (Sucking Cock on a Treadmill – Be Careful, It's Tricky!). No, my spectacle status wasn't even really about my body.

I guess you could say that I wanted to turn myself into a film, an image that was so smooth and coiffed and presentable that I could eventually glare back at those who watched me and say "Screw you!" while swept up in an endless surge of joy. Since that deluded day on the floor of my living room, I have figured out that had I ever reached the point of sleek cinematic presentability, I would have effaced the violent freak within along the way.

I was pretty dumb and nothing less than melodramatic when I lay on the rug thinking how sweet it would be to say, "Screw you!" by turning in the homework assignment. The day I turned the assignment in, I wore a blue button-down shirt and jeans. I had some visible sweat under my arms, but otherwise, I was somewhat spectacle. The day I turned the assignment in, I thought I would be transformed into

a lauded renegade. I thought of Mr. Archel and how he would probably grin and whisper “yes, yessss” when he read my words, because somewhere inside of him, he felt the same way.

What the hell was wrong with me? I turned it in and got back the sheet with the red words “see me” printed on it. My meeting with Mr. Archel was almost as useless as my appointment with Dr. Richardson. Archel tried to appear sympathetic, but had no idea what was going on in my head. I attempted to put an end to his questions by saying that I was so interested in the Mongols that I had become distracted, a word that he alighted upon, a word that gave him the solution. He suggested that I might have ADD, a “very common, very treatable condition that often interferes with homework completion.” Two weeks later, I was sent to The Grove for my first doctor’s appointment and I swore that I would never again try to render myself legible. Until Mela intruded, that is.

The Car, Again

But I could not explain to Mela how I had ended up in the office. I doubted she would have understood my loneliness or the weight of my body or the limited tools of subversion that were available to me. I responded with a cop-out that I don’t remember, something about my parents being concerned about my work in school. After my weak response, a gust of wind blew some leaves into the car and Mela went off talking about power structures and the leaves and nomads and metallurgists and rhizomes and a deluge.³ I nodded and kept looking over at her, wondering if she too felt a *frisson* shoot through her body when she looked at me.

³ Even after I found out she was talking about Deleuze, I still preferred to think of him as a deluge.

We turned onto a smaller street and Mela switched tactics. She told me to take a look at the invitations by my feet, a request that did not involve a verbal response.

I reached down and picked up a small stack. On top was a photograph of a llama jumping over a gingerbread house, which was labeled “Shard’s Domain.”

I laughed. “Oh, so we’re driving to a gingerbread house. Good. I didn’t think a healer would live in one of these brick ones.”

Mela turned and looked and smiled.

“Yeah, that’s a pretty good representation of Shard’s house.”

I wasn’t laughing when I saw the date written in the corner of the invitation.

“Wait, this invitation is for *today*?”

“Yeah. I suppose that makes you invited.”

What an enthusiastic summons, I thought.

The Garage

Mela pulled up a driveway that bypassed a three-car garage and became a dirt path. After the car cut through some overhanging tree branches, wrenching leaves from their weak stems, the path turned back into a driveway leading towards a sealed garage painted blue. Mela’s foot hit the brake right before the car tapped the first row of glass Heineken bottles lined up on their sides. I was quite familiar with Heineken bottles after living in Amsterdam for two years, but I had never before encountered them as a security device. Those who tried to cross the border into the garage would turn green bottles into an Emerald City of dangerous green sparkling pieces on the ground. This miniature glass enclave would thrust green shards into the border-

crosser's tires. How clever. Mela slid out of the car. I struggled to climb out from the low seat and stood up just as a llama poked its head around the corner of the garage.

“Yo Werther,”⁴ Mela called out. Her stomach poked out over her baggy jeans and I would have liked to count her unapologetic pudge as a mark against her and for me. But that was all wrong. Her pudge did not detract from her allure; instead it flashed the ridiculous status of my body-mind relationship back in my face. I saw myself as a despicable pool of sugar-free chocolates, baked potato chips, skim lattes – a despicable pool that wasn't even slender. Suddenly, my entire fantasy of boniness seemed laughable in view of Mela, who was all the more attractive for not having imbibed such gross food items. Before my self-hatred could climax, Werther walked up, lettuce hanging out of his wet mouth. In a low voice, he said,

“Shut the fuck up about your body-mind relationship. Become a llama instead.”

I glanced at the creature standing before me and then bolted past the garage and up the path, where Mela stood searching for her key.

The Entrance

At last, we've reached the house. Look at the innocent brick façade obscured by trees, the balding bushes leaning up against the front wall, the lack of Halloween decorations, the traces of a number once freshly painted onto the mailbox mounted next to the door. Don't get too comfortable: As I entered the house, I was only beginning a new phase of meandering. While Mela took out her key and unlocked the door, I had to wonder about her relationship with Shard. When she turned the doorknob and opened the door, a thread of smoke stunned me back to the old autumns

⁴ Pronounced: Vair-ter.

where meaning rustled in sidewalk crevices and between the delicate folds of receipts, where a pie tin clanging against the wall to scare the birds was a portent, where I had once opened my eyes under the bath water to find an intact maple leaf floating straight above my head like an island. But instead of diving back into these dreams, I thought of what Mela had said about leaves in the car. Mela's words ripped my maple leaf out of the stagnant bath water and into her narrative about deluge.

The Vestibule

The front door opened into a mirrored octagonal vestibule with shoes lined on two of its many sides. Mela immediately slid off her brown boots and sneered at some magenta moccasins embellished with glittery polka dots on the ground.

“Goddamn appropriation,” was all she said.

I simply thought that they were ugly. I couldn't stop watching the shoes refracting. One of the eight walls was covered with a photograph of a woman looking into a mirror. The woman looked at herself as if she was a painting. I had never seen this gaze in a mirror. Mirrors sent my mother into a mild terror: when faced with the evils of an unexpected reflective surface, her eyes began to dart and she would steal glances at herself out of the corner of her eye. She could not look full-on. I had the sense that she wanted to empty herself out. When we had returned from Amsterdam, she went on a liquid diet, citing the heaviness of *bier* and *stropwaffels*. Yet when we had returned, *I* felt unbearably light, like the title of a book that was always sitting on a coffee table in my parents' Dutch friends' apartment. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. I read it during one of their cocktail hours and it created the way I felt when I returned from abroad. In the airport on our way home, surrounded by so many people,

I had my first panic attack. A rush of anxiety flooded me because I thought I was disappearing, so empty did I feel. I wondered how my mom had turned emptiness into a fantasy while I was terrified. Of losing everything. Of hunger. Of disappearing. Of lacking all substance. Of losing the ability to tell stories.

Mela dug her hands in her pockets and watched me looking into the mirrors. She pulled on a pair of rust-colored work boots that nearly matched the ones she had removed. Some pale blue slippers embroidered with what looked like barbed wire enticed me, so I flashed through every possible objection: “Faux tough girl meets princess, celebration of late capitalist restraint, ugly...” The only alternatives were red Birkenstocks and a pair so girly that I hoped Mela caught my disgusted face in the mirrors as I inspected them. I put on the barbed wire slippers.

“Those are pretty tight,” she said.

Mela then explained that she had to check out the living room for the party and so we left the vestibule. I asked where the bathroom was and Mela pointed to one of the closed doors along the corridor. She then pointed towards a door at the end of the corridor, and told me to rejoin her there.

The Corridor

As I walked along the corridor, I could see that the entrance to each room was protected by a pair of large French doors. I couldn't help but wonder why each room was so cloistered.

A Bathroom

In the bathroom, every surface was covered with bits of glass. Some pieces had paint on them and some were tinted purple and magenta. I was afraid to sit down

on the toilet because the most jagged glass seemed to have been attached to the toilet seat, and so I squatted awkwardly over it. The glass was strong: I walked across it and it didn't shatter any further. Or conversely, the glass was so broken that it couldn't undergo any more ruptures. Would Shard be strong or broken? I didn't know. As I washed my hands at the sink, I noticed that one pane of the window was not covered in pieces of glass. I looked out and saw trees shaking and a red car driving down the street. I wanted to run outside and get away from all the breakage. It seemed as if the room was Shard incarnate. I ran my hands along all the surfaces of glass. Don't think they were presented mosaic style: these pieces did not fit together in any way. I wasn't even sure that all the pieces were made of glass. Propped against the window, I saw an index card and read:

Fake Glass

Using sugar, a fake sheet of glass similar to the type used for prop bottles in movies can be made. This is the sort of "glass" that is often seen breaking in cowboy film fight scenes. The finished product is translucent.

Some people would read the card and start licking the bottles in front of the garage and throwing them at each other. I took the recipe for cowboy film glass as a potential sign that Shard was only a broken piece of sugar from the set of a Western. Or a cinematic shadow who belonged with Polly in the Advertisement. Or a film director, in which case, the whole house could be nothing but a set. I glanced around the bathroom for hidden film equipment, for nothing could be worse than being even more closely investigated by another "healer." Then I heard,

Outside the Bathroom Window

“You are no longer in the doctor’s office, Eve. No one wants to see you simulating a Paranoid Person with ADD. Stop trying to run away.”

Without even looking, I knew that Werther was speaking to me again. I couldn’t believe it. The only pet I ever had was a hedgehog, Petunia, which my parents made me give away once they found out that hedgehogs were one of the stupidest creatures and had not evolved in thousands of years. Perhaps it was Petunia who taught me the value of a treacherous self-defense system. I would talk to her for hours and her only response was the bristling of spikes.

But this creature has some strange and wonderful power, I thought. As Werther first spoke to me from outside of the window, I was more amazed at his sense of authority than at his capacity for verbal communication. I called out the window to him,

“Ok, calm down. I’m not actually going to leave. I’ll probably make it at least until the party,” I told him.

“I don’t even care if you leave the house or not. I’m concerned with how you leave even when you’re here.”

“Huh?”

“I’ll say it again: ‘no one wants to see you simulating a Person with ADD. Also, stop trying to run away.’ You have no idea what is going on around you. If you did, you would notice Mela and you would notice all the rumbling forces of this house.”

I didn't know what to say about noticing Mela. I noticed her far too acutely. So I addressed the issue of my presence in a given space. I tried to tell Werther how I had trouble dealing with not only the space surrounding me, but with the accumulated minutiae of any setting.

"I don't know why this happened but in some vague adolescent era, amidst the yearning of all those books about prairies and tesseractes and the adventures of Girls in Historical Time Periods, especially *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle*, I started skipping over descriptions of the setting. This was not conscious. I just wanted to move so fast, that I couldn't deal with the way the hanging pots clinked in the galley or how the light hit the mast at high noon, especially just as Charlotte was becoming a member of the crew."

Leaning out the window, I could see Werther's head turned towards me as I spoke. He was standing between Shard's yard and the neighbor's yard, chewing on grass, as if the chewing were a response to all that I was saying.

"Maybe it became too traumatic to deal with the fact that there were all these concrete spaces that I could not inhabit. Maybe I was just a dumb kind of dreamer, an Emma Bovary who would have recoiled from the description of her own domicile, so rich and tedious, like a thick provincial porridge being stuffed into the reader's mouth. Both Emma and I would have wanted to choke. I decided that Flaubert hated her so much that he tortured her by stretching out the intimate details of the mundane when she just wanted to skip past the dull space of her house and burst into the lurid and exotic and brilliant."

Werther nodded and bent his head down into the lawn. I hoped Mela couldn't hear me addressing the llama.

“See Werther, there were whole sections that I didn't even read in that book because I didn't want to fall prey to Flaubert's descriptive violence. Like this part:

'The brick house-front was exactly flush with the street, or rather the road. Behind the door hung a coat with a short cape, a bridle, and a black leather cap; and on the floor in a corner lay a pair of gaiters still caked with mud. To the right was a parlor, which served as both dining and sitting room. A canary-yellow wallpaper, set off at the top by a border of pale flowers, rippled everywhere on its loose canvas lining; white calico curtains edged with red braid hung crosswise down the length of the windows; and on the narrow mantelpiece a clock ornamented with a head of Hippocrates stood proudly between two silver-plated candlesticks under oval glass domes. Across the hall was Charles's small consulting room, about eighteen feet wide, with a table, three straight chairs and an office armchair. There was a fir bookcase with six shelves, occupied almost exclusively by a set of the Dictionary of the Medical Sciences, its pages uncut but its binding battered by a long succession of owners...'

“You see, I skipped over the whole thing so I could race ahead to Emma's despair. Maybe I should have lingered in the descriptions; maybe they would have been an aesthetic buffer against the pain of someone who does not want to live in a particular universe.

“Anyway, Werther, let’s not get sentimental here. I am somewhat aware of my surroundings, but I don’t enjoy thinking about them. There are exceptions. In San Francisco, the hotel where I stayed had a tremendous Louis XV chair. This chair was of a provocative size: Not giant enough to dismiss as mere novelty, the seat came to my collarbone. (The seat actually came to my breasts, but if there’s anything I can’t bear to draw attention to, Werther, it’s my breasts). So basically I could jump into this throne and sit on the silk upholstery, observing how the fireplace cast amber-tinged shadows onto the floor below and how the deep brown walls with sepia photographs of animals made me feel as if I was resting in a hunting lounge as Queen Hunter and how the servers in the adjoining lounge did not dare approach my throne to ask if I wanted refreshment. In this chair, I didn’t think about the outside San Franciscan streets or the jungle or the subjects of the digital portraits in the lounge that winked and scowled and wiggled their noses.”

“What about your own despair, Eve?”

“I’m sure that’s a factor in all of this, Werther.”

I closed the window before the llama could respond. I took some deep breaths so that I could meet Mela again. I felt this sort of crumbling inside. Yes, a llama had punctured the outer shell of my emotive “fats” by forcing me to make excuses for my own discomfort, which was almost like narrating. I had no idea how much more llama drama would occur within and without the house before the night was over.

The Living Room

In the room at the end of the corridor, a mannequin stood where most residents of Oaken Manor constructed their entertainment centers. The mannequin

wore a tuxedo. The room was otherwise empty except for a feather boa, a low table set in the center of the room, some cardboard boxes and a shredded “Basic Instinct” movie poster. My anxiety grew. I had half-expected a deteriorating throne with Shard perched atop it, waving a red light-up sword. I stood in the doorway and looked into the emptiness of the room. Then Elizabeth came back to me. I had sent her so far away, the Elizabeth who got caught up in my dreams: a vague figure who was always pressing my head inside her thighs. I had never before allowed the pallor of her skin or the strangeness of watching her shaking to enter my waking hours. I couldn’t believe that my mind had let her appear in the middle of the afternoon. My advertisement in the waiting room had been a poor translation of my startling dream, a dream so potent that it had lived in the shadows of my mind.

As Mela inspected the room for some unnamed purpose, I heard footsteps. A person in a cape walked in and I should have expected Shard, but was too busy noticing my shoes on this person’s feet.

“Hey P what’s up,” Mela said, “We’re just prepping for tonight. Although all I really need is this hot tuxedo that Shard left for me.”

P looked at me with great skepticism and walked out of the room. The word “we” rippled in my chest; I wasn’t used to the pleasure of this word. For once, I was happy to be with someone in this linguistic category. I had fantasized about leaving the house because I felt so electrically uncomfortable around Mela, as if by tackling me in the office hallway she had gained privilege over my body. When she looked at me, I wanted to become whatever she sought. I was miserably elated by whatever had compelled her to intervene in my healing process and had no will to escape, even

though the reference to Shard was reason enough to. I had not wanted to hear it; I wanted to stop at the “we” and go off in all directions with the simple pronoun. I didn’t want to think about what Mela was prepping for: I didn’t want anyone to disrupt our nearly nonexistent rapport.⁵

Mela disappeared for a moment and came back with two folding chairs. She unfolded the chairs, pulled up the table, and lifted one of the cardboard boxes on top of it. In the brilliant mid-afternoon light, Mela reached into the box and pulled out a brown bottle of Maracaibo Especial. She did not use a bottle opener, but tilted the head against the edge of the table and hit the cap which came off in a pop. Mela handed the bottle to me and said that I should taste hints of cacao, cinnamon and orange peel, so I did. Fearing that Mela would start asking me more questions about myself, I asked her how she had met Shard. After taking a sip of the curious liquid, Mela started speaking of meeting Shard at Belon.⁶

Belon

Mela didn’t even like bars. I imagine this one was musty, like the brown cafes in Amsterdam. Except that it was a dyke bar. I didn’t know what that would look like. Mela wore a leather jacket and was tired of encountering what she called “femme-y girls who thought they were really badass because they prowled in dyke bars and could still be read on the street as sweet hetero peen suckers.” This embarrassed me. I often got off on this same sensation, but not as a “femme-y girl” who could

⁵ A magnetic mesmeric connection; a patient-healer relationship, and intercourse *en français*.

⁶ By far the most famous name in the oyster world. It designates European oysters which have been refined in the estuary of the Belon River in Southern Brittany. I’m assuming the bar was named this way because of the enduring metaphor of oyster as vagina, a metaphor (and bar name) I was not entirely thrilled with.

masquerade as a “hetero peen sucker.” “Hetero peen sucker” offended me. I was not that!

Mela’s story about meeting Shard flattened my mind. Whenever I thought about genitalia or people identifying based on their penchant for genitalia, a dumb stone block descended on my thinking. Mela explained how she sat alone at the bar sipping a whiskey, wearing a “neon hipster flannel shirt” and orange Pumas, avoiding the purportedly badass femme-ys.

“Less than a decade ago, Belon had chicks in leather, chicks who didn’t identify as chicks, chicks who would cut you if you touched them, chicks who wrote castration odes on the men’s bathroom stalls as they peed in them. Back in the day, Belon had sometimes attracted whiny Bikini Kill poseurs, ‘omigod life sucks because I’m a victim of the gender binary,’ but sometimes, Belon had been rocking.”

As Mela had sat bemoaning the “fucking gentrification of Planet Earth,” “this kid walked in with a baby ferret resting in a basket on top of hir head.”

Here Mela stopped for a moment.

“Wait, um. Do you know about gender neutral pronouns, Eve?”

No. And I wasn’t sure how much I believed in the possibility of escape out of a category that so often tormented me.

“So basically, you use ze instead of she or he; hir instead of hers or his. It’s a way of de-centering the gender binary, you know? Ah, I don’t want this to sound academic. Um, it’s like, a way of acknowledging the failure of gendered pronouns. The problem is, most people don’t really see that there’s any failure at all.”

I nodded and Mela continued,

“Anyway, so this kid didn’t identify as a chick. The kid was losing hir mind. The kid had a copy of an Acker book in hir bag and it was barely possible that ze was 21. Ze was Shard.”

The sound of “ze” distracted me from the entrance of Shard into Mela’s story; the “z” seemed sharp and forced. This pronoun would take a lot of effort. Now I can narrate Shard – and Werther, who preferred gender neutral pronouns – in this language, but as I moved throughout the house, I was uncomfortable with this new pronoun.

Mela paused. She didn’t seem to be talking to me anymore. I saw several sips go down her throat and then in a voice deep and soft, she continued,

“Even back then, when ze was so uncomfortable yet intriguing, you couldn’t resist hir. I did want to go home with hir but ze disappeared on me.”

I was relieved that Shard had disappeared from the bar, but why did Mela have to tell me that? I didn’t want to be her platonic confidante.

“I almost didn’t answer hir call three days later, but when I did, I could barely hear hir voice. Ze told me I had to come over, but only if I agreed to document what I saw. Then the voice cut out. In spite of myself, I drove to hir house. I rang the door bell and no one answered. I ran around the house trying the doors and finally decided to climb in through a back window that had been left open. As I climbed in, I could barely breathe. The stench was burnt and sickening. I found Shard lying on a couch.”

Again, Mela stopped. She looked down. She spoke to her lap.

“The upper part of hir chest was all bubbles of charred skin filled with liquid. Hir eyes were fluttering but ze didn’t seem to respond to me. I will never get over

how I wanted to run away from hir. Maybe if ze had been panicking, I would have wanted to stay and help, but hir empty eyes and the smell of burnt hair and the silence of the house made me want to run. Somehow, I called the ambulance and ze seemed relieved, although I was so pissed that ze hadn't called them before. While we were waiting, I tried to ask hir questions but ze refused. All ze wanted was for me to take hir picture. I refused. I could barely look at hir body. The top of hir shirt had burned off, and thick sloppy bubbles rose out of the skin. Bright patches of wet redness sprung out of the – wait I'm sorry. Why am I telling this to you? It's too nauseating. The ambulance took hir to the burn center. I had to follow in my car. When they asked where hir parents were, ze said they were dead. I was terrified that ze was so alone. Before I could even think about why ze had called me, of all people, I had already seen too much of hir pain to have a choice in the matter. I had never been in the position of taking care of anyone, but I could not leave hir or even think beyond the hospital walls.”

I didn't know what to do with the story Mela told. When Mela started talking, I had expected her to conjure some cool and cinematic passion that I could envy. But what she conjured was charred and wet and full of stagnant purple liquid dripping onto the threat that Shard might have no one else to document hir stifled whimpering when they ripped the skin off hir legs and stapled it on top of hir chest.

“But to get back to Belon for a moment. We can't even go there any more after Shard punched someone in the face who told hir that hir scars looked like ridges on the ocean floor. ‘Don't even try to aestheticize my pain,’ ze said. I wish I had documented that scene,” Mela mused.

The Living Room, Again

My chair faced the doorway, so I saw the figure enter. I saw deep-pocketed trousers that grazed the floor, layer upon layer of chains over a loose t-shirt, a top hat, a crow on an arm and a mouth screaming,

“My political consciousness is fried, I’m not exactly woman identified, I don’t give a shit, I just wanna get laid by curvy little hot and sexy eyeliner babes.”

Although this person sounded furious, her walk was calm. She didn’t even seem to look at us, but into the depths of the living room, as if there was another audience further back. I had the unsettling feeling that this figure was in complete control of the outburst and was surprised when I glanced over at Mela and found her clenching her teeth. I hadn’t expected Mela to fear anyone and I didn’t want this figure to have an effect on her.

“Shit Shard.”

Shard. I hadn’t expected my healer to come in the form of a stunning short almost-hipster who I couldn’t stop looking at. For a moment, Shard stopped singing and addressed me,

“Welcome to my menagerie. I see you met Mela. Beware. She likes rocking out with her fake cock to songs about Neanderthal Dykes.”

I felt my face blooming red after this remark. and I couldn’t tell if it was because of the mere force of Shard’s anger or the reference to Mela’s genitalia.

“Shard, you need to stay the fuck away from my computer,” Mela responded with vague uncertainty.

“Mela. I could fucking care less about your iTunes. And you know I would bone every member of Tribe 8. I only wanted to give this kid a lesson in Riot Grrrrrl nostalgia, Zarathustra knows what else you’ve teaching her. She was probably playing coed soccer at the time when Tribe 8 was blowing up. You played coed soccer in elementary school, right?” Shard asked, with snide emphasis on the “coed”.

“Yea,” was all I could say.

“Well I was actually just explaining about Belon,” Mela said.

“What’s that?”

I could see Mela flinch at Shard’s forgetting, but before Mela could answer, Shard started screaming,

“People hate me I make a lotta noise They’re kind scared cuz I don’t need boyz Whisker biscuit’s what I likes to lick I ain’t the kinda chick where they can stick their prick?”

As Shard sang, I couldn’t help but think ze performed this spectacle without a trace of the self-indulgence or melodrama that so often turned me off. Screaming these words that might have blasted in the Belon when Mela and Shard first met, ze drew me to hir. Maybe because ze could make a terrific scene, the prospect of which terrified me, unless of course the scene was cinematographic.

Then Shard stopped again.

“Girl, is this intriguing to you?”

Again I wanted to disappear. Or even reappear back in the doctor’s office before Mela had invaded it. At least in the office, I hated the doctor for the shame he made me feel; I didn’t want to become him. Well, years ago, I wished to have been

born as a slim professional man in a suit instead of a baby, naked and loaded with chunks of fat that would endure forever. No longer. Now I threw off the fantasy of skipping through the world with the lightness of a slim, suited man who was subject to neither scrutiny nor magnificent self-hatred. I knew I could never spectacularize myself as Shard could, but now I wanted to at least be able to respond to what upset me instead of stuffing all my reactions down underneath my emotive shell, which was already breaking.

“Whoa, who are you? Why don’t you tell me to fuck off? Why are you letting me say this?” Shard asked, then turned around and walked out in disgust.

I blushed and could not face the living room, so I stared off at the dirty floor, as if it were my audience. I wanted to tell Mela that I should have just stayed in the doctor’s office. I wanted her to know that Shard’s form of “treatment” was more dangerous than the doctor’s because it was wrapped in all these intrigues and calls and secret words that I wanted to understand. But Mela looked hurt. I hadn’t yet considered that things could hurt Mela. I couldn’t bear to say anything.

“Come on Eve, let’s get something to eat,” Mela said.

We walked out of the room and entered the first doorway on the right.

The Kitchen, or is it?

I didn’t understand the kitchen: it was as if the room happened to contain a stove and oven. A projector and screen dominated an entire wall, and probably supplanted the dishwasher.

“The only film we usually screen is ‘Babette’s Feast.’ You know it? No. It’s about this refugee who flees Paris to work as a cook among these old Puritan Danish

sisters in the 19th century. They know almost nothing about her. She wins the lottery and wants to cook the austere women a sumptuous meal. It's so great. Speaking of feasts, what do you want to eat? We're having a sort of banquet in a few hours, but we should have a snack," Mela said as I looked around the room in wonder.

I had never spent any time in my kitchen: it was my mom's domain. If I stepped in for a snack, my mom would tell me to watch her "steam vegetables." That was a euphemism for: you are fat and need to learn how to steam vegetables for when you are older and fatter and even more alone. When I was younger, she let me cook with her. I had to read through the recipes to understand my role and then dice and grate and measure and baste and sauté while standing on a chair. As an outsider, I would have thought that having two scientists as parents would have translated into some sort of egalitarian domestic system. No. My mom's domain was the kitchen and because she was a scientist, that made the kitchen even more treacherous. Measurements were exact, recipes followed the rigidity of lab reports (Introduction-Equipment-Procedure-Results), and sometimes Bunsen burners were called in for extra heating purposes. Needless to say, my mom left on her lab coat as she cooked. This sometimes made my dad uncomfortable, as he imagined that a great deal of hazardous chemicals might have accumulated on the lab coat and might slip into his food through vaporous contact. And then my mom would say,

"What do you want me to wear, a fucking apron? I'll make you a deal: you wear a fucking apron to work and I'll wear one in the kitchen."

I was always anticipating this day, just as I always anticipated the day in which my mother would poison us all with her lab coat.

But I was no longer in my mother's kitchen. Here I stood in Shards kitchen, where I found:

- a recipe for *Menestra* handwritten on a card bearing the insignia of a restaurant in northern Spain and taped to the side of a large clay bowl
- a number of retorts to menstruation jokes written on a can of artichoke hearts
- a giant neon mound on the floor, which turned out to be a painted sack of basmati rice when I opened it.

As Mela started pulling out ingredients from the refrigerator, I moved around the room and was intrigued by a row of wooden cabinets painted with the words “DON'T OPEN.” A list was taped to each cabinet. One such list read:

Don't do anything in the kitchen that your mother would have done. (If your mother washed the dishes after dinner, wait until the next morning. If your mother woke up early to make breakfast, don't try to reproduce that shit within our house. We would rather sleep another twenty minutes).
No aprons. Seriously.
No women, only whims.
No flesh of other creatures ALLOWED, including the flesh of those creatures who swim in the sea.
All people in the house must cook.
No jokes in the kitchen.
No fucking tupperware.

Within parts of this list, there was an odd tone of bureaucratic seriousness that I hadn't found anywhere else in the house, and that made me think of the house as a sort of restrictive hostel.

As I glanced at some maps on the wall, including one that was labeled “The Fictional Realm of Tlön,” whatever Mela was cooking started smelling of onions and cheese and butter. The silence was okay. I liked watching her. Her back turned at the stove, wearing the same loose grey sweater from the corridor and the baggy jeans and

the boots that weren't hers, Mela's appearance said to me, "I don't care. I'm just cooking because I'm hungry. I don't need to engage in a battle over domesticity. I obviously will never be domesticated." During the times when we weren't talking and when Shard wasn't around, Mela turned back into the force that had tackled me, that had called to me, that had possessed the silent angry strength of the arctic. Mela flipped two grilled sandwiches onto a plate and then we went into the room straight across the corridor.

The Dining Room

An index card labeled "Opulence" had been taped to a chandelier, yet it did nothing to diminish the opulence of the room we entered. Crystal finger bowls, decanters and candelabras sprawled out on every surface. The top half of a cabinet was stocked apothecary-style with vials of all sizes presiding over the top shelf and below that, a shelf of jars was filled with colored powders. The bottom half of the cabinet displayed glassware that I had seen before in many houses, along with empty space where the decanters and such had been removed. Tall windows might have led to the outside, but they were draped in heavy green fabric with a print that I thought Mela would label "fucking appropriation:" carefully orientalized cherry blossoms and Chinese dragons pranced about the curtains.

As I looked at this room of opulence, I couldn't help but wonder what my host thought of it. I was surprised that Shard had not smashed these fancy icons of wealth. Even smashing the icons would not explain either their presence in the house or their relation to the vials and jars. On a basic level, the vials and jars should not have been perched above the usual glassware and decanters. Later, I would discover that Shard

relished this confusion; ze did not like stratifying things. Ze took the opposite tactic of hosts who carefully orchestrate their fêtes and arrange name cards to avoid the unpleasant mixing of antipodal guests.

Mela pulled out an embroidered chair for me, set down one of the sandwiches and left the room with the other one in her hand. I tried not to think about her until she came back into the dining room. Mela returned, smiling. Apparently, we were supposed to go upstairs while Shard readied the downstairs. I hoped the smile had nothing to do with Shard.

The Staircase

Mela led me to a door that faced the bathroom. Mela opened the door, revealing a staircase. Interspersed on the wall were antiquated instruments of war: crossbows, breastplates, and shields, as well as homely objects of clay: pots, vases, urns and mugs. Mela moved quickly, two steps at a time, up the stairs, so I didn't have a chance to wonder at the wall adornments.

The Hallway

at the top of the stairs was narrow and defaced. On the walls, I could see cracked plaster around empty nail holes. I could see rectangular outlines where frames had worn into the green walls. At the end of the hallway, a window nearly obscured by a heavy curtain looked out into the street.

“Ok, this should make you feel better,” Mela said as we entered the second door on the right. She was wrong.

A Bedroom, Preserved

I didn't want to see the mural that wrapped around the four walls: painted flowers and birds and trees and streams glistening with the sparkle of a mundane utopia. I tried to keep my eyes on Mela, who was surveying the dusty room. I looked away from the stuffed animals on the bed, the nail polish on top of a white dressing table and the copy of *The Bell Jar* sitting on a low stool. My mind fled to film, to when the supposedly "radical" Isabelle reveals her frilly bedroom in "The Dreamers." Shard yelled for Mela to bring hir some candles from the closet and Mela left the room. A few moments later, I bolted out of the room that Shard must have curated, perversely dedicated to hir past self.

The Hallway

was full of empty walls. As I hurried out of Shard's old bedroom, I saw an open door down the hall.

A Closet, Ajar

It was the closet door that Mela had left ajar. The closet was full of disordered objects. On a middle shelf lay a row of cardboard tubes and a stack of spiral notebooks. Thinking that perhaps the notebooks contained all the secret mess that had been evacuated from the Preservation Site, I opened one with a green cover. And I looked straight into a photograph, straight into someone's body. When I saw the exposed reds and pinks beneath a glaze of wetness, I wanted to wrap gauze around and around this gaping wound. My body started to ache when I saw the curdled white discharge gathering around colonies of belligerent red dots. I had never seen a new burn before. The image made me want to wrap myself in a thousand sheets. I couldn't

stop thinking about what would happen if it started to rain on this raw surface that belonged so far beneath the skin. After the rest of my body could no longer endure how my eyes fed on the grotesque topography of Shard's exposed skin, I read the tiny notes Mela had left. I wanted Mela to react to the horror of the pain-scorched skin, but her comments were hardly more revealing than those the doctors must have recorded.

“Went down to whirlpool treatment: had to elevate Oxycodone dosage beyond recommended dose.”

“More lively, but can't remember what we talked about this morning.”

“Slept for almost two hours without using the med pump. Dr. Anton's concerns: infection on the shoulder burns. Grandparents came in today. Grandma wants to stay with hir?”

Later on, at the end of the month:

“Nurse: ‘Well honey, at least having kids will be a piece of cake after this.’

Shard: ‘Get the fuck out.’

I had to make up some bullshit excuse; at least this nurse used to be friendly to hir.”

I put back the first notebook because I was bored of Shard's wet skin and Mela's stubborn blankness. I reached for one of the tubes next to the notebooks. I opened it and tilted it until a rolled-up sheet of paper slid out. I held the sheet out in front of me and saw that it was a blueprint of the house. I didn't notice anything too exciting so I put it down on the floor and picked up another tube. When I tilted the tube, a rolled-up sheet, as well as a small note, poured out. The note read:

Tegan + Sara: Floorplan

*I want to draw you a floor plan/ Of my head and heart/ I want to give directions/ How
for this/ What you'll be looking for/ What you'll be looking for*

I had never heard of Tegan and Sara – and their song lyrics seemed quite sentimental for Shard – so I disregarded the note. I couldn't get rid of these twins for long. I would stumble upon them adorning some of Shard's invitations. Oh, the party: I hope you haven't forgotten about it, dear reader. There will be twins and deception and even things unmentionable.

I held out the blueprint, or, the “floorplan.” I noticed nothing too exciting, except that the corridor had been outlined in red pen. I checked the other blueprint that had already rolled back into a tubular form on the floor.

As I was trying to figure out what was so different between the prints, I heard someone open the door to the staircase. I rolled up the prints together, put them in the same tube, and thrust the tubes back in the closet. I grabbed for another spiral notebook, which I hid under my shirt. I was so afraid that Shard would find me prowling in his closet that I ducked into the first door I saw, which was perhaps the most dangerous thing I could have done.

A Bedroom, A Refuge, An Archipelago

The room was larger and darker than all the others I had entered. On the furthest windowsill, a row of candles cast irregular shadows on the walls. I wondered why someone who had been so burned would leave candles on a windowsill. I felt air that had just touched the trees outside and figured I might have come to a refuge, a space away from the tension that was growing in me. I could see the outlines of a

queen-sized bed that filled the room, a bed that Elizabeth could have slept in. As I put the notebook down upon the bed, I thought of my sleep at home the night before: hours so smooth and blank that my mind was softly annihilated. Elizabeth's virgin sleep had probably been even dumber and more perfumed than mine. I wanted to curl up on the bed and sleep, but not to draw emptiness around me as a cover. I wanted to hold on to the intrigue of the house and let it swim around in my head. I didn't want to see Shard, I wanted merely to feel his wrath, distant and disconnected from Mela and perhaps set out on a tray to be sampled in my dreams. I stepped forward towards the bed where I could dream of Shard's anger without having to deal with his presence. Suddenly, a voice wafted in from the open window.

“Don't think you can escape into Shard's pain; this house is not constructed for escaping.”

I recognized that the voice emanated from the wise mouth of Werther the llama.

Below,

Werther's head was pointed towards the sky. I could see a room jutting off of the house, a room I had not entered before. I could see Mela's car and all of the Heineken bottles. I shivered when I noticed the sky dimming, but then saw two pony-tailed women in jogging suits power-walking down the street. I wish I could say that I saw stuffed green lizard tails with orange splotches hanging out of the back of their designer jogging suits, but I didn't. I wish they had seen me with my face aglow at the window, but they were too busy staring and walking straight ahead.

“What Werther, is that what you want of me? To walk straight ahead in a designer jogging suit, to engage with the world by passing through it in a protective outfit?”

“Shut up Eve,” came from below.

“You shut up, Werther,” I retorted.

A Bedroom, A Refuge, An Archipelago, Again

I turned away and headed for the bed. I wanted to sink into it and diffuse. I realized that I had been walking around the house cloaking myself in the dumb equivalent of a jogging suit. Even worse, I was following Mela around, I was waiting for the house to expose itself to me, I was feeding off of Mela and Shard’s narrations, I was a parasite.

I had almost reached the bed when I stepped onto a thick sharp slab that had emerged in isolation from the archipelago of glass on the other side of the room. I stumbled backwards. I screamed. Mela ran in, dodging the glass on the ground. I was so relieved that she looked terrified; I had feared that she would scorn me for my ignorance, my inability move around in the house. She picked me up and carried me over the glass and down the hall.

The Hallway

My foot bled on the arm of Mela’s sweater as we walked to the room next to the preserved bedroom.

Another Bathroom

Mela spoke in soothing words, Mela went over to the bathtub, ostensibly to turn the water on and then muttered something under her breath. She reached into the

bath tub and started throwing jewels across the floor. Orgiastic jewels. Fake or real, she threw clumps of rubies, pendants, coils, diamonds, golden rings, sapphire nose studs, metallic teeth fillings. Watching her as my foot bled onto the floor, I thought the jewels had been stripped off of Elizabeth and had ended up here, in this bathroom that did have tile and a shower curtain and toilet paper, in spite of its excessive bathtub.

Once Mela had emptied the bathtub, I went over to it. She turned the bathwater on, soaked my shocked foot, and ripped the glass out of my foot with a tweezers. After she had pulled out the fragment, she still looked terrified. As I watched the bathwater turning red – not a cinematic red – I realized that something had happened that they were not expecting. I had been led about and instructed for so many hours that I had not realized I could make an impression on the house. As the red seeped out of my foot, I became angry at last. I wanted to tell Mela that I would rather remain uncured than be dragged about and yelled at by a llama. I didn't want to leave the house but I was done with being a parasite in it.

As Mela held the door open for me, I limped into the room straight across the hall.

The Study

at the end of the hall had a bed in it, which I found curious but didn't mind. And weapons, all sorts of aging weapons, and an antiquated globe on a carved wooden stand and a plush armchair. I lay down and pulled the blanket over my head. Mela turned the light and left the room, telling me to rest. I would "rest" all right: I would bury myself in blankets and figure out how to stop merely taking in everything

around me. I lay under the covers feeling my body and my tingling foot. Then I heard Shard's voice:

“There was a princess named Cisserl in the kingdom of Aggaethe who always grew ill when she had to stay indoors. The kingdom doctors tried to placate her body with all sorts of potions and concoctions and even spells so that she would be able to take pleasure in the luster of the palace rooms. Under the influence of potions and concoctions and even spells, Cisserl might have delighted in the jewels and the layers of heavy fabrics and the crests painted onto the chamber pot. But she said ‘fuck that shit’ and left to walk around outside.”

With my head still under the blanket, I listened to Shard.

“She would inspect the soldiers who stood on the castle walls. Their uniforms were always glistening and they were always waiting. The gates were so high that they could have protected the castle against a giant sea monster with tendrils of forty feet that the princess had read about. She walked around and thought about a tendril peeking over the castle walls. She tended to be overly conscious of her status, but one day the air was crisp and she felt as if she did not possess a royal body that was supposed to birth a creature of power. That day she encountered a guardsman and after some friendly exchange, he took her up the musty steps of a tower and to the top of the wall. He gave her a bow – a longbow not a fucking hair accessory –and although she was rather bored with the prospect of patrol, she enjoyed the weight of the bow in her hands. She took to pacing the castle walls, always with the expectation that she would spy a sea monster that had slithered out from untold depths and

crossed over onto land, heading straight towards the castle gates. And this is the very Medieval Longbow that Cisserl held in her bold arms.”

I wanted to feign sleep once ze had finished. I wondered if ze was holding up a longbow in the darkness. I didn't poke my head out from under the blankets. I lay in silence, hoping that ze might leave the room. But then I started wondering where the story had come from – the person who had nailed the weapons to the staircase? *A Book of Imaginary Fairy Tales*? A medieval parchment that had been found centuries after a sea monster had devastated the kingdom? I almost summoned the courage to ask. I figured I might actually like Shard, if ze was able to tell a story as an apology. But Shard went on,

“I saw that you took out one of Mela's notebooks. That's all about boundaries and weapons and border wars. ”

Ze waited for my response, which I certainly wasn't going to give. Once again, I was failing. Even Cisserl could say “fuck that shit” and walk outside; a medieval princess was more of a character in her own narrative.

“Eve, are you sleeping? Oh well. I'm not mad about the notebook or anything. There are many things to find in this house.”

Another long pause.

“Anyway, I used to pretend that this was a den of revised war stories. You know, I would hang out in here everyday after elementary school and my dad would tell me all these tales adapted to make me not feel like shit about the past. One day when I was home from college, I came in and tried to tell him all about Deleuze's War Machine. You would think a medieval weapons historian would be delighted

with Deleuze's vision of the war machine as a metallurgic flow of matter, as a mobile force, not of destruction, but of subversion... Well, my dad kicked me out. I think he was afraid I would ruin his inner sanctum, which I would have liked to."

Shard sounded so sad. I wanted to console him, but I didn't know how.

"Oh well. It's mine now. Goodnight."

I grew anxious at that word. I didn't want Mela and Shard to leave me alone in the study at nightfall. A few minutes after Shard left, I heard laughter coming from downstairs. I could not bear to think that Shard had made a joke about me and that Mela had laughed. I squirmed around under the light blanket and then decided that I had to go to them. I could not hide among the weaponry.

First, I went limping back into the bedroom, and yelled out the window,

"No Werther, I'm not escaping into Shard's pain. I'm using it to see how to emerge. I'm using it to wonder what sort of trauma it will take for me to open up to someone, for me to shed a thousand sheets."

"Good," was the only response from below.

I wanted to blow out the candles, lest they start a fire, but I refrained, thinking that a fire might be what I needed.

The Hallway

I walked towards the middle of the hallway and stepped onto the top stair. Hearing the voices of Shard and Mela, all my imagined defiance against the house disappeared.

The Staircase

On the staircase, I paused to listen to them. They weren't laughing anymore. Shard was muttering that the lentils were undercooked. Mela mumbled a response. I felt that by standing on the staircase, I was a weak, creeping vermin. I wanted to get back the feeling I had when I thought of Mr. Archel sighing "yessss." At least Shard was illegible to me; at least ze wouldn't send me to a doctor. I recoiled. Maybe I would remain a specimen for Mela and Shard to interrogate, to study and to diagnose as "not radical, not willing to continue" when I wanted to say "yes, I can be, I will... if only you would ask me." I'm sure Shard would have mounted a horse and taken off to find a Mongolian tribe before ze would have thought that mocking a homework assignment was subversive. I heard one of them push back a chair and decided that I should face the lone dining room occupant. I tiptoed down the hallway and took a right.

The Dining Room, Again

I peered in from the doorway and saw Mela sitting alone at the table that was now set and glimmering with lit candelabras. She had an elbow propped on the table. Wearing the same loose sweater in which I had first seen her breasts carve tiny mounds, the loose same sweater that my blood had dripped on, she did not belong in the garish room. I pulled back an embroidered chair. I sat down across from Mela and she grinned at me.

"Welcome back," she said.

"I was afraid you wanted to desert me in the study," I responded with a nervous laugh.

“Well we didn’t want you to sustain any more injuries.”

“Well I felt like a kid who had been sent upstairs to bed during a party or something.”

Mela looked at me for a while after I said this.

She then yelled, “Shaaard. Get that absurd book you’ve been reading to me from, will you?” and then, after Shard had responded, Mela said, “Sorry Eve. So welcome back to the living. I hope your foot has survived this house. Shit, I can barely survive this house. We’re trying to set up for tonight. I’m going to go check on these lentils that are apparently undercooked.”

Mela left and I looked more closely around the dining room where everything glistened. Even the tablecloth was sewn with thread that shone in the light of the Opulent chandelier. As I glanced around at the unsettling resplendence, Shard walked in with a stout black book. When ze saw me, ze dropped down on the plush green carpet and crawled over to my foot. Under the tablecloth, ze stroked my injury. When Mela returned, Shard still had my foot in hir lap under the table. Mela seated herself across from me, flinched, stuck her head under the table, and then grinned as she lifted her head. Shard emerged, pulled up a chair, sat down, picked up the black volume from the table and started reading. I was entranced. Long, winding sentences poured into the room. I sank down into a world that seemed cast in an opulent fervor. The sentences seemed to move on their own and the nouns lost their contours.

“That detested staircase which I had always entered with such gloom exhaled an odor of varnish that had in some sense absorbed, fixated, the particular sort of sorrow I felt every evening and made it perhaps even crueller to my sensibility

because, when it took that olfactory form, my intelligence could no longer share in it...”

The narrator knew how a house could usurp one’s sorrow. The narrator knew how to lie in a bed, longing for someone who was luxuriating in an opulent dining room replete with finger bowls. I was caught up in the oddness of listening to something that was so related to what was happening to me. I had always read to get someplace where I could think more brilliantly, but there were finger bowls in the black volume and there were finger bowls right before me. And for once, I felt I was converging with a narrator that was not myself.

Mela poured some wine into a crystal glass, and I felt better: no one would have allowed the anxious child to come downstairs to the dining room and drink wine.

Once the narrator found that he was *“no longer separated from her; the barriers were down, an exquisite thread joined us. And that was not all: Mama would probably come,”* Shard stopped and Mela looked upset.

“So Eve, what do you think about elitism?” Mela asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, the high style of Proust, the way Shard thinks it’s glamorous to emulate it in this dining room.”

Shard got up and left the room. I was caught up in some fight between Shard and Mela – I enjoyed it. So great was my delight that I lost my reserve for a moment and decided to tell Mela of my cinematic creation in the waiting room.

“Well, this isn’t a direct answer to your question, but back in the doctor’s office, I thought of this film I would like to make. It starts out with an opulent set that gets stripped, leaving only a queen dressed in a body suit that doesn’t match the pallor of her skin. I was thinking that the opulence was only a way of meandering around the vitality of the queen. Once the room is stripped, the queen’s power is unleashed. She charges a gamine with a mission to either find a bird or die. The gamine finds it impossible to stop meandering.”

“Hm. Forget the opulence part for a moment. What’s so wrong with the meandering,” Mela asked.

“Well, for instance, you asked me about the opulence of high style and I ended up talking about a film I wanted to create. Or I try to think about the opulence of the room and I end up speculating on why that little jar of indigo powder in the cabinet, which is not opulent and which might belong in an apothecary, is in this room. I feel like I never get anywhere.”

“Oh, but that’s it, don’t you see! That indigo jar contains everything about this room and its opulence, Eve.”

Mela jumped up and headed towards the cabinet. She took down a jar and handed it to me.

Inside the Jar of Indigo Powder

~Treatise~

- 1.) No one can be annoying.
To be annoying is to be pretentious. If three of us vote that you are speaking in an annoying (pretentious) manner, you will be asked to silence yourself for the next meeting.
- 2.) There will be snacks. And beer.
- 3.) This is not Oprah's Book Club.
- 4.) The reading list is very simple.
Each week, the person designated to bring snacks will pick the book. The book can be happy or sad, although preferably not neo-con. Preferably life-world enacting. Preferably widens the imagination. Preferably doesn't suck.
- 5.) Each book read must instigate action. Action: not stagnation.
- 6.) The meetings will always take place in the Opulent room with the indigo jar at Shard's house. This is non-negotiable.
- 7.) If you are a cultural studies/philosophy/English major or just really like sucking the dick of Derrida, Foucault, Zizek, etc., please refer to number 1. Butler does not apply to number 1. Kristeva is not to be mentioned (please refer to number 10).
- 8.) Pets allowed. Werther will sometimes join us with a special reading of hir favorite book, *The Open: Man and Animal*.
- 9.) This is a WILD CARD rule. Make up your own shit and enforce it at will.
- 10.) If you somehow ended up here by accident but have nothing in common with our so-called radical ways, please stay. Don't expect anyone to listen to you, but do feel free to eat some snacks. For a list of Unmentionable Books That We Do Not Want To Have To Deal With, see Shard in the Library at 11 pm after our meetings.

Dining Room, Again

Before I had time to figure out how the tract explained the room, Shard returned with a dark purplish portfolio and took hir seat. Ze glanced at the tract, smiled, and poured a glass of wine. I felt a warm rush, as if it was somehow

becoming possible that the two of them might say “yessss” in response to all my thoughts that had remained so unintelligible. As I peered at Shard, who still wore a top hat but had changed into a silk vest and bright green pants, I couldn’t help but marvel at all the space in hir mind, space that held Neanderthal Dykes which ze had screamed about earlier and this refined Proust character and hir own style of glass weaponry. I wondered how ze dealt with the space without collapsing or being overwhelmed with the perverse delight of traversing so many disparate realms, or relinquishing any semblance of a self and then disintegrating. As if to prevent further wonderings, ze reached into the portfolio, picked out an envelope and set it down in front me. Then ze left the room again, but not before spreading out the contents of the portfolio in piles all over the table and handing Mela a red folder.

Inside the Envelope

Eve,

*This is not an INVITATION. You are already HERE.
And the party has already begun, in a sense.*

So, here are your instructions for the evening:

*Come as you are. Take your place in the VIP LOUNGE – Basement by 11pm.
To get there, go into the kitchen, open the door next to the refrigerator, and descend down the stairs.*

*Be prepared, but do not bother trying to prepare for the fête that is fast upon us.
Stay away from Mela: she has too much to do tonight to guide you any longer.
At 2 am, check on Werther (ze seems to have taken to you) and make sure ze isn’t making out with any guests.*

*Also, there are many factions attending, which may cause tension. Tension is good.
Beware of the people who speak of a “mystery” – there is no such thing; I am only trying to keep them wandering aimlessly around the house.*

S.

Reading the typed non-vitation, all the humidity that Proust had put into the air went dry. I had been “non-vited” to follow a list of prohibitions that did not suit me. My non-vitation alluded to intrigues and false mysteries, yet had been written in a tone that brought me no exaltation. Of course, I was proud of my status as higher-than-mere-guest, but this meant I was locked out of the pleasures of the party. I didn’t get to believe that there was a real mystery. I didn’t even get to wear a “costume.” Maybe Shard had taken me for someone more mature than I was. Or for a simple pawn in hir vast plot of a party, so happy to be included in such a “fête” that she would do anything to help it function. Was I simply the Weird Outsider Girl-Patient-Pawn to hir? I wondered if Mela’s folder contained a non-vitation. Mela was deeply engrossed in the dull red folder so I couldn’t complain about my non-vitation.

So distraught was I by all of the possible ways Shard could have misread me that I decided to disregard hir instructions. I would go into Shard’s own closet, I would solve my own mystery, hell, I would get a sailor’s pin-up girl tattoo à la Amy Winehouse if I had to, but I would not strive to maintain the status quo at a party given by the potential partner of someone who had tackled me in a psychiatrist’s office hours before.

Ready to charge forth in defiance, I stood up from my chair, causing Mela to raise her eyes. But then I saw the spread of invitations; those flimsy sheets of paper promised me so many different parties. Anticipation bit me with heated teeth. Ever since the car ride, I had known that there was to be a party, but the implications – other people would enter the house! – did not seem possible. Before I saw the invitations, I had felt as if Shard, Mela and I would be stuck in a rarefied stasis

forever. Not a love triangle: That would be too rudimentary a shape. Instead, our stasis was that of dumb objects rocking back and forth but never quite reaching each other, effective only in our failure to never touch.

The Invitations

Seeing the invitations all together was a party in itself. Only Shard and perhaps a few others like myself would ever witness a sprawling sample of all the multifarious and perhaps conflicting ways for the party to unfold. A note on top of one pile read: “Elemental Twin invitations: 1 queer icon. 1 room. 1 map. 1 sea creature. 1 severed twin image. Per twin.” I flipped through the sheets and saw that each pair of twin invitations would fit together if you aligned the “severed twin images.” I had no idea who most of the queer icons were, but a few of them were labeled. When I paired some of the labeled twin invitations together, I saw that the queer twin icons were: Mildred/Dred Gerestant. John Cameron Mitchell/Le Tigre. Hepburn/Troyano. Tegan/Sara. I told you I couldn’t escape from Tegan and Sara, who were apparently twins by birth.

Another pile consisted of tattoos – a crown, song lyrics about shattering, a mongoose – that the guests were ordered to inscribe on their bodies. Another pile was labeled “DisId(entit)apartY” and one invitation within it had a particularly stunning picture of a blond “slutty pirate” with the caption “10/12, 11pm, Shard’s house” written in her crotch area. One invitation in the pile labeled “Random” described the dress code as “Apocalyptic Country Club Casual” and the place as “Empire of the Senseless.”

Looking at the contents of Shard's portfolio, I saw how slippery the night might become.

Of course, I preferred playing around with the invitations' outcomes to considering more terrifying outcomes: what if I had to leave the house alone the next morning; exiled and carrying around a night that was only archived in the form of a hangover and a non-invitation? I would get a phone call from the receptionist, I would go back down the hall and nothing would happen except that I would actually reach the doctor's office as I moved forward. The office would be the same, but what about me? I couldn't help but think in melodramas. What would happen to all that they had ripped open in me? I might never close.

My melodramatic fears annoyed me and I didn't want to recognize myself as their protagonist. Of course, if I had to leave the house the next day, it would be my own pathetic fault. But I could no longer put on any spectacles and I didn't think I'd ever walk down the office hallway again. Quite simply, the doctor was no longer a factor in my wellness, and if I made a dismal exit from the house, dripping entrails seemed healthier than keeping them dressed up in spectacle casings.

I wanted to pick up the Tegan invitation from the Elemental Twinvitation pile, but I couldn't because Mela was watching me. She stood up.

"Come on, we have to get out of here before Shard starts preparing the rooms."

I followed Mela out to the corridor and towards the front door. I thought Mela was about to leave the house when she turned right and faced a doorway next to the vestibule. As she opened the door with her left hand, she brushed my shoulder with

her right one. I might never forgive myself for having flinched. “I’m not an alien, I’m just not used to ‘we,’” I wanted to say but didn’t.

We entered the new room and all around, I saw the worn bellies of books. How curious it was to find books with their yellowy softness exposed and their hard spines facing away.

The Library

“Shard won’t bother us in here,” Mela said, “It’s the only room out of commission for tonight.”

“Don’t you have to get dressed?” I asked Mela.

“Don’t you,” she responded, taking a seat behind a large desk.

I stayed standing so I could look around the vast room and its shelves.

“No, I received some ‘instructions’ saying that I could come as I am, unless you wanted to lend me some clothes.”

“Maybe we like you just the way you are.”

“Yeah right.”

“I’ll lend you some threads.”

“I knew I wasn’t cool enough for this party.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it. Shard is overdoing the whole thing. Not that I blame hir. It’s the first party since...” Mela trailed off and I let her.

I was never one to probe for awkward information; it always seemed to present itself to me without any prompting on my part. Mela didn’t continue, though. I watched her. She looked so different from when I had seen hir on the floor of the office. Then, she seemed like a blazing archetype of something that I could not turn

away from. Now, even though I had seen her pudge and the way she flinched, I wanted to go toward her. She had a stoic grace, a style that looked deceptively nonchalant but was actually well-suited for a gentleman-esque person, a searing look of angst and its containment, a blunt yet somehow tender way of impressing herself upon the world.

Later, I would learn the vocabulary for some of this, but it didn't help knowing that she was considered a "soft butch" by random voyeurs any more than learning the latin name for a teddy bear cholla cactus (*Cylindropuntia bigelovii*) helped me rip its jumping barbed spines out of my leg. This general category did little to explain the force she exerted on me, a force that was amplified as she sat behind the desk and looked up at me. Watching Mela look at me, I fancied that even the smallest of reversals had occurred. I didn't dare to hope that when Mela looked at me, she ached. Or that I exerted any sort of hold on her. I only hoped that I had some sort of lasting effect upon her, even if it was only the blood left on her sweater. I thought about how I could tackle her during the party and I tried not to smile.

As I watched her seated behind the desk, scratching below her eye, I thought of the doctor sitting behind his desk, wiping off his lenses, glasses necklace shimmering. Although he repulsed me and she did not. Mela got up and motioned for me to sit down in the chair behind the desk. She pulled out a few books, revealing a hidden closet. I watched her remove a key from her pocket and open the small wooden door. She pulled out a bottle that I presumed to be Scotch. She poured two tumblers of the liquid and as she walked back to the desk in her baggy jeans and sweater, I laughed aloud at this mockery of a gentleman's club.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, just that we seem to be reenacting a 19th century gentleman’s club.”

I wondered what had happened to Mela’s sensibilities in the opulent room, or what sort of sensibilities could decry crystal yet embrace leather and the smell of expensive cigars.

“Of course, but with the necessary revisions. No gentlemen.”

She said the word “gentlemen” with a knowing smile. I did not want to know what she meant. I took a deep drink.

“You’re making this rather hard,” she said.

“I’m making what hard?” I took another sip.

“I just can’t really read you. I’m starting to feel like I made a mistake in bringing you here, because I just don’t know what you think about anything. I can guess, I can make conjectures, but at some point, you’re just going to have to be explicit.”

I was about to start stumbling through my self-defensive excuses “Give me a break, I just got here ...well sorry I’m not as explicit as Shard in my self-presentations...maybe you should have asked me how explicit I could be before you tackled me in an office hallway...” but they seemed like weak evasions. I did want Mela to know that she had made a nearly fatal error: if there was ever a time when I didn’t feel like being explicit, it was right after someone paternalistically scolded me for not being forthcoming. It was stupid on such a basic level.

“Obviously making me even more self-conscious about my self-censorship is a sure way to bring on all my inner secrets.”

Mela laughed. And said,

“Fine. I’ll be explicit then. Are you queer? Or do you just find us an amusing diversion?”

If there had been anywhere to flee, I would have left. Waves of despair and Scotch started crashing in my stomach. All I wanted to do was say yes, yes, yes, of course I am. But I didn’t know the answer to Mela’s question. If I said no, I was afraid I would be ejected back into the empty buzz of my solitary mind. But at the same time, the question poured a sinister glaze all over Mela. Was this an elaborate plan of seduction and if so, why did it take such a strange form? Did she tackle people as a form of foreplay? Was she trying to reduce the wonder of this afternoon into a question of desires? Shit, once I asked myself this, I realized that all the wonder of the afternoon *could* be reduced to a question of desire. And an unbearable shaking in my stomach. I had told myself that what I wanted was illegibility: the ability to leap around without letting a doctor, an assailant, anyone, know what to make of me. But that was just an evasive myth, another Polly scene. I should have explained that I was too dysfunctional to identify with such a broad category of desire. “Queer” seemed too cool to encapsulate my relation to Mela or Molena, my disregard for genitalia, the heaviness of desire, my terrified respect for Shard or why I had stayed in the house without escaping.

“I still don’t know what you want me to say. I’m not really familiar with a lot of this. I mean, do I enjoy sleeping with people who identify as ‘men’? No. Do I envision a whole lot of alternatives? No. But this is in no way revolutionary. I mean...”

I didn't know why I was distancing myself from her when all I wanted was to get closer. She tried to save me one more time,

“Ok. I'm still not really phrasing this in the best way. I mean, regardless of who you sleep with, do you feel any solidarity with what is going on in this house? Because I have a feeling that even if you ended up in the house of a right wing stoner jam band quartet, you would conduct yourself with the same stoic nonchalance. And you wouldn't leave until someone kicked you out.”

“Yes, I do. I mean yes, I would probably sit through a right wing stoner jam band concert, but I wouldn't have any attachment to them.”

I couldn't believe I told Mela I was 'attached' to the house.

“Okay. I suppose that's about as explicit as I can hope for, coming from you,” Mela said.

“Okay,” I responded, feeling depressed that she thought I was hopeless.

I mean, if this were a film, she would have started making out with me or something. But she rested her cheek on her hand and stared at the bookshelf.

We kept drinking, but the Scotch did not ease the heaviness. In a pile on the desk sat *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. Why, you might ask, does this book end up scattered about the world? Maybe because the novel is so unbearably light that the wind endlessly picks it up and deposits it in new places. I wanted to tell Kundera, and Mela, that a promiscuous, self-assured, proudly “male” doctor might find sex unbearably light, but fear nearly pressed me into the ground. I didn't want to feel so stiff and terrified but the sex I had performed in actual time and space seemed like lockdown, an act in which I had been compelled to enact a most rigid routine to

achieve particular results. In the prescribed high school hook up culture, I knew I would always fail to perform with manufactured ease. One could not deviate from motions and thoughts that were designed to increase sensuality, and thus one was confined to a rather small number of maneuvers. And coming from someone who could get turned on at all the wrong times, I was afraid that I couldn't function in accordance with the basic principle of sexual etiquette: being engaged simultaneously with a partner. I could hold on to desire in a disembodied form, but once it was supposed to crystallize around people such as Andrew Molena, I lost it.

In the house, I found tufts of desire, disembodied and otherwise, all over the place. I could no longer rely on my disdain for the rigidity of high school hook-up procedures, but the prospect of whatever types of queer sex were performed in Shard's house terrified me more than trying to feel something in such proximity to someone who had a penis inside of me. I did want to believe that all of a sudden, I could abandon my disastrous sexual history, but my belief in rapid transformations had always been a problem. I had always looked to sudden shifts as my salvation, but hoping for jerks of change only left me floundering in despair. Seated across from Mela, the flow of words Shard had read came back to me. In those words, time had spread out, had curled around me, had unraveled itself in a way that was anything but tedious to hear. How had the writer, the narrator even, ever given himself the license to luxuriate in the spreading out of so many intimate complexities?

After an undetermined amount of time, undetermined because I was lost in all of the possibilities that had just violently stomped into my head, Mela brightened up.

“I’m going to go change. Are you okay with staying in here? I’ll bring you some of my clothes if you want, although you’re smaller than me. I see the way you are eyeing those books. Take a look at this, here is some real reading material for a ‘gentleman’s club.’”

Mela handed me a small book, then turned around and walked out of the study. For once, I didn’t want to mope around with books, I only wanted to savor the texture that Proust had put into my mind. I wanted to go out into the dining room, pilfer an invitation and conduct myself according to its demands. I ended up looking at the book only because it was small and serious and its grayish blue unmarked cover seemed to offer all the wet wistful calmness of an afternoon deluged in salt spray.

“The Pyre”

The lover of this story put on a green coat every afternoon at four pm and then left the house to walk among the leaves. The lover of this story told me dreams of disappearing into nothing. The lover of this story did not eat cereal in the morning because the sheer amount of granules was too overwhelming. The order of this list is already off – it should have gone cereal then coat then dreams. Or maybe dreams then cereal then coat. Oh well, I do remember that in the middle of one night, the lover of this story put on the green coat and went to walk among the leaves. Coat then dreams, then cereal. But that night was peculiar and terrible: I met the sickly light of five am alone under the sheets. The lover of this story would not want me to mention what was occurring outside among the leaves in the sickly light of five am, although the green coat carried traces of muted debauchery. The lover of this story would want me to mention the time when we climbed the ladder of my parents’ apartment

building, far above the scene of my mother cleaning up the remnants of a dinner turned dangerous. Dinner Turned Dangerous. It could be the title of a late night Lifetime Original Movie, which would be a Safe Topic of Conversation in my family.

Dinner Turned Dangerous: A restaurant owner and his wife invite a charming young employee into their house for dinner, only to discover that her diabolical identical twin has come instead, with dinner plans of her own.

I would watch the film for one scene: the diabolical twin lets drops of red wine pour out of the corner of her lip and grins as they hit the surface of the white table cloth, forming a calculated wound. The owner's eyes of misrecognition: this person is not the Samantha who waits at the hostess stand, her body the soft entry point; and yet, this is Samantha.

This movie is probably no longer in the Lifetime genre, it would need an abortion or a suicide or a rape or a long lost child and the diabolical twin needs none of these. Regardless, our dinner did not start out as dangerous. In fact, we spoke of the Apple iPhone. The iPhone fell under one of the few Safe Topics of Conversation categories:

- 1. Technology: new makes and models, reasons why we should just go back to using the telephone – as if it were a self-evident and natural implement –but above all, technological problems. Crashing ipods, how the wireless malfunctions in the apartment, the inexplicable forces behind the GPS system landing my parents on a shooting range instead of a Target store during their vacation in the South.*

2. *Television shows: Desperate Housewives, Grey's Anatomy, Curb Your Enthusiasm, – any show that dramatizes or at least ridicules the banal: domesticity, bodies, life.*
3. *Other people: but not controversial or weighty issues relating to them. For instance, dissecting divorce proceedings and settlement agreements is Safe. Mentioning that the wife's lover was a 220 lb., large-breasted, Rainbow Valley cheese merchant from the farmer's market is not.*

Just as my father was ruminating over the iPhone stock features, my mother, obviously bored, veered the conversation towards Other People, remarking,

“That's enough, Henri. These kids are too poor to even care about the Stock feature. Anyway, I heard that Margaret and Jonathan have decided not to have children. What do you two think about that?”

The Library, Again

At this point, I wanted to stop reading. I was not one for sharp sentences and lists and whining about the dysfunctional nature of families. I thought the gray cover would have contained thick wet slabs of emotion. I thought Mela might have slipped me some more Proust, which she secretly craved even though the writing contradicted her anticapitalist leanings – and general dislike of excess and sentiment. I only kept reading because the slim volume caused me to question Mela's judgment in writing, among other things. I figured that if the whole story was an empty mess, I could dismiss the pain that our conversation had caused me. I knew it would not be simple to lose esteem for Mela, but the gray volume was leading me there.

“The Pyre,” Again

Before I knew it, we were out of the Safe realm. I wanted to burrow in the green coat which had been carefully locked in the front closet. Yes, I’m a coward or rather, I knew they would never understand that all those nights of jumping about to Cansei de Ser Sexy and the lowering lines of wine in the glasses and the lover of this story’s hand behind my head so it wouldn’t hit the wall too hard and the sliver of glass going into my knee when we fell on the floor were not meant to reproduce anything. If anything, I needed those nights for their breakage, for their promise that I would not follow the angry pattern that placed us all around the table at a dinner turning dangerous.

Neither the lover nor I could properly verbalize our discomfort with her question. Neither my father nor my mother had any idea of what we were saying.

“Well, I hate to say this but eventually, your lives will probably be barren enough that you’ll change your minds,” my father surmised, not without sadness. Somehow, we made it through the meal and once we heard my mother turn on the faucet to start the dishes, the lover of this story grabbed my hand and we hurtled up to the rooftop.

From the rooftop, we could see the usual lights, usual poor reproductions of the sky once star-filled, and we could also see a fire one block over. At first, the fire made me think about how I left my cigarettes down in my parents’ apartment. I wondered how much the lover of this story would hate me if I went back to get them. The lover of this story claimed that I used cigarettes as a distancing tool: that letting my eyes go cold and pensive, I forged aloofness. I would rather not discuss the verity

of this assertion, but as my language just grew cold and distant, it's probably true. I did not go downstairs to get my cigarettes because our eyes fell into the flames and couldn't move. I had always been wary of stock love metaphors: love as fire, flowers, symphonies, storms, ships, daggers, drugs, etc.

Once, in the middle of the Sinai desert, I went to see the "Burning Bush" and all that marked its presence was a fire extinguisher, a limp ancestor-shrub that was not on fire and a tapestry of a flame formed as if with a godly stencil. I thought that these love metaphors had taken the same route as the once-smoldering, myth-inspiring plant and had burned out, leaving behind dumb vestiges of a flame, as could be found in any cheapass coloring book. This fire, however, violated the careful uniformity of a coloring book flame. Instead of flames in the form of curved pincers, this fire grew in the form of the blowing wind that it sucked up. As I saw the fire filling the outline of motion, I almost believed in the stock metaphors of Rumi: "My heart is burning with love/ All can see this flame/ My heart is pulsing with passion /like waves on an ocean." I saw that in a bathroom stall somewhere and although it disgusted me, I did yearn for its simplicity.

For a few moments, we could hear the fire move through glass that had been held in by window panes without the interruption of fire engines. Then I heard the lover of the story tell me that we would never need children to keep our lives from becoming barren. I already knew this, but I needed to hear it anyway. To keep our lives from becoming barren, we already had

- *moves glowing perverse in the dark*
- *the lover reading (choking, moaning) of how the world must be turned over*

- *shrugged off the terrified forms imposed in the streets*
- *fights over how much aesthetics should matter. I lived for weeks cloaked in an orange velvet curtain with jewels glued all over my body which glinted in the dark – there were no perverse moves during that time*
- *a rat that came and went and which we did not try to domesticate although this creature preferred to drink water out of a crystal bowl that my mother had given us*
- *escape routes. I could leave for days and hide in the island and the lover of this story had so many friends to turn to who were hidden in holes, corners, flower pots*
- *enough ex-lovers to banish from our dreams*
- *all of our forgotten projects – that fashion show which got you fired (passing a wide-brimmed burgundy hat draped in pearls and fake hair around the elevator for a whole business day, so licentious), those photocopies on the café bathroom wall doors (that induced diarrhea in the privileged and barely conscious), that time the lover of this story wouldn't let go of a green balloon and carried it into some Museum of Modern Art (not even a project, just one of those moments when people look at each other, one of those moments of rupture that foreclose barrenness)*
- *a stack of letters from the floor to the ceiling which could dispel doubts of fidelity, explain the planetary shifts, and catalog the upper lip hairs of a goddess.*

I could see all of this as I looked into the flame. The lover of this story trembled next to me and we stood together in an awe that would never again exist.

If only I had known that the awe could never again exist, I would not have tried to recall it by lighting a piece of paper on fire. I was sitting alone in the kitchen at 4:05 pm one afternoon. I figured that the lover of this story was out walking among the leaves, wearing the green coat. I felt alone and the novel I was reading wasn't helping: all the words conjured up nothing but ashes and coloring-book forms. (I don't claim that these words are doing much better – but I don't really care, as you will soon discover). Sitting at the table with my novel and its word-illustrations, I remembered standing on the rooftop with the flames had looked like anything but curved pincers. Because of the lover of this story's absence, I was smoking a cigarette, and my eyes were probably cold and pensive. At first I flicked the lighter a few times, but the flame was too regular. I turned on the ceiling fan and tore a page out of the novel. I pressed the well-formed flame onto the page. I watched until I couldn't bear it anymore. I had to leave the room for a moment; awe was nowhere to be found. And when I came back...

Instead of describing the way the flames started emptying the room, I'll tell you something and you might think that it's a diversion and maybe you're right. When I was filling out the paperwork I came to one of those boxes that desire a mark. And at first I didn't check it because it was as despicable and irrelevant as usual. But when they started harassing me, all I could say was,

“The lover of the story is dead. In death, I can only imagine that gender must become vestigial. Not that I ever wanted to give it much import in life. Of sex, I will

not speak: who knows of either the Orientalist orgies (shimmering bodies, lips on hookahs, oils of jasmine and sandalwood, gilded elephants, spice of despotism, all manner of embellishments) that you hope might rage in the afterworld or the number of worms that are currently weaving in and out of the lover's organs, sexual and otherwise. If anything remains of them. The lover of this story died in a fire and probably disappeared into nothing."

So now you get it. Or maybe not: one particular afternoon, the lover of this story did not put on a green coat at four pm and did not leave the house to walk among the leaves. The lover of this story was napping upstairs when I decided to recall the awe of the night on the rooftop. Now you must get it.

Later, as I was standing by the grave, smoking a cigarette and letting my eyes go cold and pensive, I realized that since the lover of the story was dead, and the lover of the story was the only person I could ever call a lover without evoking coloring-book shaped metaphors, my gender was vestigial as well. I never wanted to enact more than violence upon it during my life – and now it was obliterated. And although I will not speak of the Orientalist orgies (quivering darkened skin, the licking of tigers, indignant Sultans... this is boring: read Flaubert's diary, complementing the luster of his prose with your own never acted upon sexual fantasies of disgusting otherness), I can tell you that in my grief and under the influence of voided gender, I attempted to sleep with almost everyone I encountered. And no I don't have the heart to describe these encounters with ornate prose: they were aesthetically bare. Again, the chronology is off: before I started sleeping with everyone I came upon, I filled the bathtub with Captain Crunch cereal. Then I turned

on the water. Then I climbed in. All the granules dissolved into a thick wet mush and for weeks afterward, as I headed to the tub to rinse off fluids and hairs and despair, my feet crunched the mush that had spilled over onto the tile and dried. I guess the order will work after all.

The lover of this story put on a green coat every afternoon at four pm and then left the house to walk among the leaves. The lover of this story told me dreams of disappearing into nothing. The lover of this story did not eat cereal in the morning because the sheer amount of granules was too overwhelming.

The Library and “The Pyre,” Again

After I finished reading, I stared at the desk for a few moments, wondering how the story had forced its tentacles into me. The ending was exactly what I had wanted to tell Kundera: it spoke of all the sex that could only happen once everything inside was dead. Sure, Tomas can get so much out of his random ejaculations, but only after the end of the world, which might in fact be the setting for the novel. Not that I was a moralist, I just had low standards for the amount of pleasure that people could ever allow themselves.

When Mela walked back into the library, I couldn't separate looking from aching. I didn't want to lose Mela to all the guests playing out their flamboyant roles, guests with answers to Mela's questions, guests who could move about in clouds of gaiety and movement and artifice. She set down a pile of clothes on the desk. She seemed rather melancholy. Her sadness was a reproach: perhaps she wanted me to read “The Pyre” for its desolate yearnings, for its post-apocalyptic sexual escapades. I couldn't help it: I could be the stupidest reader sometimes. I read words and

construed them to my liking. The crunch of the cereal became an argument with Kundera. The list of ways to overcome barrenness became an obsession: was this the way lovers behaved? Did they actually sit around plotting with each other? How wonderful.

I looked at the pile of clothes and found a pair of burnt orange trousers, a white collared shirt and a set of suspenders. I should have felt pleased, but I wondered if anyone at the party would take me as an imposter.

“Put them on,” Mela said as I held up the pants. I froze and then headed toward the door.

“Where are you going?” Mela asked.

“To the bathroom, I guess.”

“Oh. Well, the guests might be out there already. Don’t worry, I won’t look.”

Mela sat down behind the desk, swiveled around in her chair, and faced the hidden closet.

I pulled on the pants, which were in fact baggy on me. The shirt was large, but I didn’t mind because it obscured my breasts, which while admirable on Mela, always struck me as grotesque on myself. I fumbled with the suspenders and Mela turned around. She smiled and I imagined that my absurd image must have cured her melancholy. My discomfort didn’t seem to stem from wearing something alien to me, but rather, wearing something that was too close to some sort of hidden and prohibited self-image. I thought of all the masquerades of the world and how Shard had designed something in defiance of them.

“How does everything fit, Eve?”

I had to think about this for a long time. Because while the clothes didn't try to squeeze me into a desirable shape like all of those my mother tried to buy me, I answered,

“I feel like I'm a lowly bacteria that has enveloped this hard object, called the gender that I am supposed to enact, swallowed it really. I wanted to swallow it at one point, to eat. But now it's integrated and even though it disgusts me, I feel like I am excising pieces of myself when I try to change how I think about it. Which is fine, but a slow process. That's how it all fits.”

I was trying to narrate myself in an appropriate way, using metaphors that were not to be trifled with, even though bacterial eating maneuvers could not describe how alluring and yet wrong it felt to dress in Mela's “boyish” – for I had no better word – clothes.

“Well, it looks good on you, if that's any solace.”

Mela, I wanted to say, why must you provoke my agony! Why don't you just ignore me so I can agonize in peace at least!

“It is.”

PART (three)Y

When I went out into the corridor, it was glowing. It is hard for me to recall the party without losing everything to the glow that I first saw on my way to the basement. It is hard for me to recall the party without trying to figure out how it so quickly escalated from a mere party to an initiation, an intervention, a large interrobang **?** I should have known that the party had no hope of ever being a “mere party” when I left Mela in the library sitting back in her chair and looking overwrought, even though I thought she had every reason to stroll out to greet the guests with a gallant stride.

As I crept along the corridor, I could smell a distant hint of burning leaves. I reveled in the smell, it was the same sensation that I had perceived upon walking up to the house, the sensation that had sent me back to old dreams. Ah, the aroma of burning leaves! What mythopoeic torrents I would have poured out if I had been in the street by myself!

On my way to the basement, the door bell rang and I knew that I was probably authorized to answer it, but I was afraid I might step outside into the fall air, turn around, and find that the house had disappeared.

I walked slowly. All of the doors off of the corridor were still shut so I could not see how the rooms had changed. I sympathized with them: I had undergone some sort of transformation as well. I went all the way down the corridor, and took a right at the entrance to the kitchen without seeing anyone.

Initiation

In the kitchen, I was basically already in the basement. Beneath a thin buffer of wine and scotch that kept me from total paralysis, I could barely function for fear of meeting whoever Shard had labeled a VIP. So great was my anxiety that I didn't register the strange proportions of the kitchen. I saw that a loaf of bread the size of a golf cart was standing vertically against the projection screen and a Fisher-Price kitchen set had been placed in the middle of the floor, but I made no conjectures about their presence. Following the instruction on my non-vitation, I opened the door next to the refrigerator. I bypassed some cleaning supplies and went down the stairs.

They were waiting for me. Many figures, some in spectacles, one in a shirt cut open to expose the tattoo of song lyrics that had been printed on an invitation, waited on a chartreuse couch. A figure in a long crimson cardigan and lavender tights, a figure who would have looked like an American Apparel ad, if not for a giant bruise on her cheek that crept under her eye, smiled and said,

“We've been waiting for you.”

In spite of my discomfort that an entire group of people was staring at me, she continued, explaining that the majority of the VIPs were “ruggers” and although I didn't know what that meant, it did not stop them from circling around me and starting to discuss my “initiation.” Of course, I, who was not really a group-oriented person, had absolutely no experience in initiations, and did not think such rituals still occurred in the twenty-first century. I was wrong.

An Apology, Not Really

I am sorry that I cannot describe what happened during my initiation. I am not sorry because I don't think you want to know all of the sordid details. Part of the initiation involved swearing that I would never divulge what happened during it. I can say that Werther came down to see what all the shouting was about and ze was thoroughly amused to find me funneling a beer instead of running away.

After the initiation had reached its height of ritualistic ecstasy, the rugger who had narrowly escaped looking like an advertisement escorted me upstairs. I left my non-vitation down in the basement, disregarding the rest of Shard's instructions. My escort introduced herself as Claire and said that the rest of the VIPs would remain in the "lounge," waiting for their next initiate. Of course, I didn't say anything about Claire's bruise, which took on new colors in the bright light of the kitchen, but she quickly told me of its genesis.

The Bruise

In the kitchen of skewed proportions, Claire told me that just as someone tackled her, another "rugger"⁷ went down and shot up hir (yes, Claire knew the language, too) foot in such perfect timing that her face met the player's cleat. Only the most precise coordination could have produced bright patches of swollen veins against a sour purple backdrop. As Claire narrated her injury, I had to think back to Mela's inexplicable action in the office corridor. I had never imagined that the movement that brought us to the floor had been part of a recreational activity. Deep in the recesses of my soul, I had believed in the tackle as an isolated rupture, invisible

⁷ Someone finally alerted me that rugger=rugby player and that Mela was one, too.

and inaccessible to the world; a severed event that had occurred as if on the frozen plain where I liked to place Mela when I thought of her in the abstract.

Now I supposed Claire and I were comrades in our particular falls. Before I could come up with a more elaborate vision of kinship, someone interjected,

“It’s so great to hear someone glorifying their own masochism.”

“Fuck you,” Claire responded, “As long as we already live in a world of violence, why not participate it on a level that we control? Do you tell your quarter-back brother to lay off the masochism? Sorry, that’s not homoerotic masochism, that’s just dudes having fun, right?”

At that, the uninitiated guest walked off.

“Sorry, that was Justine. I have no idea how she even ended up here,” Claire said.

“Well from what I can tell, Shard seems to have included a wide range of people in his invitation lists. What was your invitation like?”

Claire looked confused.

“Never got one. Sam – I mean Shard used to have these parties every first Saturday of every other month. Then they stopped. Last week, almost a year since the last party, I got a pretty vague call from Mela saying that they were starting again. The house does look different though. I can’t figure out what it is exactly.”

“It could be the large loaf of bread over there, you know.”

Claire laughed, which was good, and which stretched out the mottled bruises. Claire introduced me to a group of her friends. All the while, I kept peering about to see if either Shard or Mela were around. I didn’t see them.

I saw a guest in a sailor's costume of tight navy and white striped pants, a large white shirt with a large square navy collar, and a white hat stride into the kitchen. The shirt was adorned with medals that did not look either fake or cheap. The officer barely acknowledged anyone in the front hall; I figured that a naval uniform was almost sufficient protection against the guests who dressed brightly and let the darkneses of their minds seep through their speech, the floor that trembled, all the people who were returning to a house sunk into the aftermath of something. As I watched the officer, I felt a slow flood in the back of my memory. As the naval officer passed me, I saw a blonde pony tail streaked with black. And then I knew who was entering the kitchen. Well, not exactly. I knew where else I had encountered the person walking by, but I couldn't align that person with the officer passing me. When I thought of the person who had passed me, I had to slip back into high school categorizations; I couldn't stay at the party.

Taxonomizing Ashley

In high school, Ashley was a loner who hung out alone – surprise – or with a token new kid who had just transferred to our school. I always wondered if she didn't cling to the new kids because she was desperate to grasp something outside of our city. She wasn't particularly goth or shy or attractive. Thinking of her in the middle of the party, I was painfully aware of the pettiness of these high school distinctions.

Actually, I had never been able to place her entirely within my high school vocabulary because one day I saw her roaming in the Circle, which was outside of school. Unlike the Grove, the Circle did have some relation to its name; some long-lost trolley car rail circumscribed the area. The Circle was a place for outcasts that I

could only refer to in flat high-school-esque terms: pseudo-Goths, hippies who no longer believed in Che and still sold Che t-shirts, Messianic Jews, underground DJ's mixing on the street, Scientologists, yuppies who darted into the Circle to get bubble tea and organic baby clothes, seminary students from the bordering religious institution who perhaps sought a devilish place in which to study their doctrines, people who woke up an hour early so they could look extra strung-out at the Blueberry Café (the name was misleadingly sweet and probably ironic), and of course, people like myself who pretended to be above all of the castes of the Circle.

Anyway, I saw Ashley walking in the Circle with a sullen character at least ten years her senior, although I have almost as little skill in guessing ages as I do in creating high school taxonomies. I began to wonder if we, my bitter high school cohorts and I, had been misreading this character all along. At once, I thought of her living in an apartment with this older being where they would scoff at our homework assignments while playing records and drinking highballs in the evening. Her entire secret life flashed before me as we walked towards each other. In a moment, she had recognized me, cringed and turned away.

I wanted to say, "Don't turn away, I'm the fool here. Yes, I am quite successful in my spectacles, meaning I can dump all my energy into a high school environment that sucks. But you say screw it to all of us. Not only am I jealous, but you've magnified my level of self-loathing and while I'm dropping cubits of my soul into retaliations against an institution that thinks I'm crazy or at least "unmotivated," you're living out some vintage romance in the Circle. And you probably get a table at the Blueberry Café the moment you walk in."

After that run-in, whenever people would scoff at Ashley walking down the hall and not smiling, I would scoff at myself.

Ashley

Claire sat down at the kitchen table and started speaking to someone who sat on the other side of an intricate dollhouse. She would speak through one of the windows and then press her ear to the window to receive the message. I saw the naval officer near the sink drinking something green out of a clear Mason jar. I approached and had to use her high school name.

“Hey Ashley.”

You see, I didn’t mind this banal opening because I figured we would soon launch into a spectacular dialogue in which Ashley, in all her configurations, would dump all of her secrets upon me and I would convey all the madness of the house to her.

“Hey.”

It appeared that Ashley did not care to acknowledge me.

“So like how did you end up here? Do you know Shard?”

“Huh. Oh, I don’t know. My boyfriend got the invitation.”

On cue, the boyfriend walked over, pretended to peer about and asked,

“Where’s my slutty sailor?”

“Right here, babe,” she smiled and stuck her hands in his back pockets as he stood before her.

My disgust propelled me out of the room. Their interaction seemed to contaminate the entire house. He wasn’t even dressed appropriately, whatever that

might mean. I presumed he let his GF do the dressing-up, even though he was probably supposed to be the slutty sailor. As I walked back down the corridor, I wasn't even pleased that the sophisticated lover did not exist, the naval officer was a slutty sailor and Ashley had no reaction whatsoever to Shard's house aside from the fact that her boyfriend was present inside of it. People were already starting to make out in the corridor, which did nothing to alleviate my disgust. I heard strange vibrations coming down the hall and thinking that they emanated from the library, I walked down towards the other end of the corridor, shoving my way through a disheveled petticoat, entanglements, streams of ribbons, a guest in a long purple velour robe leading hir partner through the house in handcuffs, the products of a rogue taxidermist,⁸ and many unidentifiable objects.

I followed the throbbing to the doorway across from the library, which led me to a laundry room. I went through the laundry room and then into the garage that had been barricaded by Heineken bottles.

Emerald City

As I stepped into a room filled with blurred outlines, I was lost and a voice cut through the swollen air from atop the makeshift stage in the front, carrying a song of aggression mashed up with dance beats that I wandered inside because I couldn't figure out my own contours, because there were other people lost in the song, there was also anger caged in such delicious sound that it became pleasure, as if the room needed any more, and when I went closer to the stage, there were bodies slamming into me, and sometimes a black and white photograph flashed onto a screen behind

⁸ These outlaw taxidermists take various dead animal parts and mix them together to come up with new creations, much like the mash-up DJ in the garage, or even yours truly, the narrator. The creations in the corridor included Siamese mermaids and *el chupacabra*.

the singer-mash-up artist, and one of the images was a seagull in black and white that might have come out of Polly's forest, and sometimes light sticks launched across the room and I caught one, but by the small neon glow of light I couldn't tell if there were any Ashley types in the room, those people who would not acknowledge stunning potentialities even when they walked straight into them, and I doubted they were present because those surrounding me reacted to the stimulus instead of blankly walking out into a cozy alcove draped in satin off of the living room, oh yes, we cheered when the mashed-up singing artist yelled "fuck you, you fucking queers" in between songs, and then some one was standing next to me looking like Shard and then when the mashed-up singer began a song that was kind of like bubble gum with pieces of glass in it, I was making out with Shard, which should only be taken as a supernatural occurrence that somehow had slipped into the fabric of the room with all the likelihood of:

- a grand blinding rainbow bursting over the mob-like crowd and spreading blossoms of joy (read: the party was not a Celebration of Utopian Love)
- Werther leaving Shard's house to marry a self-identified female llama, take up residence in the county zoo and have babies
- a gush of Mediterranean sea water sliding in through the three-inch crack under the garage door, dressing our feet in seaweed and singing crabs
- a unicorn flying in to perform a scathing remix of Mother Goose nursery rhymes

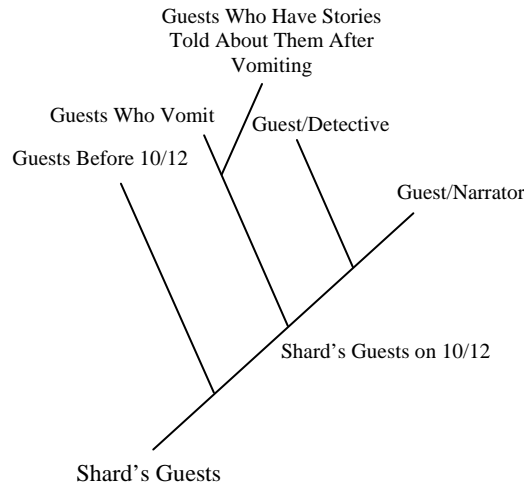
but it was happening to me, until some indistinct point when all the sound cut off with a sudden piercing blare, which I attributed to the impossibility not so much of making

out with Shard but of being able to face Shard, a blare that turned into a menacing orchestral rendition of The Arcade Fire's "Intervention," which I suppose signaled the intervention: hooded figures turned on a dim light, grabbed the singer who also, terrifyingly, looked like Shard, and as they pulled hir off the stage, I looked at "Shard" and saw someone who must have been closely related to (or mimetically engineered to look approximately like) hir, but was not hir, and then the interventionists continued their orchestral rendition on the other side of the room while yelling spoken word poetry about privilege, which was cool (even though I rather preferred the singing that had been mashed up), until Shard came over and said, "Sylvane?" to the person who was for all my intents and purposes Shard herself and then "Sylvane" said, "Hello sis," which was upsetting to me for so many reasons and then as they began to embrace like two eerie shadows, each lacking a referent outside of each other, I made my exit from that room and wished it had been more carefully guarded; glass on the inside of the garage might have helped.

The Guest Detective Species

I needed to pee but there was a line in the downstairs bathroom so I went upstairs. I walked towards the bathroom but as I caught sight of the closet, I told myself that peeing could wait. I had to see if anything deeper than the healing of Shard's skin had been archived in the closet. You would be ill-advised to assume that I was escaping from the party into the closet: I was collecting clues. A detective/party guest is close to a narrator. A phylogenetic tree could chart the similarity between detective party guest and narrator: they are closer together than detective/party guest and party guest whose vomit I was about to discover in the bathtub. Okay, I suppose I

could make a phylogenetic tree for you, even if according to Mela and her story of “deluge,” a tree-as-model is always rooted in hierarchical notions of time, space, and power. Bear with me; I know a tree is not a story.



Evidence

I opened the closet door and first, I had to put the blueprints back in their proper tubes, having shoved them into the same tube so many hours ago during my escape from the preserved bedroom. I then kneeled down to a shelf of photo albums. I was about to open one, but then I realized that I would have to look at pictures of the “twins” and of Shard as a different person with another name. I started flipping through the notebooks. My only requirements were that the notebook contained paragraphs and that it was written in Mela’s handwriting. I wanted Mela’s narration. I had witnessed a sliver of the way Mela experienced the world hours ago in the golden afternoon light of the living room, and I wanted more. I heard the door of the preserved bedroom open and grabbed a notebook that contained full paragraphs. I hid it under my shirt. The first pilfered notebook, the book of Mela’s deadened

observations of pain, was probably still lying on the great bed across the hallway from the closet. I went down the hall and luckily, the bathroom was still unoccupied.

The Jewels

Vomit had been sprayed all over the fake jewels that had returned to the bathtub, but in an uneven glaze so that the glinting regal colors poked out through the sickly puddles. People were probably telling stories downstairs about the party guest who had thrown up on the jewels in the bathtub. That sucks. Here's some advice: If you don't narrate yourself because you're passed out, then someone's probably narrating for you.

I felt an uncanny tremor while looking at the fake jewels. A dark space inside my mind twitched at the site of the dull bodily colors covering the jewels that had seemed to glow all the brighter because they were fake. Fake like sugar glass. When the twitch subsided, its message was clear: Polly and Elizabeth could not remain in their hermeneutic fake jeweled advertisement. So I invited them to the party and once they accepted, I flew them straight out of the film and dropped them on the edge of the bathtub. I brought them down to a certain level of filth; they belonged in post-apocalyptic splendor instead of in an advertisement.

The Bird

They entered the house together, throwing off the haze of dreams and film and office vacuity. Elizabeth admitted that the bird was only a pretense. The death order would be carried out whether or not Polly ever found the mythical bird. Myths had no place in the story that was no longer an advertisement.

Elizabeth declared, “Yes, Polly you will die but not your body. Why would I kill that? I need that part of you. When I write ‘die’ on a parchment and sign it with a large letter that does nothing to signify all of me, I mean that you will become mine, that you will have no more boundaries that designate you, not even a single letter, and that this death will be total pleasure for you because you will not have to go roaming on all your quests that will always fail because I will have already killed you. And you will have let me kill you because you will be so sick with wanderlust; you will need to rove the miles and miles that it will take you to move across one inch of my pallid skin.

And Polly answered, “Take me. I am no ad for Adderall. I am yours.”

The Notebook Intrudes

I would have liked to follow Polly and Elizabeth on into their erotic oblivion, but I saw a streak of my own blood on the floor, a remnant from that distant age when I had stepped on a piece of glass in the bedroom. Becoming conscious again of my own body, I felt the metal rings of the notebook pressing against my skin. I sent Elizabeth and Polly to go dance in the garage. I should have left the disgusting location with them, but I needed to uncover clues as to what had preceded the party. Yes, I desperately needed to know what Mela thought of Shard aside from her documentation. While sitting on the toilet, I removed the notebook from under my shirt and opened it.

Inside

This is my night journal. I had to start it because I began losing touch with reality after recording Shard’s skin day after day. I don’t know what I’m doing here.

That's all. Once I give Shard hir nightly pain meds, I have ten hours alone in this house where significant violence has occurred. I am too empty to read. The noise of the TV puts me even more on edge. When I try to think of other things, the house makes its way back into my mind in even more insidious forms. I can't really talk to my dad about it because he will just say that I'm avoiding my own shit by focusing so much on someone else. He doesn't get how it's no longer a question of "healthy decision making." There's nothing healthy about this house or this burned person. I can't tell my friends because they won't know how to translate it into their own terms. They will laugh at me for getting "too involved," as usual.

This is now hir night journal, too. Last night, I heard quiet murmurs rise up from downstairs. My first thought was that a ghost was whispering, which did not seem unlikely in this house that is so quiet and yet so full. I went downstairs and saw Shard sleeping and speaking. "The corridors, the corridors," ze kept saying. It sounded like ze spoke only to hirself, quietly narrating something that unsettled hir sleep.

...

Shard's grandmother came over this afternoon and told me, "Leave us be, please" in a voice of tightness. I waited around in the kitchen and she eventually came in and sat down.

The first thing she said was, "Don't think this is any sort of family conference. In no way do I feel comfortable that you're staying here, but even in her weakness my granddaughter is strong-willed and refuses any other living situation. So do you know the full story of Samantha's family?"

“No, I don’t I’m afraid. Sh-Samantha hasn’t told me much.”

“Naturally. Lest you think her family has deserted her, I’ll tell you.”

Long pause. The distinguished woman cleared her throat.

“A few weeks before Samantha’s – ahem – accident, the house was burglarized. You see, Samantha’s father was a great collector of medieval artifacts, some of which were quite valuable. The thief k-killed both of Samantha’s parents with the spear that he was trying to steal. He then fled the house and was soon apprehended because he was carrying the murder weapon and in a state of great distress. Samantha returned immediately from her university and Sylvane suddenly disappeared. They’re twins, you see.”

She paused again and then said,

“That’s about all the information I think is necessary for your understanding.”

The tremor in her voice conveyed all the information necessary. She then stalked out of the house in a cloud of perfume, leaving behind an envelope of money for Shard’s medical bills.

...

I’m starting to make out more of Shard’s utterances. Ze always seems to insist that the corridor should be blocked, that it’s too open. Sometimes ze only cries out “Sylvane, Sylvane.” I can only spend so much time listening to hir cries at night. Sometimes I just collapse into what I guess was Shard’s parents’ bed.

...

I was going out to chill with Werther on the lawn when I saw his car parked across the street with its unmistakable license plate: DRRICH. I started intensely disliking my dad once he got that license plate. I made him roll down the window. He said he was concerned for my well-being. I told him the same. I didn't have the energy to start screaming at him about boundaries. I stared at him. I started feeling bad for him and for his car. They must be lonely together.

Dr. Richardson ¶

You didn't think Dr. Richardson would really disappear, did you? It was a nice dream, wasn't it? Well take how you're feeling right now and multiply it by some inordinately large number. Because that's how I felt to discover that Mela was Mela Richardson, the offspring of my pseudo-nemesis.

Back to the Notebook

I wandered into a room of books downstairs and saw a coffee cup on the large desk. When I looked into it, I could see hairy tufts of green mold. I couldn't touch it. Sometimes I take solace in the pottery studio outside. It's a weird space: Everything in it is broken. But the pieces give the room an earthy smell and all the windows open up onto trees. When I lie on the huge orange and gray couch in there, my dreams are not as bad.

A Knock

I had to evict all that I was feeling from my voice and say, "Someone's in here," so I could keep reading. This hadn't happened since I used to take baths every night to extend my reading time. At some point after I came back from Amsterdam last year, I stopped caring about reading. Instead, I would stare off into space and try

to imagine some place that wasn't as hostile as my American high school. I couldn't deal with any other present. But why didn't you just read to escape the hard and insidious borders of your life, you ask? Why don't you go ride a warthog through the mists of Avalon, I say.

...

About twelve hours ago, I put in a PJ Harvey CD so I could languish in an atmosphere of refined yet defiant screaming dripping pain. Oh, yes I can write truly exquisite prose when I am feeling like shit. So I put the CD into the stereo I had set up in the pottery studio. As I lay back, listening, Shard walked in. Ze said nothing, and I was shocked that ze was strong enough to walk through the garden. I was also shocked that ze was responding to the music because everyone I knew always rolled their eyes at what they considered PJ Harvey's excessively dark and strong emotion. I moved over on the couch and ze threw hir tired body down next to me. We listened to the CD on repeat twice until I saw that ze was asleep. I turned the stereo off and we both slept out in the pottery studio. I just woke up and ze is still sleeping with a woven throw wrapped around hir chest. I don't want to disturb hir; I'll sit here all day if I have to.

...

I'm in my apartment. Shard just kicked me out of the house. Perhaps I am an affront to hir conception of strength, but this is so F—ed. I don't know what to do here. I can only sleep on the orange and gray sofa in the pottery studio. I am desperate to know if ze even misses me or if I was just an opportune caregiver to hir. Me, a caregiver? Only Shard could have made me give hir care.

The End of Voyeurism

Having reached Mela's humiliating juncture, I told myself that I had to stop reading. First of all, nothing could convince me to give up on Mela and let her disappear into the raucous night with Shard. Secondly, I needed to get away from the disgusting smell of jeweled vomit. I went down to the vestibule to check my cell phone, which presented a lot of useless numerical data to me.

Surveying the Vestibule

I looked up from the numbers on my phone and saw the layers that the room had grown since I first entered the house that afternoon. People had shed all sorts of coverings before entering the party: flip-flops, a band-aid, a coat of raw burlap.

A photograph that looked like it had been ripped out of a family album was stuck to one of the seven mirrors. The image of two kids standing in long t-shirts at the sea shore was accompanied by a scrawled caption taped to the bottom of the picture: "Welcome Back Sylvane (You Asshole I Can't Believe You Deserted Me) Party. Time: 11 pm. Date: 10/12. Place: The House Where Sylvane Formerly Lived Before She Fucking Ran Off." I didn't want to be reminded of Sylvane because she ruined my belief that the party had ruptured reality in a deep and significant way: In short, she was Sylvane; ze was not Shard. Also, because I could think of the laughter that would come from Shard's throat when Sylvane told hir that she had made out with me.

I looked at myself in one of the seven mirrored sides of the vestibule. My reflection revealed someone who reminded me of Sylvane: not quite the original but too disquietingly similar to be a completely separate individual. I saw my "twin," this

strange creature who had appeared to attend the party. With the sounds of the party insulating the vestibule, I couldn't recover the original, that notion I had of my own dismal and cowardly appearance. My twin wore an almost badass outfit, replete with suspenders, which said that she surely hadn't spent hours trying to look respectable. My twin would have appeared almost attractive if not for the presence of the same rather bulbous nose that had plagued me for eighteen years. I did examine my twin with interest instead of disgust, which marked a change in the way that I dealt with mirrors.

Someone ran into the room and yelled, "Come on, the llama's on stage. And it's making fun of Bikini Kill!"

I put my cell phone back and went to the garage.

Werther as Riot Grrrl

Werther stood on the stage with combat boots on all four legs. The lights had brightened so I could make out some of the people around me. I saw a lot of short hair and fierceness and a small monkey and oh no: over at the front of the stage stood Mela. My body gave a great lurch. Even though I needed to see her, and even though I was relieved that she wasn't locked away in some love den, I wished she had stayed away. I ducked behind someone with a hole cut out of a shirt, revealing a tattoo of a crown from one of the invitations. Shard might as well have worn a crown because no one else could have compelled someone to permanently mark hir body for one night's celebration. Harsh drum beats and guitar chords signaled for Werther to start marching. Most of the crowd started laughing, but I knew, and Mela knew, that this wasn't just a novelty act.

A sudden, a piercing, nasally voice that did not belong to Werther came out of his throat. It didn't seem possible that he was lip-syncing, but the voice was nothing like Werther's earlier one. He started singing about a "rebel girl," who most of the audience seemed familiar with because they kept laughing.

After the line, "*I think I wanna take you home, I wanna try on your clothes, uh,*" he urged revelers to jump onstage and start switching clothes. I realized that Werther could not have been lip-syncing because he would stop in the middle of the song to comment. He was ventriloquizing himself. As Werther shrieked away about this "rebel girl," people kept climbing onto the stage and exchanging items of clothing. I saw breasts and butts and the glint of piercings and a plaid jumper traded for a leather bodysuit and a body of tattoos and a fake beard traded for a bikini top, all flashing across the backdrop of the lyrics:

*Rebel Grrrl, Rebel Grrrl
Rebel Grrrl you are the queen of my world
Rebel Grrrl, Rebel Grrrl
I think I wanna take you home
I wanna try on your clothes*

*When she walks, the revolution's coming
In her hips, there's revolution
When she talks, I hear the revolution
In her kiss, I taste the revolution*

*That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood
I got news for you – she is!
They say she's a dyke, but I know
She is my best friend*

The music was not my style, but how could I not have some affinity with a song about the dyke queen of the neighborhood who carries revolution in her hips?

The Origin of Love or, the House Becomes a Symposium

The music stopped and amidst the cheering, Werther introduced the next song.

“Hello dear people who would probably be offended if I referred to you as ladies and/or gentleman. The next song I am going to hideously mangle is based on a dialogue from antiquity. Don’t let that turn you off: it is a dialogue about a rager. A rager called the Symposium. A Symposium about the Nature of Love. And during the rager, our dead friend Aristophanes gives his own mythical account of the origin of love in which Zeus chops bodies apart. But more important, please continue using the house as the setting for your own amorous Symposium.”

More cheering. Werther had removed his combat boots and he launched into a melancholy song with a young raspy voice that I figured must have come from a stockpile of pilfered voices. I felt someone pull at my arm.

“Hey, how are you doing?”

Mela.

“I’m fine. I’d like to find out where love originated, though, it’s always seemed rather enigmatic to me.”

“I wouldn’t listen to this song for your answers. It’s about the “three sexes” being split up and roaming about looking for each other.”

“Oh damn. I thought maybe the song explained how love had originated in a place, like an old Greek well or something.”

“If only. I heard you’ve had quite an eventful evening?”

“Yes, you could say that.”

“What did you think of the initiation?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss that, sorry,” I said with a smile.

I felt like resisting Mela’s line of questioning because she seemed so interested in talking to me.

“So you don’t want to tell me what happened?”

“Not really. Sorry, I’m trying not to overanalyze everything for a change.”

I didn’t think the initiation could be narrated and I liked making Mela work to talk to me. I never would have had the strength to refuse Mela anything if she hadn’t expressed interest in what I could potentially tell her. Isn’t that really immature, you ask? After having followed my assailant around all day, wearing out all of my useless self-defenses, did I really care if my tactics of shifting the power dynamic were immature? No.

“Okay. Want to leave Werther to his Rufus Wainright impersonations and go to another room?”

I shrugged in assent and as we crossed out of the garage, back through the laundry room and into the corridor, Mela asked where we should go. I said the kitchen. We followed the same path I had traversed by myself right before the party. Her cheeks were bright. She touched my hand as she handed me a beer from the refrigerator. I didn’t flinch. I walked over to the doll house still perched on the table. Mela joined me and peering inside the miniature model of the house, she asked which room we should go into. I looked hard and I could see her watching me look from room to room. I chose the upstairs study because it was where I had felt most alone in the whole house as I listened to Shard and Mela laughing in the Proustian dining room.

“Alright, as long as you make up a story about weapons; that’s the rule,” Mela said.

I agreed to tell her a story about weapons. She opened the kitchen window and I heard music. I looked out and could see nothing. She told me that a quartet was starting to play in the back yard to gesture farewell to the parting guests. I wondered when I would fall into the category of a parting guest.

We walked upstairs and I wanted to stretch out every moment, to elongate all the time before we would have to face each other alone, to merely have her presence without any of its complications. The upstairs seemed empty. I saw a light under the door of the bedroom and was glad I hadn’t chosen that room. Awkward. We had almost reached the study when we heard something roll down a creaking track and make a thud.

Oh, did you think the party was ending, winding down? Surely not. We haven’t even explored some parts of the house, dear reader. Mela and I turned around as a mobile unit of pleasure came bounding down a ladder from the attic.

They were in a state of grinning disarray. As they went towards the staircase, they winked at us. Mela said she had forgotten about the attic and asked if I wanted to go up there. I agreed, if only to get out of telling a story about weapons.

We climbed up the wooden retractable ladder into darkness softened by a spectacular nugget of sky. A glass lantern was still smoking on the floor and we relit the candle inside. The room was not an unfinished attic, but a bedroom. Sylvane’s bedroom actually. And den of pot, Mela explained. Sylvane had moved to the attic so

she could smoke weed in peace and occasionally, every member of her family – even the fat little man that was her father – would climb into the attic for a few hits.

“So what’s your bedroom like, as long as we’re on the subject,” Mela asked.

“Opium den. We installed a wheel chair lift on our stairs so my grandma can partake in my reveries. Secretly of course.”

“Come on.”

“I don’t know; it’s a mess. It has a bed, some drawers with stuff in them. There are no annoying posters on the wall.”

“What do your windows look out upon?”

I had spent so much time looking out of my windows. I was incapable of joking about what they allowed me to see. I wanted to shoot down Mela’s question because I was afraid she would shoot down any earnest response. But I answered,

“The window by my desk looks over the great green bellies of pine trees. When the wind blows on them, the world seems to sway. I can also see a small shed that has some tools, my hedgehog’s old cage, some lab equipment. I sometimes catch a black badger dodging about in the fallen nettles.”

“What happened to your hedgehog?”

“My parents gave her away after they investigated the evolutionary history of the species. They thought I would be adversely affected by her stupidity.”

“What did she do?”

“Well, most of the time she, Petunia, was scared. The only activity that would alleviate her fear was when she stuck her head in a toilet paper roll and ran around with it covering her eyes. Otherwise, she mostly spiked into a ball. This of course did

not deter me from playing with her at all times and assuming that she understood all of my secrets.”

“Did you have any other playmates besides Petunia?”

“No sibs. I used to play with this kid Doug who was about four years older than me. We were the only kids on my street. My parents had me sort of late and they didn’t like the idea of living amidst young parents and their millions of kids, minivans, micro-managerial skills, etc.”

“Were you lonely?”

“No, never. Not until I got out of elementary school and realized that people had been leading these intense social lives.”

We were seated on cushions that were placed in a circle around the lantern. An origami mobile swayed from what force I don’t know. Purplish cobwebs clinging to the splintery rafters gave the impression that we had stumbled upon some uninhabited cabin in the woods.

“Were you mad that I tackled you?”

I was taken aback. I paused. I mumbled something. Then I said,

“No, I sort of needed a jolt. Nothing that a doctor could provide, especially not that one.”

Mela seemed satisfied and stretched out on the cushion drinking her beer.

“I still want you to tell me a story, though, it’s still the rule. And your biographical data is starting to bore me.”

“No it’s not.”

Mela looked at me with a sense of recognition that I had never seen before. Her look said “Oh, so you are a person and you won’t always take my shit” and she said,

“I know.”

“So what sort of story?”

“Whatever you want. Don’t rush; I’ll wait.”

PART FOUR: Eve's Story

Mela closed her eyes. I did the same until I knew the story I would tell.

I wanted Mela to think about me as I spoke. I wanted to enthrall her, to dominate her attention the way she had dominated mine.

“Polly, my alter-ego, had been on a train for far too long.

“For days at a time, she would lie in the bathtub in her sleeper car and watch the empty fields. She had not boarded the train so she could stockpile the sight of barrenness; she had boarded the train so she could run away from the man who had taken over all of her dreams. When Polly first boarded the train, she didn't even look out the window. She simply stared at an etching on the wall of an ambiguously gendered child in a blue lederhosen peering into a well. The compartment also contained a small bonsai tree that changed shape by the hour, but Polly would not look at it. One morning, Polly awoke and sat down to the small *repas* that had always appeared on a little table by the time she had opened her eyes. She tore the crust off a piece of toast and dipped the naked bread in a cup of coffee. She looked up at the etching on the wall, as if for guidance. She saw the kid's look of piqued curiosity and could feel the slippery moss growing on the inside of the well. That morning, Polly felt like she was lost somewhere inside the well, like she was an impotent water monster trapped in a narrow brick column. A tear fell into her cup of coffee. The train stopped. She heard a knock on the door. No one ever knocked on her door. She opened the door a crack and saw a looming man in a dark suit. She tried to slam the door on him; she feared spies and worse. He put one soft hand against the other side of the door and calmly said,

‘Eh, Madame the train is stopping for more hours. You can off train,’ in a broken tongue that she understood perfectly.’”

I peered out of one eye to see what Mela was up to. She opened one eye when she heard me stop. Satisfied that she was paying attention, I continued,

“Polly knew she had to get off. Polly put on the jacket of her traveling suit, left her room, and tried to pry open the train doors. She pushed them open but as she slipped through, the heavy doors slammed on her pinky finger. Using one hand, she tried to open the doors. After moments of agony, the doors slid open on their own account, dropping a small piece of her finger onto the ground. She tried to find the looming man to see if he had a bandage of any sort, but the train seemed deserted. She wrapped some toilet paper around the angry stub and exited the train.

“She was literally falling to pieces but had forgotten her mp3 player and without the melancholy accompaniment of the music she would have selected to hear as she prowled through the town, she didn’t feel so bad. She heard a bell ringing. The village was still. When she reached the edge of the cobblestones, she kept walking. She walked straight into a forest, even though in her head, something whispered, *‘Imbecile’* in an unknown accent. In the forest, she saw red and purple mushrooms glistening in patches and was very tempted to pick them, even if they were poison, because she needed something to stir her mind.”

Reader, don’t for a moment imagine that I was lost in the comfort of some sort of bedtime story ritual. I spoke as Scheherazade, gushing words to avoid both my desire and the prospect of its fulfillment, words that assumed power from some unknown source in between my fear and my need. Why couldn’t I just lie back and

enjoy the sweetness of the moment, you ask? Why did I have to make everything so difficult, you query? Why couldn't I be a normal human being and just kiss her? Maybe you should try one of my red and purple mushrooms. I certainly don't need them in my story.

“Polly did not pick the delectable morsels because she saw a house in the clearing ahead and went towards it. Inside, there was, of course, an old woman smoking a pipe and nursing a maimed wombat. She told Polly to sit down in a deeply cushioned armchair and gave her a warm spiced beverage in a clay mug. The liquid calmed the burning pain in her finger. Then the old woman began to speak, but would not once make eye contact.

“‘Your dreams are bad. The train is bad. You must look out into the fields as they pass you. They are dead, but they will cure your dreams.’

“These sentences seemed to tire her. She stopped.

“‘Why won't you look at me?’ Polly asked.

“Her only response was to shift her hold on the wombat. The wombat purred.

“They sat in the small room by the warmth of a hearth fire until night began to fall.

“‘Get. Out,’ the host said once it was dark.

“As Polly left the cottage, the host uttered her final words, ‘And get rid of your. Portable. Music. Machine.’

“When Polly stepped onto the train steps, the doors swung open before she had even touched them. Back in her room, she un-wrapped her finger and saw that the tip had already healed. She did not bother looking out of the window and so that

night, her dreams were bad: The very man that she was escaping had returned. He drove his car straight into her dreams, and she could see his eyes burning through dark sunglasses. The next morning, she stopped looking at the kid peering at the well. She focused her eyes on the fields, which wasn't really looking because she knew that only rough hues of brown dead grasses would meet her gaze. Under the guise of looking, she would stretch her mind out to horizons and edges and cracks. And her dreams were good: He was gone.

“One night, the etching changed so that the same child was now floating on a boat in mellow seas. The next morning, she used sugar in her coffee and jam on her bread. From the bathtub, she saw the bonsai tree stretching its limbs. That night, her dreams were neither good nor bad. His presence lingered, but he did not actually appear in them, as he usually did. The day after her dreams were neither good nor bad, Polly heard a knock. No one ever knocked. The man had come.

“Don't think he wanted her as a lover. He was her older brother. He had come only for revenge. Polly was not surprised. She knew he would return.

“‘Sabotage doesn't happen in my house. Sabotage doesn't happen in *my* house,’ Polly's brother had muttered to himself as he crossed continents looking for her.

“When her parents found out that Polly had smashed all of her brother's expensive androids, ruining his pleasure den, they were upset.

“‘But he wasn't hurting anything,’ they said of his violent doll-playing.

“‘Right. He wasn't hurting anyone in particular. He was hurting everything. The air in this house. Me. I cannot live in the same space as his fantasies.’

“‘So leave,’ they said.

“‘Before she left, her father pulled her aside and said,

“‘You see Polly.’ Long sigh. Cough. ‘Men have these urges, urges that you probably can’t even understand. And sometimes, if they’re not met, things can get ugly. So.’”

Before he could continue, Polly was gone.

“‘Back on the train. Polly’s brother was close at hand. She grabbed a valise and jumped out the window before he could come in. She had left her portable music machine on the small table. She ran through the fields until she saw a small rowboat rocking on the tips of some high grass. She didn’t know what to do. She climbed in and the boat began to float. She fell asleep and when she awoke, the boat had found a harbor outside of a tall fortress wall. She looked up the heavily armored doors and could see guards pacing. The spikes on the large doors were colored from hunter green to neon orange. They clashed with each other. One large spike was candy-striped. Another glinted with specks of gold.

“‘She wanted to cry or maybe impale herself on the spikes. The world had shut her out. She would never pierce its armor. She had no armor. Not even a portable music machine. She looked back at the dead fields. There was no train in sight. When a guard shouted down to her, Polly slowly raised her head.’”

It was with great joy that I decided to enlist Cisserl, Shard’s princess-warrior, and Carolien, the Dutch border guard, to defend the castle. In my rush to invite all the specters of my mind into the story, I did not pause to consider the violence of usurping Shard’s character.

Before I could figure out what Cisserl should say to Polly, Mela was kissing me. I didn't have time to think: Cisserl is shouting down to Polly and Mela is unzipping my pants, because it was already happening. I did not have to think about the absurd question that so many people would later ask me, "So what IS queer sex without the detestable phallus," because it was already happening. I was ecstatic and Mela was laughing at my surprise at the pleasure that did not seem even attached to my body anymore and I was shaking and Mela was above me.

"Excuse me, but I want to find out what happens in the story," said a dry voice of strained indifference.

My pleasure broke. Mela looked alarmed and took her hand out of my pants, pants that did in fact belong to her. I sat up, stunned, and turned around to see Shard perched on the ladder. Ze didn't move any closer. Ze waited. When I turned back around, Mela looked pissed. I seriously doubted that my thoughts would ever cohere again. I didn't think I was capable of speaking to such an audience. But at the same time, I was intrigued that Shard wanted to listen. I had a perverse need for hir to witness my unfolding pageant. And let's face it: I was desperate. I didn't think Shard would leave the attic unless I continued the story.

I took a moment, closed my eyes, and continued in a faltering voice.

"Uh. Well. So Cisserl was there, standing above Polly on the wall. Although Polly thought Cisserl was going to kill her, Cisserl merely asked,

'Are you coming in or what?' and opened the gates.

"Polly entered the kingdom, and Cisserl did not shoot her with the longbow."

I hoped Shard would not shoot me with a longbow.

“The kingdom overwhelmed Polly. The main castle had satellite rooms scattered around the kingdom, rooms emblazoned with the letter ‘E.’ While dining in a satellite room next to the creek which ran alongside the gates, one could technically be ‘in the castle,’ Cisserl explained to Polly. E was the initial of Cisserl’s cousin who was staying in the castle. As a welcoming gesture, Cisserl’s parents had plastered the “E,” those three prongs rising horizontally from a curved spear, throughout the kingdom.

“Cisserl led Polly into the main castle.

“‘Bring the vagabond to me,’ a voice echoed through the thousand turns, around a hundred walls. The voice belonged to Elizabeth.

“Cisserl brought Polly into a humid glassed-in dome off the wing of a long hall. Elizabeth sat at a table, naked except for a piece of purple ribbon tied across her breasts, with a line of perspiration above her lips and a scornful gaze.

“‘Get back to your post,’ Elizabeth directed Cisserl.

“‘You need to stop cowering. If he’s bothering you, you kill him. You don’t sit on a train and wait for him to find you,’ Elizabeth directed Polly.

“‘I would send you on a futile mission for a unique species of bird,’ she added, ‘but I’m not really into imperialistic knowledge expeditions and it will probably be extinct by the time you reach the island. I have other things in mind for you,’ she said with a wink that was both suggestive and derisive.

“Elizabeth then peered into a small globe.

“‘What’s that?’ Polly asked.

“It’s a snow globe that lets me see every stirring within my uncle’s kingdom. Here, give me your hand.”

My plan was to keep reinventing the story of Polly and Elizabeth until they had sex. I didn’t think it could happen with Shard in the room, but I couldn’t stop talking for fear Shard’s anger would erupt out of the silence.

“Polly put out her hand and looked into the globe. She could see her brother clawing at the kingdom gates. He slammed his hand against a magenta spike. Fearing that Elizabeth would try to kill him and disapproving of such violence, Polly started stroking the skin in between Elizabeth’s royal fingers. Although Elizabeth had accused her of cowardice, Polly did not lack boldness. How else could she have smashed the skulls of her brother’s robotic sex slaves? From finger crevices, Polly moved all over the strong body. Polly was not just using Elizabeth, but the pretense helped prolong her fantasy of boldness.

“‘Stop,’ Elizabeth ordered, before she lost all control.

“‘Who’s the coward now?’ Polly wanted to ask, but of course, did not.

“Elizabeth crossed her pale legs and, without even looking at the ball, said,

“‘He will be shot tomorrow, before my film shoot.’

“Then she was gone and Polly couldn’t even find anything in the hothouse with which to wipe her hand.

“Polly went out and walked along the hall. A digital portrait winked at her without any malice. She went up on the castle wall to talk to Cisserl about her brother. She wanted to convince the guard that he could be put to use in the kingdom

instead of being put to death. Let me be clear: She did not care about saving him; she simply doubted that his death would prevent his return.

“Up on the wall, Polly could see the outline of the train on the horizon. Down below, she could see her brother yelling. She hoped he wouldn’t recognize her in the 18th century gentleman’s traveling suit that she wore. Hoping to get out of his sight, Polly invited Cisserl into the castle for a drink, to which Cisserl responded, ‘I don’t go inside.’

“Polly said, ‘I’ll be right back’ and procured a large jug of wine, two glasses, a loaf of bread, some odious cheese and a mask from inside the castle. When Cisserl eyed the mask, she exclaimed,

“‘*You’re* invited to the party?’

“‘Dude, calm down. I’m just hiding from my murderous brother below. What’s the occasion though?’

“‘Masquerade. Typical set-up. I’ll be up here watching, or shall I say, hoping for invading sea monsters. I plan to embrace them with open arms.’

“Polly began to like the Princess who would never go by such a title.”

I opened one eye to gauge Mela’s expression. She looked amused.

“It’s okay. Shard’s gone.”

“So why aren’t you kissing me?”

Mela smiled and slowly removed her tuxedo jacket, the jacket Shard had left out, the jacket that had replaced the sweater.

“Uh, why aren’t you kissing *me*? At least pretend to be bold.”

“Hey don’t use my own story against me. Ok fine.” I pulled her towards me and kissed her and I will here curtail all crashing sentiments deriving from the notion that Mela viewed me with the painful desire with which I viewed her, as moments later she pulled away and said,

“I’m sorry. I have to go check on Shard.”

“Are you fucking hir?” I froze after I said this.

Mela raised an eyebrow and said, “We’re in an open relationship. Or so I thought. I’ll be back.”

I sat in the attic, watching the lantern flicker. I wondered if I could get out of the house without anyone noticing. I really wasn’t into love triangles, especially one that Mela could enact with such nonchalance. I really wasn’t into nonchalance, as tempting as it seemed. I could hear someone climbing the ladder. I lit a match and saw Shard’s masked face. Ze carried a jug of wine, a loaf of bread and some cheese that was probably odious.

“I need to hear the end,” Shard said.

I didn’t want to keep talking. The story had crumbled when Mela pulled away from me. I wanted to run away from Shard and hir house. But I had left Polly and Cisserl up on the castle gate. Carolien hadn’t even entered yet, threatening to shoot Polly with a longbow for having seduced Elizabeth. Polly hadn’t run back to Elizabeth’s throne *en masque*, leaving Carolien and Cisserl flushed with battle. Shard glared at me, but all I could think was, Mela must return, I will speak until Mela returns.

And so I continued.