



Atlantic Ocean

H. W. Haught

SOJOURN

Joseph Murphy

Illness is the doctor to whom we pay most heed; to kindness,
to knowledge, we make promise only; pain we obey.

— Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

- I** *[Sic]*
- II** *Spleen*
- III** *R & R*
- IV** *Delaware*
- V** *Envoi*

I

The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.

— Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*

[Sic]

The sign above the café's entrance brightened. *Dr. Albert's*, it said almost; the *s* refused to show, hadn't worked a while – there, though just so – but Corinne had only then noticed. Martin looked quickly before returning to his paper. The other letters hummed loudly, but, in a moment, neither of them would notice. Strings of hanged and miniature lanterns along the terrace awning illuminated too; each of them flickered to moderate life. Corinne removed her broad hat and hung it from her chair's arm. Several decks below, couples gathered poolside to watch the last moments of sunset, uncorking other-worldly colors, all to suggest some brighter, purer state just below the horizon.

Corinne wore well a look of complete and utter boredom. Still, she smiled when Martin looked up from his reading to show her something, something mid-paper and above the fold. It's always the same, isn't it? she offered without seeing it fully. So-and-so's ahead; so-and-so's behind, it says. Visit Wisconsin, it says. Out of one country and invade another, it says. Dogs and cats...

Martin laughed though he knew he probably shouldn't have.

She returned to her sketchbook. A half-circle tucks itself behind a single-line, while, before it, a few penned figures watch it go. She added nothing, not really – a few jagged lines beneath the figures' feet.

Inside, one of the boys passed behind the glass doors and windows without a glance in their direction.

Do you think they forgot us? Martin asked her.

—Who? She watched the water. The ships there, she pointed out, seem to hardly move. Minute to minute. —One day to the next, for that matter. —The boys? she said, turning to face him. There's no hurry, is there?

In a decisive motion, Martin folded the paper twice so that, later, it would fit beneath his arm.

All around them, night came in – too early for stars, the moon at waning crescent, boats that were surely still there disappeared. On and on, the ship's spotlights cast lazily upon the dark water, now and then offering some object to distract them.

From a narrow box of matches – one that bore the doctor's name too – Martin drew a match to light the candle between them. He struck it, and, nearly synchronous, a single firecracker burst over land. More followed, bloomed sporadically. Below, where some bathers had returned to the pool, cheers rose after each report. Others went on swimming or, in robes and slippers, shuffled toward the arcade shops, their cabins.

One of the boys brought a teapot and left it with them before either could protest.

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From perfect emptiness, a garish dahlia soundlessly broke, reported an artless pale-green, and slipped from the sky with a falling-leaves effect. A tourbillon followed, pierced the afterglow with silver, white, then gold. Its sound followed a beat later.

—Where do you think we are? Martin said, pointing toward the pallid horizon during a fading pause. Though there was no way he could have known it, for the slack silhouette of the coastal town was mostly indiscernible, he thought, for a moment, he recognized it.

Just to the left and above, the dull sliver of moon glowed more like a prop than what it was.

He guessed Wilmington or Myrtle Beach, Surf or even Ocean City. Corinne shrugged and covered her eyes as a searchlight roved slowly past. Honestly, she'd no idea. Could have been anywhere north of Charleston. That was the last place the ship had come to port – and that had been months before. Or south, for that matter. And really it didn't matter much.

In every direction, the water seemed to rise around them like a bowl.

—If you really wonder, she said, I'm sure you could find out. Ask the boy when he comes around, she said.

—*If*, Martin said and raised a finger. The boys were all inside, a team of them polishing the mirrored walls along the café's far side. He heard them laughing as they rigorously polished their reflections' faces, groins.

Anyway, they would know, and, as the searchlight's light receded from the room, she made some gesture he didn't quite understand. Why wonder now? she said. Be content, she suggested, that you're somewhere at all. Somewhere else, really. I rarely

hear anything anymore, but the little I do – well, it seems tense, unpleasant. Everywhere – not just one place.

–And are you? he wondered.

What? Content? She pushed the sleeves of her black sweater to her elbows. Yes, she thought so, and removed the silver ring from her thumb, turned it over then replaced it. I've been to some pretty dingy places. This is far better. Besides, I've never really been to many *places*, and I've certainly never been to the places I *think* of. She said the company could do.

The boy returned – this time with a basket of bread – just as Martin was about to reply. Instead, he ordered another pot of tea, which had been surprisingly good.

She returned to her sketches. As she absently drew, she cracked bread and swabbed it in oil before eating it. Mostly, she watched Martin over the pages: adjusting his shirt's collar, touching his chin's stubble, and looking – almost passively, she thought – past her toward whatever was there, at the water's edge as they perceived it. By candlelight, he reminded her of those anachronous photos in which families dress up for souvenirs; his clothes seemed drab though not unfitting, and the look he wore then – made somehow to look old, though he had, only a few months before, turned thirty-two – seemed to gaze toward some future he'd never reach. Perhaps it was the sudden motion of a searchlight nearby that recalled for her the camera's bulb. Whatever he saw or whatever he was thinking seemed to strike him, she noted, lowering the book slightly, as very funny, and she nearly laughed too but instead politely covered her mouth.

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Inside, the boys worked to dismantle the dining room. They whipped tablecloths from every booth and stacked chairs in precarious piles. While the linens soaked, one of them emerged from the kitchen to advise Corinne's wine selection; his shirt's sleeves were damp and transparent to the elbows. The wet soles of his shoes bleated on the tiles as he approached. By ship regulation he couldn't have been a day older than seventeen, but the way he spoke and dared to lead her hand with a gentle grasp back to the menu's wine list imbued him with a fetid air of adulthood, one that felt practiced and well worn. All the boys reeked of it. With excitement, he apologized about the low stock. But I can still recommend one of my favorites, he continued ridiculously. A Hungarian wine, *Halál Pillanata*, which, with a long finger, he pointed out to her, pronounced it perfectly too – or as perfectly as anyone could tell.

With a wry look, Martin listened as the boy went on to compliment the wine's body, legs, and head... As he finished, the boy swept his hair from his eyes with a flattened hand, another practiced motion.

He'd be back in a moment, to give her time to decide. *Halál Pillanata*, he said again.

—Some pristine nonsense, Martin said.

Yes, but he delivered it so well, she said, still looking over the list. —Like a strange, little robot.

A crossette bloomed with a willow effort, reporting pistils of pink and blue.

When the boy appeared again, Corinne gave him her cabin number and asked for the *hall I'll peal...* —Yes, that one, she said when he corrected her and closed the menu with some finality.

The boy smugly took it.

—You will have some, won't you? Corinne said. I doubt the doctor would approve, but...

He knows nothing, Martin said plainly and waved even the thought of him away.

Maybe so, Corinne said, adding only that it was, at times, hard to tell for sure. Sometimes he comes up with the greatest notions — psychotic, yes, but great in their own ways still.

I honestly wouldn't know. I've only seen him from afar — heard about him from you or Adrian. I never see him actually —By design, he added unnecessarily. The doctor, Martin was relatively certain, was as mad as they come — harmlessly so but mad all the same.

Like everyone else, I'm sure. You really should go to see him, she said. He's not so bad. Well, no, he is, but it's incredibly entertaining, like —Well, I don't know what.

Dr. Albert, Martin said. He laughed.

Corinne looked at a place in the foreground: a spotlight hovered over the turning and lacing water. Just the other day, she recalled, he went on and on about the complications of *modern living*. It was an earnest lamentation, at the very least. If the world wasn't quite as it was, he said and seemed to think he'd have had children or felt right in doing so. A bit dismal, yes, but his points were taken all the same – earnest, she said, smirking sardonically, just as the doctor had.

Martin smiled absently.

I imagine you'd need to be a little mad, Corinne said, for all this.

Or perfectly sober.

Returning to leave the stout bottle between them, the boy tucked his hands behind his back. —Americans, right? he said.

It's obvious? Martin asked, eyeing the bottle.

Most of the passengers – us, too. Well, he said and awkwardly asked if he might also wish them a happy holiday.

—Is it? Corinne said with a scathing glance.

At that, the boy disappeared again, a white towel hanging from his back pocket and swinging.

Martin fixed their glasses, saying, To hallways or whatever this is, as he pushed one toward her.

Six months now? Corinne asked, and that sounded about right to him. They'd met six months before, soon after he'd come aboard.

They touched glasses, and, drawing them back, both took a small sip.

Oh God, Corinne said, touching her mouth. I don't know if the smell's better or worse than the taste.

Martin simply looked at the dark, red drink before him. He put it beneath his nose. —Better, I think, he said, drinking a bit more.

Touching her throat, Corinne coughed while Martin spun his glass before him, absently reading the wine's description at the base of the bottle's label. He cringed and turned it away. Still, he drank his portion and poured another, adding, as he did so, To a troubling and eerie youth —To our doctor and To our future, to which Corinne, with a groan, drank again, adding only, Bleak as it may be.

Five decks below, Mara insisted we go out, so I took her cabin's flashlight to lead us. Its beam cut a pale column ahead, whitening the fog that loosely unfurled over the ship's lower half. From above, Corinne mistook us for a roaming couple, strolling on a downed-vista and likely huddling together in robes and nothing else, all for a romantic nighttime view: a girandola spinning stupidly.

Against the dense fog, I was a severe shadow with a head bent slightly, hooked like a shepherd's staff over the girl — both of us foreshortened beyond age.

Soon, our light retraced its steps, went out, and we disappeared, for a few pages more.

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Martin held his leg at his knee, lifted his leg and rested its foot against the railing.

She cringed. —Does it hurt? She could tell by his face that it probably did, but he said it did not.

Getting better. More a dull ache. He rolled his pant leg up to adjust the brace he wore: sleek, metal runners with elastic fittings. At night, sometimes it got worse, though less and less often now.

Something rose to a point, whistled and disappeared, leaving a faint-yellow trail behind it. In its place, a Saturn shell rolled.

—Martin, she began, but, just as she was about to go on, the ship's diaphone, dull and hollow, went off. And though it sounded every hour, six 'til ten, Corinne jumped, quietly swearing, and only narrowly avoided spilling her wine.

Martin laughed but reached too for her hand, which she quietly drew away.

Removing her scarf and hanging it around the empty chair beside her, she fanned herself with both hands. —They must constantly remind us time's passing? she said lightly. Sometimes, she thought aloud, our stay's marked more by words, by conversations — by silences — than time itself; still it never goes away does it?

Are you all right? Martin asked.

She nodded, though, when a spotlight reached her, she appeared drained of almost all color. It frightened me, that's all, she explained. It'll pass, she insisted and drew herself forward in her chair. She'd spent all day going from one appointment to the

next; she was tired. —I forget sometimes, she said. It's easy, I suppose, to forget, how short a time it's been. She recalled for him how one of the boys led her across the dock, dragging her wheeled suitcase behind him, and held his shoulder as they climbed the walkway — like it was yesterday or, at least, not nearly as long ago as it truly was. More than a year, she said — though it had actually been nearly three, would be exactly three years in less than a month. A year goes so quickly. —But let's talk of something else, she said. Beyond the glass doors, she fixed upon their reflections in the mirrors; there, as another spotlight passed them, they seemed to be talking of something very serious, pinioned to their table and caught, in that brief light, like conspirators, both in black and leaning against the rail. —Or it's this awful wine.

Let's talk about September then.

Corinne groaned and turned her eyes to the stars, which she just noticed were like little doorways opening up. —Not that, please. She tried to have him look, but he persisted. —Fine, she said. Are you *really* leaving?

It's not up to me entirely.

She knew all that. But it could be. She looked at him meaningfully — or tried her best to do so. Looking for Gemini — still half a year away — she thought she might have to shoot him in the other leg to make sure he'd stay. I've never even held a gun, she confessed.

With a signal to one of the boys – ignored, of course – Martin said it probably didn't matter much. It wasn't any more or less dangerous if she had. —Or you could leave with me.

Corinne blushed deeply. —Where? I wouldn't even *know* where. She waved the idea off and refused to even think it. Far off still. Let's enjoy ourselves until then. Maybe you'll catch something anyway and stay here with us. She teased him.

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Fissures of lightning opened and closed. A little nearer, two parallel comets silently rose from land and burst, peonies: red and white and blue, patriotic; all of which they ignored. Everything dropped, and, across the bed of black water, beneath the bursts of color, the graph of a skyline could be made out again, miniature and flat. Then it was gone. Otherwise, the night was thick; deep, sullen water slapped the ship's sides below.

—A storm is coming, Martin said finally.

Yes, she'd felt it earlier, a trapped breeze in the inner arcade. All afternoon, the awnings had filled and tugged at the storefront, and the whipping, lowered flags all seemed to be bucking at their posts. Corinne pushed her glass away. It's bitter, she said and shrugged, turning the glass 'round and around by its stem without drinking anymore. With a shiver, she lifted her scarf and drew it around her. It's *very* bitter actually, she said.

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A spotlight rose and settled on a buoy. At first, it was only something there, in the water; it flickered beneath the light like a projection, which made the buoy's visible movements appear stilted, sudden. In the dark water, it turned, batted one way or another by small crests. Its orange and white stripes had faded so that the buoy seemed but one color, a sickly pink or yellow, almost fleshy, and its light had dimmed, though some light did remain in it. As the water rose against it, the buoy seemed – at least to Martin – stuck eternally between two waves that refused to flatten, refused to disappear, two waves that rose continually just as the buoy became upright, glowing still, damp and pale pink or yellow. Such a strange place for a buoy, too – so far from land, so far from anything at all.

Corinne fooled with the silver chain she sometimes wore around her neck. –In three months, she said, letting the chain drop against her throat. Looking around her glass in a tired way, she seemed unwilling to start again, to say anything at all. –I'm sorry, she said, lifting the necklace again and laughing nervously. It's stupid, really.

But Martin insisted with a smile.

And, after a moment, she started again. You're leaving, she began, in three months.

Yes, he said —Though, he said, taking up his tea, I've not given it much thought. I was only...

Lightning arced all along the sky's dome, and, finally, there was rain, which struck the decks in a seamless sheet.

—No, she didn't think he — being Martin Touch — would have, she said a little more loudly, simply to be heard over the sudden rain.

He supposed he'd go home, and Corinne weakly smiled at the word. Wherever that might be, he added.

From behind her glass, she said, *And?* Put off by the smell, she replaced the glass without a sip.

And? Martin echoed.

Looking past him, she saw one of the boys duck beneath the counter. Nothing, she said, and, though she watched the counter intensely, the boy never resurfaced. It'll probably never arrive anyway, she said with a brief smile and left it at that.

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And, to the west, fireworks, mostly hidden now beyond a dense fog, still occasionally smattered and broke. There was thunder, which came in waves. As the storm worsened, the boys hurried to lower the flaps all along the café's open side, and, soon, nothing could be seen beyond the narrow room. Yet the wind still battered and the awnings

tensed; the world outside was blunt, obtuse, and pressed upon them only dully. Another plangent diaphone blast rang out, the last of the evening, slightly fainter and farther off, though it couldn't possibly have moved. But Corinne didn't flinch. Martin watched her, but she didn't seem to notice. Soon, the rain lifted, and the boys rolled the covers to drag them abaft.

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Before the ship, there was nothing, just a muddied, dense swath of night. The fireworks had now long faded above land, which seemed, too, to have disappeared, leaving only a blank sky, perhaps a faint glow, a slight change in the purple-black register, but no more than that.

When Corinne lifted the candle's glass, the freed flame grew and, for a moment, burned and thrived. The wick in its middle, charred and black, twisted as though alive. Wetting her fingertips against her lips, Corinne pinched it, to mercifully put it out, but it refused, and she quickly drew her hand away, shaking her fingers loosely though they hadn't been burned. A trick, she supposed. When the glass cover was replaced, the little flame kicked instantly but then began to dwindle, tamed.

From the kitchen, one of the boys began to sing some patriotic song, muffled to a rudimentary warbling by the swing-door; though he sang poorly, he sang unabashedly from the very center of his being like he meant every word.

—Tomorrow? Martin said.

Tomorrow? Corinne said, wincing at a high note —Oh, yes, I forgot. They had talked of making plans, hadn't they? Tomorrow. No, Corinne said —Actually. She saw the mirrored walls inside; a streak glared just above their reflections as another spotlight passed. —Let's not make any plans, Corinne said finally.

For a while, he said nothing, and, quietly turning her glass, she said nothing, too.

A pod of dolphins appeared in the ship's wake; their shiny, rubbery heads surfaced now and then, poking curiously from the dusky water. We'd seen dolphins before; sometimes dozens of them kept pace with the ship for days. There were stories that a few patients had swum among them in warm Floridian waters. Someone, in fact, was telling of that time just then, when she – she, her *very* self – had clung to a friendly one some years ago; it took her for a ride just beyond Boynton Beach's alluvion. Such lovely creatures – really, they are, the woman concluded. From the other bench, Mara watched them at play. She named them: Jack, Pink, Derby, Roy, Emma and Fig. One seemed a bit slower than the others and bluer than gray; she named that one after me. Adrian, she said. She felt sorry for him. –He looks sad – or hurt, she thought. Injured.

We were walking our neighbor's dog, Paul. Come on, Paul. On his collar, he wore a bell, and, while he walked beside us, it sounded pleasantly. Mara would run ahead and call to him, but he would only register his name with a lift of his head and slight tilt to his ears. Still, Mara hugged his neck and told him how good he was each time we caught up.

You're spoiling him, I said.

Only a little. She ran ahead, her terry cloth robe dragging along the deck behind her, and called for Paul, but he calmly kept pace at my side.

On the lido, every lounge chair was taken, but everyone lay so still – only the occasional slap of an awning when the warm wind changed direction.

Mara whispered as though we were in the medieval wing of a museum.

Strained and red, faces appeared beneath umbrellas as we approached.

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Mara lay face down. She'd shed the robe, which was balled at her feet, and hugged the lounge chair, interlocking her fingers. She turned her face to look at me beside her; the webbing of the seat had left a crisscross pattern across her forehead. —Relax, I said. You don't have to hold on so tightly.

She relented, letting her hands touch the deck. What are we doing today?

You've got an appointment in the saunas.

When?

Ten.

When's that?

About an hour from now.

Paul jumped onto the lounge and lay with her. She turned on her side to hug him and throw one leg over top of him.

Can Paul come?

I doubt he'd like it. Besides, Deiger wants him back.

What are you going to do?

I looked around the lido. The morning haze had all been burned away. Not sure. Wait for you. Put these on, I said, handing her her sunglasses – pink plastic rims with yellow cartoon crabs on top.

–Will you make any phone calls?

Home? Maybe. Something you want me to tell them?

She shook her head.

Anything you need?

No, she said, pulling Paul closer. Let's go swimming. She jumped from the lounge and stood over me. Get up. She pulled me by the hand toward the pool.

Paul watched, wisely silent. I touched his gray head.

You love Paul, she mocked.

Shut up, I said. But, yes, I do.

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Above us, the sun overflowed like a bath. Light hit the deck directly, striking the pool's surface with considerable intensity, glinting off the metal railings emerging from the water at even intervals, exits marking 3 ft., 5 ft., 9 and 12 ft., and the field of horizontal bathers' bodies.

Mara held onto the parallel bars and leaned back on her heels; with an audible breath, she sprinted toward the diving board's end, bounced, and soared at a slight arc over and into the water. She clutched her knees to her chest but hardly made a splash.

I grasped the cobbled ledge. With a deep breath, I drifted under, where I could watch the better swimmers below, belly up or down, passing beneath the frenetic legs that roofed them.

A more courageous man swam gracefully toward the depths, sinking like a fallen statue, very sure and poised, only to collide with the pool's floor – painted a light blue – at full speed. Limply, he floated to the surface. As he burst lamely out of the water, blushing terribly, a woman in a little red suit latched onto him and dragged him to the shallow end, where, surrounded by a half dozen children, she comforted him and kissed his head. Her lips were red too, with his blood, which steadily appeared from under his hair.

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Two boys lowered the flag – a bold caduceus against sea-foam – from its mast. In its place, they raised two black banners.

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In the women's sauna, Mara lay on a damp, plank bench along the lower tier and listened. In the upper lofts, women – most of them four or five times her age – hardly noticed she was there.

One of them descended to pour water over the coals.

Patience, another said from above.

The coals steamed and released a loud hiss.

It takes time.

In a way, I guess I've been fortunate, she said, climbing back up to join them. I've spent all my life looking back though. But we can't go *back*, can we? Always forward, she said.

Patty, another began —Patty, you're young.

Patty scoffed. Not so much anymore. Old enough to remember what the world was like a few decades ago. Old enough to really wonder if the world didn't end sometime in our lifetimes without us knowing.

Patty, calm down.

One doesn't have to go far to see evidence, she said. Look around.

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I went to meet Anton Deiger in the often-neglected aft bar. As Deiger came in, only a few minutes later, Paul obediently went to greet his owner mid-room.

Hey, boy, he said, lightly touching the dog's head. Waiting long? he asked, groaning as he climbed the two steps to join me in one of the elevated buddy-booths along.

Hardly noticed, I said. They're replaying the debates. Though I'd seen them several times before, I'd slid to the edge of my seat to watch them once more. There were constant replays on a few channels.

Again? They've got to let this go, Deiger said, hardly noting the television above the bar. It's been years. Thanks for taking him, again. How much do I owe you? He reached for his wallet.

Nothing.

I insist, he said, really.

Deiger, it's nothing.

Then I'll get this round.

Fine, I said, shaking my head at the TV.

Don't let it get under your skin. That's what they want to happen.

It's working. It's just wave after wave of stupidity, I said.

With lulls in between, Deiger said. That's the way of the ocean. He waved one of the boys over from the bar. Two more of those, he said, pointing to my glass, nearly empty. Do me a favor and change the channel too. You're destroying my friend here.

In a moment, the boy appeared again; he'd found some figure skating on one of the mid-channels. Good?

Better, Deiger said, just as a teenage girl went sliding headlong across the ice. Everyone in the bar laughed.

Paul went to follow someone into the restroom, but the door swung shut before he could get in.

I whistled, but he only turned – just his head – to look toward me.

Deiger said his name, and he came running.

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Beside the jukebox, someone had hung a gilded pair of running shoes by their laces. A small plaque dedicated them to Jack ‘Fast Track’ Plano. Framed and autographed photographs of famous musicians, athletes, actors and actresses hung all around. Among them was one of Plano, shirtless and posed on a soundstage beach; his autograph was broad and wild. It was all kitsch, unlike the posh bow bar: two lacrosse sticks met above the counter; a rabbit’s head was mounted above the door; an autoharp, maraca and flute were arranged in a hanging basket above the pool table. Deiger put another rack credit on his cabin number, and the pool balls were released again. You rack and I’ll break, he said and disappeared into the hall, to smoke no doubt. By the time he returned, I’d gone for another round of drinks. More of the same, I said, sliding a beer across the table’s edge. Loser buys next, he said and, without deliberation, sent the

cue ball careening toward the others, scattered them and sunk two. Stripes then – and proceeded to down another two. I nicked the felt first go, but then so did he.

You heard about Martin’s book? Deiger said, chalking his cue.

He wrote a book? I watched the cue ball bounce off the bumper and come recklessly close to the eight ball.

Not him, no. There’s one coming out about ’im though. Some ghostwriter. Or whatever the word is when someone writes your story.

I laughed. Do you think he knows?

He has to, right?

I guess.

He shrugged. Anyway. Maybe we’ll be in it.

Sure.

He never mentioned it, then?

Not to me. He doesn’t say much – especially not about himself.

Right. I guess that comes with the territory – spotlight and all.

Barely a spotlight at this point, I said. More like a sniper’s sight. Better or worse, he’s gone from household name to cult hero – urban legend maybe. People forget. Quickly.

We kept pace, and, soon, there was only the eight ball.

Call it, I said.

Back corner, he said, pointing with his cue, and took it. —You’re buying.

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From his jacket pocket, Deiger removed a handkerchief and preemptively held it against his mouth. He looked at the sun, the way the water came to life beneath it. A plane's white trail appeared in the sky. He grasped the railing and coughed, lurching forward suddenly. He pulled the handkerchief from his lips without looking at it and shoved it in his jacket again. The coast looked like a row of knuckles. In between, a few sailboats bobbed.

Settled, I said, bringing Paul out with me.

He looked at us and weakly smiled.

You look pale, I said. All right?

Fine, he said. He patted the pockets of his jacket as though looking for something. He walked ahead of us, reaching now and then to touch the railing as though to be sure it was still there. He stopped near the life rafts.

I bent down and let Paul off-leash.

—Look at him, he said with a laugh. He acts like he's never been on this deck before. Paul had his nose to the ground as he hurried forward, stopping here and there to investigate something further. Must be wonderful. Everything new, surprising — unworn. No history —No future, for that matter.

No chronicle of injustice; no crushing anxiety.

He coughed as gently as he could into the crook of his arm. Paul, come here, he said to draw him away from a couple up ahead. Very good boy. I should be going, he said. He checked his watch. Shit. Yeah, I've got to run.

I handed him the leash, which he regarded strangely for a moment before laying it across his shoulders.

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At the telephone bank, I punched my cabin number into the keypad and lifted the receiver. In a moment, the line came alive with a hollow, far-off tone. I entered a few numbers, waited, as, with eerie clicks, it thought and processed; there was, of course, a delay, which sounded like human breathing, but, though no one answered, the line was connected all the same. It rang and rang and rang then, after a few distant clicks —Hello? I said, waiting. From somewhere, I heard my own voice saying, Hello, 'ello, 'ello, 'llo, but nothing else. The man in the next row was having a loud conversation with someone; it ended abruptly when he slammed the receiver down again and again. I hardly recognized Martin's voice — actually, I didn't at all until I saw him walking away, dragging his one leg aside much more than I'd seen ever before.

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Returning to his cabin, Martin sat briefly on his bed, which creaked loudly beneath him. His room was sparse: a small desk, a chair, and a table upon which stood an old lamp. His portal had no curtain. His walls had no pictures. Though he'd been there for months, his clothes spilled mostly from a suitcase on the floor; a few shirts hung in the closet, but that had no door.

He drew water from the sink and let it run over his hands. Above, there was no mirror, yet he looked deeply at the bare wall as though there was, as though he was realizing something profound.

Slipping off his shoes, Martin lay back against his pillow.

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I waited outside while Mara went to change. The sky was a pale shade of blue, almost gray. Still, my shadow pointed away from me and angled sharply toward the pools. Okay in there? I said. She didn't answer. Mara? I could hear her moving in the cabinet. Finally, she appeared again, still in her bathing suit. What are you doing in there?

Sorry, I was reading.

Get back in there, I said and shut the door behind her. What were you reading anyway?

The paper. Someone left it behind.

Don't do that. It's not good for you —For anyone, really, I added.

A few boys stood nearby, watching over the bathers. Occasionally, one of them ran off to collect towels from relinquished lounges.

Well, they don't look sick, one of them was saying.

They all laughed.

Mara? Let's get out of here.

What's an eight-letter word for *idiot*?

Imbecile, I said eventually. Imbeciles.

High above, the waiting room windows, tinted rich amber. Soft, caramel daylight played in lattices upon the carpet. Boys came and went from the nurses' station door. Occasionally, saccharine jazz asserted itself.

I busied myself with a puzzle, one of those palm-sized plastic squares you tilt until four of the five silver pellets find divots along an internal maze's floor. Mara hovered at my elbow and coached. I had three.

—What happens to the one left over? She'd come to stand before me, both hands on my knees. She pointed to the one likely to be left out, constantly throttled about a lonely corner. I feel bad for this one, she said. Why even have the extra? What's the point?

The woman beside us laughed. Here, she said, offering Mara an open magazine. Mara immediately pressed it to her face and inhaled loudly. —Perfume sample, the woman explained with a shrug.

I got four, I said, just as a nurse appeared in the foreground of their glassed-in station.

—Gallagher, she said, but no one stirred. She said it again, experimenting with a different pronunciation —Gallagher? You're not Gallagher, are you? She pointed at me with a ballpoint pen.

I'm her nurse, I said, pointing at Mara, who, just then, lay, magazine across face, atop the coffee table.

The nurse shut the tiny window at the station, but we all could hear them laughing inside.

There was something wrong with the woman's hand, a palsy; it seemed to clutch something though there was nothing there. She held it close against her as she read.

//

At last, a nurse called, Santiago, Santiago anyone, and delivered us down the hall.

Ours was the rustic room, an exam room clownishly made up to feel like home – or homely, at least. Crowded with hanging herbs, bucolic paintings, the room was kept a few degrees warmer than the rest. The examination table was even upholstered in a muted shade of brownish-green meant to evoke manure afield, aflung.

Left alone, I helped Mara with her shoes. As I pried off the last, I fell backward for her amusement and knocked as much as I could from the counter and onto the floor.

And she laughed in her peculiar way, aged well beyond her nine years.

So, I did my best impression, wearing a paper mask I found in a drawer; I waved my hands above her in the typical hocus-pocus manner; I declared everything – *every last piece of her* – absolutely and utterly rotten, saying she must, at a later date but very

soon, by a little-known procedure, have this and *this* and this and *that* removed while pointing to the general areas of her vital organs.

—Is it all that serious? she said, clutching her hands beneath her chin.

Afraid so, miss, I said. It's all gotta go. I thumbed over my shoulder.

She slid under the paper cover, folding herself in a delicate and feline manner; it wrinkled and clung to her bare legs whenever she moved. —Well make it fast then, she said, closed her eyes and tightened her little fists.

Above her, a framed photograph showed an old farmer, his back to the photographer, peeing into a pond.

With a sigh, I slumped into the chair beside her.

Maybe the doctor will find you a cure this time, she said, opening her eyes.

God, I hope not. In the last few weeks – much to Mara's entertainment – Dr. Albert had taken an interest in my case (or *non-case*, truly), as hers proved wholly inscrutable, naturally, for him. He had long decided hers was a matter of the mind, not body, thus out of his expertise. Dealing with trauma, he had said, the body can become strange. When he'd discovered during an appointment the week prior I was asthmatic, he snapped and revelled – simply knowing *something* was wrong with me. I stood, resuming my doctor-like murmuring. At the cabinet, I opened every drawer and stood before them, looking stupidly – just as he would have done – for *something, something, something* when the door swung open and the doctor came in.

With a sideways look, he ignored me and the mess on the floor and made a joke, clapped and dove in, as he put it.

I closed all the drawers and, leaving the paper mask on the counter, stepped into the hall.

Mara looked on as he inspected her.

//

Perhaps it was the heated room or maybe the brightly polished hall, which seemed much longer this time through. I ducked into the patient restroom and drew cool water from the sink across my face and neck. I felt flush. Condensation crept across the mirror, so I wiped it away. Against the bare, white walls of the room, I wavered (all in white, too) without focus, yet my gaze remained steady – its eyes lodged deeply within a moon-shaped, full face that startled me. This face, beyond the flush of it, observing the contours of my cheeks, hidden as they were beneath a sparse beard, belongs, I thought, though young, to some other time. Faces today, I thought, are turned slightly too, to look just left-of-center or right-. The condensation had returned, but, this time, when I tried to wipe it away, it refused to go.

In a moment, I woke on the floor and searched my pockets for those tiny, yellow pills – for seasickness, if they worked at all. I chewed a few and wobbled outside.

At the fountain, I drank, eying, as I did, the hall which suddenly seemed much longer than it had even moments before; above the fountain, I observed a painting I'd never noticed: a port with triangular white ships pricking the muddy blue-and-yellow while the washed-out cove yaws about a bulbous gray stone. I stood a while, just thinking.

//

Under the doctor's hands, Mara moved slightly, and he scolded her; she lay prone in just her under-things. Her hair was unkempt to her liking. The nearby chair filled her tossed-off gown more fully than she did. A bruise had appeared beneath her left rib so he pressed it, and she flinched. In his gloved hands, he rotated her limbs. Whistling, he checked her ears and eyes, looked into her open mouth, her nose.

In a moment, I returned, and, with a glance, he waved me toward his side. He looked at me over his glasses.

With a sigh, he looked at her again. Above the thick, round lenses he wore, he must have seen a ghostly shape, pale and hovering against the gray table, that of a little girl, more or less, warbling as though seen through water, and, beneath, a crisp figure of the same. Is she getting any sun at all? She looks like an apparition.

I grasped the counter beside us. Daily, I told him. Behind his back, I made a choking face, which Mara seemed to appreciate. —The sick favor the indoors. Or mountaintops, I said.

Under the fluorescents, which he drew from the locker, he went on examining her, muttering something about the stupid décor, which admitted only lamps with shades. The fireplace wasn't even a real fireplace, yet the whole room smelled faintly of smoke.

Concluded and, by his own admission, very tired, he turned to me and removed his gloves. His hands were well kept, his nails clean and filed, treated and spoiled like emissaries. He smiled weakly, pocketing his pen. Well, he said, nothing new, and, after jotting something indecipherable down, closed her file.

With a nod, I retrieved her things for her.

—If you've a moment, Adam, he said while holding the door open for me. He waited for the door to firmly close behind us before speaking. —I'm to be blunt, he said.

I nodded and crossed my arms, dully excited by the conversation's prospects — though I was, just then, fighting an unrelated urge to vomit.

Angling his body toward me, he said, At night, I think of *her* — of Mara, that is — and what she means.

The hall was empty in either direction.

My face must have betrayed me because he immediately rebuked, saying it was a *professional* interest — perhaps literary, too. She confounds me. But, he said, what

interests me more is what she means *for you*. Every patient that comes through my door, he said, is like a symbol of time. Symbols, all of them, he said, taking my arm so that I would look at him. Something that *means* something else.

Yes, a symbol, I said. I know what...

—Don't be smart. But Mara is a disappearing symbol, he posited, disappearing *right before our eyes*. And that, he concluded, affects *her* not in the least, but it affects you, and prodded me in the chest. He said, scratching his chin, But *why* you? He had a bad tooth in the back of his mouth that he perpetually sucked. She's been through so much for someone so small. Death is *written* upon her, much more so than upon any other of us. Her parents' early exit, he said. That is never easy. Especially if one survives the punctuation... So, he said. Why you? His glasses slid, once again, to the tip of his nose, and he fixed them to see me. —Well?

Cousin, on my mother's side, I began.

He was fooling with something in his pocket. I want you to tell me, Adam, very simply why you are here. His cheeks flushed as he repeated his question.

A boy from the waiting room passed and, mistaking me from behind for one of his own, punched me solidly in the arm. Even as I cursed and got up from the floor, the doctor ignored him.

Answer me, he said, arms akimbo. He looked at me directly then, taking off his glasses and waiting for something.

I tried once more. I've changed jobs now and then. This one seemed to take me far from that – and everything else. Honestly, I added.

He seemed content ignoring everything I'd said. I think I know, he said and looked at his shoes. The brocaded laces hung to either side of his feet. Some men attach themselves to their fears and force themselves to see them, to face them. And some still, he went on, *tend* their fears, cultivate and embrace them. He touched the bare bridge of his nose. He said, It's not my calling to care for the living but to recognize the buds of death's bloom growing within and to pluck it out of them, the living, if I can. After a long pause, during which I surveyed the empty halls, he said, Are you afraid of death?

Sorry?

No, I supposed not or, at least, that you'd say as much. My time, he said, is spent with the failing body, not the cured. As you must well know. That's an impossible thought – for most. To them, watching life end is... He said, considering the words carefully, It's devastating. Because, he said finally, they're afraid they've not lived or not lived enough – a stupid concern, if you ask me. Yet, despite how wonderful a life's apogee may be, I wait for that life too, to guide it slowly – as slowly as I can – into the dark. That's what scares them... The inevitability. He went on: And there are stories of some that don't appear to decay at all. By *death*, he said, I don't mean strictly the stopping of a heart, the extinguishing of a mind. I mean, he said, *the end of living*. You're not dead yet, he said, replacing his glasses and placing one hand on my shoulder. In my medical opinion, at least, he said with a dumb smile.

Looking past him, I could still see the painting above the fountain, though, from that angle, it appeared as only a brown and blue texture, a vertical line or even a window.

There are, always have been, he said, scratching his head, stories of people who shed their skin and become something else all together. A rock or a leopard, an intestinal worm, some bacteria atop a Florida pool, he said. And this odd change, for some, may reveal the strength of the spirit, but, to me, he said, touching his chest, a doctor, the act is wholly destructive. Lowering his eyes at me, he said, You will *not* come back. Even if you did by some cosmic mistake, with each new shape you took, another would be abandoned, and that loss is permanently marked upon the birth of the new, weakened, filtered through the last life because the movement of a life is not toward infinity but toward zero, falling – for some, more rapidly than others – into the realm of darkness. And, from that place, there is no escape. A moment, for you, perhaps, in youth, is still the mystery of the living; it should be, as even time decays. Every moment *should* be, as was our first. –Wonderful, though it is pitted against that immense emptiness of death. He showed me the size of that emptiness with his hands. You look pale.

I admitted I wasn't feeling well.

Don't tell me any of this is a surprise!

No, no, I said.

Sometimes, the doctor said, you must amputate a bad limb to save the body from infection.

We stood in silence.

A nurse passed; her small heels tacked along the tiles.

—You're going to be okay, he said, and I nodded just to be rid of him. With a faint smile, he asked how I felt.

Watching the nurse disappear around the corner, I said, Very ordinary.

Ordinary, no *very*, the doctor said. Ordinary is one of those words. Like normal. He held me by both arms and shook me. He laughed, as though to empty himself. I've seen plenty a lazier and stupider man do great things. All under the shadow of death yet. Let pain sharpen you, he said. Only a regular life dulls. With a swipe of his nose, he continued: To be alive, you must let your spirit walk freely about as your body does now and hide that body away. Life, he said, like love, is better when the loss is acknowledged, the possibility of loss, the inevitability of loss. He said, raising one finger, Remember this one thing, if nothing else. He winked and patted my head. To do so, he had to stand on his toes, and I could hear his tight shoes wrinkling.

Mara was just as we'd left her.

—Oh, Adam, he said, snapping his fingers.

Adrian, I said.

He seemed not to understand. Anyway, he said and performed a box step, to show me he'd been practicing; he'd told us he'd just started waltzing lessons last appointment.

I nodded.

Well, he was off to a lancing.

The water, that morning, appeared suddenly calm, almost unmoving, like a tabletop, with light spilt out upon it, toys left scattered upon its surface: a pair of sailboats scuttled left. Inside, the booths were crowded. A family rearranged tables so they could all sit together, generation aside generation. The boys had wheeled in a television as usual, and it stood on a tall cart in the corner. The sound was low, but you could see people straining to hear what it said, even as their companions spoke.

Martin sat alone on the balcony, where direct, early morning sun deterred others from joining. He drank coffee and looked through the pile of letters he'd received that week, fewer than the week before – and certainly fewer than the months before that. A year before, he'd have had boxes. Now it seemed he received only the threats, and it'd be decades before those dwindled.

//

His brother's letter, dated almost a month before, went like this:

Martin,

I feel warm, having just swigged a glass of cider. Our best batch yet. Since dinner, I've been sitting in the "sunroom" alone, listening to the scraps of radio that come and go, loud and pompous talk and game shows, while reading quietly your last letter. I suppose you are doing well. I hadn't any

need to write, and still I do not, yet a strong desire to write you overtook me (I've taken another glass or two with me). I fought the urge, as I thought it necessary to go on with reading – I brought a book, too; my hands were full. Actually, your letter fell from the pages of the book, where I had cleverly put it and its envelope to use. Yet, here I am, writing, drunk in the “sunroom,” my glass empty – was it one or two more? My book – oh, I must have misplaced it.

Today is the last day of examinations. We must be approaching midnight now, June or so, what I mean. Middle of month, midyear, midnight. It'll likely be a week or more before I mail this off; I hardly ever get to town. Early, today, I took Marnie out boating; I told her of you, my brother – the things we did as kids, how inseparable we'd been (and still are). She smiled at your name. The lake was as perfect as one could imagine: no clouds, a soft breeze, and a shade that stretched across the shallow end making it cool enough to wade-in. I let her row through the boils and watched her short, muscular arms windmill out of the cut-off sleeves of her dress. Off to starboard a thick underwater tangle of rubbish turned, but she didn't seem to notice. A light fog pressed us together as we walked through the park, where thin protest was taking place (*no more*, but what?). Somewhere there were gunshots punctuating; an oddly beautiful remark was made. She said, “One more for an ellipsis.”

But I'd rather talk of the great-ship *Sustina* [sic], which suited you, if I recall now, as you took to it. Your color changed; you were no longer that sickly green, no longer that bored hump in your back. All you had to do was play up that limp of yours to fit in; you were, I believe, truly sad to go – even if you'd never show it. I remained at the dock for a long time, watching it disappear, the ship and you in it – or *on* it. Perhaps you saw me, my shape tall against the blank city dock; I do not know. What a sight, that empty sea – *ocean*, whatever – just after you had gone. It seemed to seal itself atop you as you pressed on. It had opened and closed like a curtain, but you were still there, as I imagined, saw, and remembered. Has it truly been nearly a year? I wonder how you've aged, how our features have continued to diverge – me, ever more handsome.

And, Martin, if you need anything at all before coming in, promise to call; they do have a phone, I checked, though, knowing you, you likely don't know or care about that. Or, perhaps, write, as that is more your style. Though I don't expect you will do either, as that is even more *you*. Your last (and first) letter came as a surprise, which partly explains my sedated response. I'd engage in some imaginings of seafaring life's pleasures – the broken hearts at every port – but I expect you'd tell it better (rather, without a word, you'd let the mystery throb like a vein). You

sounded well – or as you wrote, *well enough* – and I'd be pleased if that remained, brother.

Daniel

Martin read it again before returning it to his jacket pocket.

The others were from his various lawyers, none of whom seemed to know what the other was doing. The most recent, dated a few days before, recalled their phone call, and, on behalf of the firm, he – Koch of the Lee, Gavin, Koch, Meyer & Graham Group – apologized. The remainder of his settlement would appear in his designated account by month's end, minus massive legal fees obviously.

And, of course, there were those ever-creative threats of death.

//

Mara exhaled against the mirror until it fogged. With her index finger, she traced an imperfect circle, two curt lines for eyes and a lopsided and curving smile. She watched it fade until almost gone entirely then she breathed onto it again to bring it back, even briefly.

//

Sarah worked until four each day, though she often left a few minutes before. There were no records; she simply left the shop. The next day she worked again. In between, she never thought of it, never ruminated upon the empty shelves left 'til tomorrow or ignored stock. She spoke of neither customers nor her mother who ran the little gift shop on the sixth deck.

It was ten minutes to four when she appeared in the arcade; she was dressed in athletic clothes: bright-orange, form-fitting shirt and soccer shorts. Her hair was pulled into a tight knot at the top of her head. She faintly smiled at a group of patients as they passed, and, for a while, she followed them through to the often-neglected starboard wing: dance studio, electronics/watch repair, photo lab, and a few empty storefronts.

We kissed quickly before the glass space that once housed a massage parlor.

Oh, God, don't ask me about work, she said. Whenever it rains, people end up in the shop, trying to fix the weather by buying one thing or another. Or, worse yet, buying one of those rainy-day books – as if only a storm permits a bit of light-hearted literary frolic. She rolled her eyes. What've you been doing? You look awful by the way. What are these? Did you make shorts of your scrubs? She laughed. Jesus, Adrian. Come on, we're going to be late.

The boys smoking outside the café were singing an adapted version of *Barnacle Bill the Sailor* when we passed.

//

In one of the last rows, I sat cross-legged with both my hands, palm-up, on the floor. I had my eyes closed, though, I admit, I opened them several times to be sure no one else could see me.

I breathed deeply.

I could hear Sarah's breathing beside me. She breathed regularly.

From the front of the room, a low-timbre gong sounded, not struck but polished, brushed gently. Still, the sound startled me, and, opening my eyes, just slightly, I saw one of the boys hurrying, lightly, around the people, touching each of them on the forehead with what looked like clear oil. As he approached me, I looked up at him and he at me. I closed my eyes and barely felt his fingers upon my brow. The whole room smelled of lavender.

Somehow, we all moved, nearly two dozen of us, spontaneous but synchronous, onto our back, where, still, breathing, we focused on our limbs, flat against the thinly cushioned floor, and the light music – gongs, bowls, and bells – became as frenetic as they could become, to whose crescendo I imagined my mind removed from my body, though it still could see, for I saw myself there, on the floor, hands, palm-up, and eyes very closed, feet splayed, and my mind laughing though my body remained very, very still – stiller than still.

Someone struck the bell once more, and I heard it, though far off.

I felt Sarah's hands on me, and I opened my eyes. Everyone else had already gone. She had a towel around her neck. —Some workout, right?

And I saw she glistened with sweat.

//

Now on the bedside table, all in a line: a notebook and a pen; a leather wallet with no money inside, very worn; a pocket knife with initials on its body, *DAT*; a mint's empty wrapper; a toothpick, unused; a set of keys, three in all, on a ring and carabiner; a folded scrap of newspaper; the face of a watch on half a band. In a wire basket: unposted letters. In a frame, a single photograph: he and Daniel in angled lawn chairs; Daniel, mid-laugh, raises a beer toward the camera's lens while Martin leans forward, reaching for something out-of-frame and wearing a look on his face that's nearly unrecognizable. The desk's lamp cast an oblong light upon it all; it flickered then steadied itself. Propped beside, a portable radio played music for a while before giving way to an advertisement: mattresses in Providence, insanely priced for quick sale. Martin's jacket hung from a chair across the room. From a hook in the corner, an overgrown potted plant swayed gently. The radio dropped into silence, and the ship creaked all around him. Music faded in then out again. In the hall, boys were preparing for a storm. Someone yelled directions from the stairwell. As rain began to pelt the portal, the boys moved a bit faster

down the hall, dragging goods to storage, drawing awnings. The voice from the stairwell became louder.

No sooner had the rain begun before it slowed and stopped completely.

//

Later that night, before the laundry room, a couple embraced in the dull, yellow light that still poured from inside. As Martin passed, the girl looked at him, but, before he'd gone around the bend, she pulled her partner's face to her own again.

On the lido, still slick from rain, Martin went to the railing; a spotlight crested the water then turned skyward.

—Martin?

Slowly, he turned, looking for wherever the voice had come.

Just me, I said, lifting myself from a nearby lounge chair.

Adrian? What are you doing out here?

Same as you, I guessed.

Can't sleep?

Can't believe anyone is actually sleeping in there. They're all just sitting in the dark.

Martin turned up his jacket's collar against the cold and removed what passed as a watch from his pocket. He saw it was nearly three in the morning. With a dramatic

wind-up, he tossed it into the void before him. Though he listened for the splash – some indication that it hit water – he heard nothing, as though it had simply vanished from his hand.

Well, good night, he said abruptly, and, before he ever made it to the arcade, he'd disappeared into the dark.

I stayed, watching the spotlights tick across the water.

In the dark, someone slipped near-noiselessly into the main pool.

//

Next morning, in the bakery, children feasted on large plates of dark, unrecognizable foods, set down for them upon the floor. Fat little boys and girls fell to these dishes, eating as though for hibernation. Their mothers' lips quivered, reminding them to breathe, darlings, please.

Absently, I touched the top of Mara's head as we waited in line. She smiled, looked up at me, and held my hand.

Overhead, dark clouds dispersed without rain, and, in a few moments, we stormed off, pastries a-bagged, toward poolside again – and again and again and again.

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Soon, July ended.

II

There are people in every time and every land who want to stop history in its tracks. They fear the future, mistrust the present and invoke the security of a comfortable past, which in fact never existed.

—Robert F. Kennedy

Spleen

With a flourish of his hands, Dr. Albert opened the collapsing mirror and observed his head. He turned from side to side, lifted his chin then tilted it so he could assess his hair, which had thinned to a delicate, white sparseness. He appeared young though still, younger than he was, despite a heavy fold in his forehead that had been there all his life and two crescent rows of shadow beneath each of his eyes. He smiled faintly, thinking – as he had many times before – that his was a face into which he'd had to grow, that his was a face that had not aged like flesh but like wine.

Handling his southpaw scissors, the doctor set about tending his mustache while brushing with his other hand the fine debris from his lips, his chin, his collar, his desk. Now and then he'd look to see where along his shelves Martin had stopped and offer some comment about the books before which his patient stood. He claimed to have read them all, but, sadly, he admitted he could hardly keep them straight, hardly remember if it'd been Nietzsche or Thomas Aquinas that had so moved him.

Martin had found neither; instead, ragged pulp novels – romances, westerns, and science fiction – filled the long shelves. A leather strap, mid-level, ran the length of each shelf to keep the books in place.

Normally, the doctor took his appointments in one of the many examination rooms beyond his office door, but Martin, everyone knew, was a special case, so the doctor had invited him as a guest. Besides, he was proud of his large office, its windows

and high ceilings. He spent most of his time there, though he kept a room elsewhere – no one knew where – onboard.

Tell me, the doctor said, turning briefly, were there many people out there waiting? Decisively, he clipped.

—A few.

With a shake of his head, the doctor foresaw his morning, like every other morning. It's endless, he said, mostly to himself, and drew the scissors across his upper lip to make one last snip then packed his kit, replaced the mirror to its drawer, and went to stand before the large window behind him. Rocking on his heels, he examined the hem of his white jacket as though it was a costume. I don't remember my father ever getting ill, not a single day of his life. There were stories, sure, he allowed with a wave of his hand —Some childhood illness, some breaking of bones. But now —Now there's always something wrong. There's an entire ailing culture, one built around complaining and suffering. Wallowing, he said. It's insidious.

Martin grasped the back of the couch as he crossed the room.

Beyond the pane of glass, a private garden thrived, plush with moss and ferns.

People will arrange their lives around their appointments, amassing more and more specialists as they age. —The body is so weak. But the spirit, Mr. Touch, is incredibly strong. So many have given up – and for nothing – so the body dies, rotting like a bad coating all around the ghost. —That's how places like this exist, I suppose. Do you know how many passengers we have?

No.

Two thousand, he said, eyes wide. He said it again and scoffed. Or there about. I don't know. Three quarters, I *do* know, are patients. Nearly everyone has multiple diagnoses. He paused a moment as the ship slanted almost imperceptibly then righted. But you're simple... —Well, not *simple*. Exceptional actually. You're not like the others. When he turned the window's latch, its center panel sprung open, admitting a cool, circulating air that upset the file he'd left open on his desk; the pages whipped one way then another beneath their clips.

Martin looked at the doctor over an open book and, taking it with him, made his way to the couch and sat.

The doctor turned, digging his hands deep into his jacket pockets, and shrugged. I'd be happy to continue housing you. He showed Martin a little, silver pack of cigarettes. You don't mind, do you?

Martin glanced up from the page. Knock yourself out, he said.

I suppose it's not a money issue, considering your latest windfall. Your *leg money*, as you once called it.

No, Martin said without looking up. It's certainly not that.

The doctor turned to exhale through the window's opening. He said, If you are healthy, and you say you are, I see no reason to keep you here. Further, I see no reason to doubt you are healthy. He sat behind his desk.

Martin nodded vaguely and went on reading. He'd forgotten how much he liked science fiction. More often, he found the authors were crack philosophers, wrapping their optimisms in a story of starships and busty aliens; it had very little to do with science.

Returning to the stack of files, the doctor sighed. Despite his best efforts, there seemed more and more each day. He wondered what that meant... Maybe by my very existence, more people need me. He couldn't say. Lifting the topmost file, he explained it was his, Martin's. —Though, he said, I suppose you knew that. It's too bad, he went on, standing again to come around the desk. He dropped lightly on its edge. It's a shame you and I are only talking now, at the end of your stay — that's what the lawyers' letter called it, if I recall. He gave Martin a devious grin and returned to the window. A salt residue made some of the panels opaque, allowing for only an impression of what went on beyond them — solid colors, mostly blue, and odd shapes, something, the doctor mused, like a Miró: a long strip of vertical white against blue, a dash of red that looped, black dots here and there that seemed to move. When travel had been simpler, he'd seen Miró's triptych in Paris —A long time ago, he said. Rubbing on the glass with a fist did nothing, though, cupping his eyes and pressing his nose against it, he claimed he saw a little stranger — some bird he didn't and wouldn't ever know by name. We might understand one another more if only we'd had the time, he said to the glass. *You*, I mean, he said, turning on his heel, not the bird. One hand massaged his pate; beneath, his face seemed genuine, but, as his hand dropped before it, all emotion left as though

wiped away, like a vaudevillian trick. Well, he said, clapping his hands, there's no point wasting the time we have discussing what we've squandered. So, tell me about your stay, he said like they were old friends discussing the years between occasions. He laughed again at the word. *Stay*, he said and shook his head. Hardly a fine vacation when it starts with a court order. Though I imagine here's better than many of the places you've spent the night. He performed a histrionic shiver.

Sure, he said. Painless enough, Martin added.

Beneath his mustache, his lips turned. And I imagine you consider yourself fortunate for that – that *painless* bit, he said. Not all of you, he said, carefully including Martin in the ship's unfortunate cargo, are so lucky. Rather like a second chance for you. He fiddled with the scale upon his desk, lifting a few tiny weights from one side, unbalancing it. A bit of purgatory, a bit of respite. Then you're born anew! He put the tiny weights into his pocket. A resettling of sides, in a way, he added, considering the scale. He stood over the cluttered desk, his hands hovering as though he wasn't sure where to put them. It could have been far worse, he thought. You're fortunate we were all watching. No witnesses, he said and paused. Who knows? *They*, whoever and whatever they are – bosses, *lawmakers*, politicians, billionaires, fuckwits, idiots – have a penchant for... —Well, you know. He shivered again. Then he seemed to remember himself and collected Martin's file from the mess. With a sidelong look, he said, You know it says quite a bit in here about you.

I imagined as much, Martin said and, setting aside the book, opened his pen knife, sticking the rounded tip of its short blade under his thumbnail and moving it slowly about the edge.

—You really ought to have kept *one* of your appointments, he said. He jerked open a drawer. Looking inside and finding nothing, he closed it. I'm almost hurt you didn't. You mustn't forget humanity – yours, mine.

Martin shifted, adjusting his leg so it stuck straight out. I've a great fear of doctors, he said, tending his left hand's index, and revelations, for that matter.

The doctor laughed. I'm sure you do. If I'm not mistaken, you've spent quite a long time amidst them already. Us, I mean, he added.

Martin knocked on his bad leg and, with a wry look, tapped his left temple too.

Bastard gods, the doctor scoffed —Happy enough to witness some suffering, to thief a life from the clutches of death. But that rarely makes the life good, you know. To have stared death down doesn't make the result a contented one. Though I suppose you know that too. All the dramatic shit.

Martin continued butchering his nails.

Of course, I've seen you around, if not in my offices. He laughed. —In the café, long ago, the doctor recounted, falling back into his chair. With your motley company. One of the boys whispered your name in my ear though I knew who you were. The boy leaned in, very closely, which the doctor demonstrated then. That's Martin Touched, the boy said, narrowly dodging my hand; I'd raised it to brush him off. You wore a coat with

a collar turned-up, he recalled, dark pants and boots; there was still a cold breeze in the air, which crept in through the windows' covers, and a pair of leather gloves hung from your back pocket. I remember exactly. November, it must have been, not long after you'd come aboard. That man-nurse was there, and, though I'm uncertain of the origins, your friendship seemed instantaneous.

Martin reminded the doctor of my name.

Yes! He stood by you, loyal in that awful jean jacket. You were all standing in line before the long buffet. You limped slightly ahead and, with a raise of your hand, denied the boys whenever they tried to feed you. At the dessert bar, you wanted only the caramelized fruits, which the boys piled high on your plate. —By the way, I understand a childhood infection rendered you vegetarian, he said, as though it was a secret. The doctor beamed. Your file, he said, knocking upon its pages, and continued. At your table by the railing — which I'm to understand is your usual spot — a woman waited in a serious black get-up. Though I certainly knew her — had known her for some time then — I didn't at once recognize her. Adam, he said, sat in that boyish way of long ago, turning his chair backward, to straddle it like a mare. It was Ms. Black of course beside you, but she was made strange to me by the smile she wore. —It was so unlike her — what with her vertigo...

Martin closed his blade and dropped it in his pocket.

I've admired you from the start: the stoic, strong sort. Your silences aren't invitations to speak; they are invitations to stop before I'm made a proper fool. I appreciate that, though *I*, for one, never take the bait.

Martin didn't say a thing, which pleased the doctor all the more.

You know I've read the court transcripts, he said. Not much there. At least, not from you. But you keep repeating a few themes. Shall I remind you? He went on without stopping: It's all a misunderstanding; I'm not an activist – at least not how you think; I'm... but the doctor stopped there, for Martin had returned to his book.

Anyway, I suppose I should take a look at you. Informally, at least – to *prove* it. Fight paperwork with paperwork. They're intent on burying you, you know.

Well, they can go ahead and try, Martin said.

Haven't they already? Your name's all but forgotten in the press. Nearly a year in a courtroom, and you thought you were free then? Then a year *here*. He shook his head. You can't tell me that was what you intended. Where do you go from here?

I could manage a normal life.

The doctor laughed. What? Gardening on the weekends, clocking in and out? A house, a family?

It might be my greatest rebellion. Living.

And now you talk *just like one*, the doctor said, impressed.

One what?

Well, he said with a smile, just what you've continually denied being. The doctor's shoes creaked slightly, making the smallest of noises as he crossed the room, but the sound seemed to fill the space all the same. —Do you mind? the doctor asked as he kicked off his shoes. He stood then, inexplicably in his socks, which he dragged back and forth on the carpet as though preparing to charge. By the way, he said, what *did* you do with all that money?

I gave it away, Martin said flatly, and that pleased the doctor immensely as he approached with hands held out.

//

The doctor appraised him. First with and then without his glasses. Both Martins were, he said, in a haze. Yet you say you feel fine? he asked for the third time, as though it was his greatest instrument of measure.

In nothing but his shorts and t-shirt, Martin stood. His bare feet gripped the carpet beneath him. With a nod, he confirmed, yes, he felt fine.

—And the leg?

His leg, of course, occasionally bothered him.

Funny something so small, the doctor said, making the size of a bullet between his fingers, could make so much trouble.

Not the exact word I'd have chosen, Martin said and pushed his hair from his forehead.

Scratching his chin, the doctor continued: I believe it was much more than all that, wasn't it? You'd have taken twenty in the chest at the time. He made a note in Martin's file. Replacing his glasses, he looked up at Martin briefly, but, when he saw his patient had made no effort to respond, he went on writing. Please, have a seat, he said, and indicated the coffee table beside him. Just push everything aside. He wheeled himself over upon a stool. Only a moment of discomfort, he warned as he tilted Martin's head to one side. Peering through the otoscope's tiny window, the doctor said, I've always held a high opinion of you, you know – everything that you've done, for better or worse. Circling the table, he tended the other ear but refrained from his typical empty-headed joke when he'd finished. Politics are a hard act. If we all weren't so inextricably at the end of its jokes, it'd be comedy. He rubbed his hands together to warm them. And life, he went on, is merely a concurrent passage of time against *their* whims. Whether it's Pinochet or Pinocchio.

—Or poetaster, Martin added.

Yes! the doctor said with a laugh, gently touching Martin's right foot and lifting it from the carpet. I often imagine us – collectively, as a people – strung up on a mobile, rotating and hanged from thin, almost-invisible threads. He demonstrated quickly how we were hanged, his hands poised as though he held two marionettes' crosses. It just so happens, if some of those lines become tangled, and this was where he raised his eyes,

the whole thing could come loose. He slipped one hand under Martin's shirt without any warning and pressed about, seemingly at random. In *that* game, you hold more lives in one hand than I could in two lifetimes. The difference, he said, is visibility. I touch every one of them, as he was ostensibly doing then, *experience* the pains and joys, while a politician controls or destroys them from afar, without any understanding at all. Senselessness, he said. Though I've seen many of them *among the people*, surrounded by security – because surely *someone* is out to kill them... Likewise, you might never know the lives you *did* manage to change for the better. With a smile, he withdrew his hands. You can dress, Mr. Touch. At the sink, placed sorely in the corner, the doctor soaped his hands and scrubbed them furiously. Over the rush of the water, he said, Obviously, I find little reason to keep you. With his hands buried in a towel, he gave Martin a solemn look. But, as I said before, you're welcome to stay. I feel as though it's an issue of the soul more than anything. At his desk, he removed his jacket, sat, and crossed his legs. Lifting his glasses from his nose, he seemed stripped of all his credentials. Your leg's not keeping you, and, despite incentives from a particular group, I see no reason to pursue other evaluations – and he looped his finger about the side of his head. I've no use for indulgences here, he said.

As Martin dressed, the doctor went on. In a way, he said, putting his feet upon the desktop, I imagined you differently. Though perhaps you *were* that man before all this. I wept, Mr. Touch. I really did. As he spoke, he moved his toes, stretching the sheer black socks to transparency. Thousands of bodies in the streets, thick as a channel and

flowing through like water itself! Three or four years ago now —I was married then — just married, again, actually; we were brimming with hope. He rubbed his hands together licentiously. She was beautiful then, or, at least, I thought so. Everything seemed possible. Edie didn't get it, I don't think; she was made stupid by her career. Only I still saw the underbelly, while she rode atop the beast. How it cracked and rubbed. Then there you were, your face on the news and in the papers. You were fearless and desperate; one had made you the other, though it was hard to say which came first. Reaching into his drawer, the doctor asked if Martin didn't want one. He showed him the silver packet again, but Martin declined. Very well, he said, drawing one for himself. The doctor grinned about the elongated white cylinder he then chewed on. Even when he'd had it lit, there wasn't a trace of pleasure in his face. Does it surprise you? he asked. That I smoke, the doctor said, gesturing with his smoking hand.

—Not in the least.

His face tightened with thought, and, for a moment, he seemed only to be considering the burning end of his little cigarette. I never smoked as a child, he said. I never was one for risk. I never was the one who stole a pack from my father and brought them to school. For me, it was much different. I was a late-bloomer, he said. I considered the effects — detrimental, undeniably. I asked the few smokers I knew what it was like. And each of them gesticulated as they spoke, rolling their hands around their uppers chests as though to indicate a swelling cloud. The doctor gesticulated the same way as he spoke. And, closing his eyes, he let his hands fall. And each of them, he said,

claimed the feeling – that smoke rolling about them – if only for a moment, occluded death. So pleasurable, they all said, the feeling makes them forget, even briefly, about death. And what’s so fascinating to me, the doctor continued, is that the very vessel of that intense feeling is a vessel of death too. With every obliterated moment of pain that passes, so death creeps closer – and closer than it would have anyway. The doctor laughed. Human life is so strange, he said and went to stand, once more, before the window. Blue smoke followed him. Raising one foot to rest it on the lower sill, he said it again, adding emphasis to separate us, to suggest that, of all the animals, *we* were the most absurd. At least, as far as he could tell, no other animal suffered ambition or jealousy, admiration or anxiety, complacency... Not like we do, not so acutely. We’re the only animals that think we deserve the false-start, the right to begin again. He mused, mustache in his fingers: We cannot simply write off our faults, as others do, to instinct. He said, admiring the amber tip of his cigarette, Perhaps in another world if not this one there is happiness. This one’s not worked for me. He spoke slowly, letting the cigarette accumulate a limp, ashen head. Suddenly remembering it, he put it out on the glass. They blamed youth, the doctor said, if I remember it. At least at first. It was easy to dismiss the presence of a few hundred young people in a dozen cities’ streets. You were young, implying some stupidity; that was their logic. A youthful ailment.

Martin had gone to stand by the bookshelves again. Have you read all of these?

Never mind those, he said. Tell me this. Can it happen again?

—Should it? Martin said, pulling a slim volume from the center shelf. He opened the book, read a few lines, smiled, and replaced it.

Throwing on his jacket, the doctor stuck both hands into its pockets as though to indicate he was speaking professionally. He shrugged. He didn't see why not. It was an exciting time, he said, coming around to sit on the desk's ledge, or at least it had been then – capitalism seemed in its last days, numbered; we, as a people, could step left or right, backward or forward. It *was* exciting.

A tiny tin globe, displaced by the doctor's backward groping, fell to the carpet beside him, and, though it made no sound, both men watched it roll to one side of the room. In a moment, it rolled toward the other.

For some, Martin imagined.

Don't act that way! the doctor said, crossing his arms. You can't play with me – not like that.

What way?

It worked once, Mr. Touch – the accidental activist. Brilliant defense! He collected the globe and tossed it toward Martin, but the throw was short and it struck the carpet again.

It was the truth, Martin said.

But the truth is rarely so brilliant! With a broad grin, he went on, You were there, Mr. Touch. That was no accident. Things might have really changed if it all wasn't so dramatically curtailed –Bang! he said and, with his eyes going wide, grabbed his leg,

staggered, clutched the edge of his desk, reached out, and mouthed a few indecipherable words before falling to the floor. There he lay, holding his leg and looking at Martin, overturned. You're lucky it was only once. We Americans have a way of overdoing things. —And a way of fleeing sometimes. It was incredible — an incredible show of power. How quickly those crowds dispersed — and, sure, some came back, angry, distraught, but it wouldn't ever be the same. He smiled, though from that angle it was difficult to tell. Listen, he said, turning on the floor and pressing his ear to the carpet. You can leave at next docking if you wish. Unless there's something else keeping you, he added, still listening to something far below them. In the distance, there was a muffled electric hum —And *footsteps*, if you listen! The upkeep, the doctor added, of some strange machine...

Martin lifted the globe from the floor and placed it on the doctor's desk. It's dented, he said.

Dr. Albert slowly found his feet. So it is.

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Once-identical stone faces adorned the rear wall of the main spa. Each looked still like the others but they'd all begun to come apart in different ways: a flattened nose, a missing eye, a splintered crack across another's forehead. They appeared semi-human

with manes of hair and distorted with anger. One no longer produced water from its mouth as the others went on doing so.

Martin waded into the warm water and sat along the crescent-shaped pool's submerged edge. He closed his eyes in the shade of the higher floors and awoke in a searing wash of heat.

—Thought you'd left us. A man had, at some point, taken a spot beside him. In fact, the small pool was nearly full of people now, many of them standing in groups at its deep center. Water sloshed against the tile edge and spilled across the walkways.

Martin rubbed his eyes.

We were getting worried, the man said.

Martin didn't recognize him at all. —Was I out long?

Long enough, he said, laughing. He kept saying *we*, but it seemed to Martin that no one else was concerned at all. We tried to wake you, but you hardly moved.

Martin smiled. Relaxed, I guess, he said.

Let me ask you something, the man said. The tone of his voice changed, taking a higher register. You ever feel bad for all these faces? He turned and lifted his chin toward the one nearest; it grinned like the others, its lips curled to expose several sharp teeth. This one, in particular, was missing the corner of its left ear.

Can't say that I have, Martin admitted.

If you look long enough, the man said, maybe you will. He scratched the side of his face rigorously.

Martin noticed a deep red-colored rash stretched from the man's ear and down his torso.

Don't worry, the man said, lowering his chin against his chest. It's not contagious.

Martin smiled slightly.

I assume yours isn't either.

Not yet anyway, Martin said.

A month before, they'd all sat in the hot tub together: Maria, Lemon, Sun, and Ingrid – Corinne, too. The water bubbled fervently around them. Every thirty minutes, one of them got out to reset the timer. Lemon drank a beer; the others shared a bottle of wine, though they'd been coldly warned against it again and again. Corinne abstained for no particular reason.

—Bring that boy over, Lemon said as Maria climbed out.

She started the jets again. What boy?

The boy, Sun said, pointing across the lido.

Maria dashed off but returned without him.

—What happened?

Lost him. She dropped in next to Ingrid, who had dozed off.

Someone's going to have to go for the next round then.

Sun volunteered.

Corinne had had the water to herself a while before the others arrived. She didn't mind really; in fact, they seemed taken with her entirely. She was new, at least to them she was.

So, Lemon said and turned her attention back to Corinne. How long?

Corinne slipped lower into the water. Two years, she said.

Two? Ingrid had woken up suddenly.

Give or take.

Well, you've got us beat. Maria pulled herself onto the ledge to cool off. Sun's the only one of us even close to a year.

Do you miss it?

It?

Land, Lemon said. Trees, grass, mountains, flowers.

Well, you can see some of that in the garden, Maria said.

Not really – not like she means.

Cities, roads. Lemon laughed and added, Cars! You must miss *something*.

Corinne smiled. Food, I think.

They all laughed.

Lunch then – sometime, Lemon said, grabbing Corinne's arm.

Sure.

Maria slid back in. —What about family?

None, Corinne said. No, she said. Just me.

Sun danced toward them with a bottle aloft.

//

Now, Lemon sat at the head of the table; she slapped its top just then, demanding
—When?

Now, I think, Corinne said. I can't go to my cabin for a few more hours. She dabbed part of a roll in the tangerine olive oil the boy had left them before she realized no one else was eating.

Well, good luck with that, Sun added. I asked them to unclog a shower drain a few weeks back, and all they did was make it worse. One of them actually suggested they create a half-wall around it and make it into a bath. She rolled her eyes.

Corinne had been dressing that morning before the long mirror in her cabin when the whole ship shifted – only slightly, but she'd been, at that moment, angling her foot into a shoe and removing one earring. She'd fallen, not badly, but the earring she had been holding dropped beneath her dresser. —I couldn't quite reach it, and apparently my dresser was screwed to the wall.

The women all nodded. Apparently, they'd all discovered the same thing at some point.

Corinne continued. Eventually, I got it loose only to find a whole mess of mold had made its home behind it.

Every woman at the table groaned.

—And it was black? Maria asked, already knowing that it was. Horrific.

Very black, Corinne confirmed. Dense, too. It looked like India ink really. Very dense. She used her hands to describe it. I scraped at it with a pencil and a whole patch of the disgusting growth sloughed to the floor.

Again, everyone groaned, this time at a higher pitch.

Well, Sun said, smiling to her friends, if black mold was what it took for you to join us, then I'm very happy you've got it.

Corinne smiled politely. Thank you, she said, sure to look at each woman in turn.

You should have counted your panties, Sun said. She raised her orange juice toward each of them and drank.

//

They were in l'Avent. On each menu, beneath the ornate script of the restaurant's name, it said *an upscale dining experience*. And beneath that, it said, simply, *by Dr. Albert*.

Corinne made some joke, and the other women laughed – for a while, too.

They all agreed she was too funny.

//

–Wonderful! Maria said, pushing slightly away from the table as though she could no longer fit beneath it.

Wonderful, Ingrid agreed.

The others had moved the contents of their plates around, shuffling the arrangement with their forks and uncovering elements of the plate's design below, but, Corinne realized, they'd hardly eaten. Meanwhile, Corinne had. Lemon still raised an

empty fork to her mouth occasionally to add to the illusion. All the various breads remained untouched by them – the bisque, salmon terrine, rice pilaf too, though they'd made an elaborate show of ordering and the anticipation that followed.

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They'd been meeting for months, once or twice a week – To commiserate, to encourage, Maria said.

–And to support, Ingrid added parenthetically.

What they saw in Corinne – some kindred, beaten soul within her, she imagined – they never said, and they never asked what was wrong with her, they'd only seen her here and there, dozing in the sauna while they chatted, idling in the café or upon some odd bench, likely reading in the doctor's lobby. She imagined they pitied her, as they surely pitied themselves, which they readily admitted. If they had – asked her *why* she was there, on the ship – Corinne wasn't sure what she'd have said. The reasoning – whatever it had been – seemed to pale more and more until, she figured, soon, it would disappear entirely. What could she say? That she'd felt strange, angry. Maybe anxious or afraid – but who wasn't? At times, she enjoyed it, walking through crowds of people, among them but separate from them, seeing – *really* seeing, she thought – everything as it was, as demeaning and as rotten as it could be, a reality that pandered to the lowest common experience, the lowest expectation. And that old heart beating in her chest. She

was smiling in a strange way, she knew, savoring whatever weakness she had and looking at each of them in turn, thinking what each of them must have seen when looking at her – the poor girl – knowing what she thought of them, nice enough but so very odd, she thought, so very shallow, so typically wrapped up too often in their private worlds of half-pains – just like her, she thought.

//

Sun excused herself and went looking for, as she said, the powder room.

So, Lemon said, drawing out the word and looking around the table. Corinne, you *must* tell us about Martin Touch.

Corinne brought her glass to her mouth. —Who?

Lemon laughed —Please, Corinne, she said, we *see* you with him all the time. She leaned forward, laying her forearms flat on the table.

Sometimes, Maria recalled, I see him walking alone on the promenade or just sitting by the pool.

You know, we all used to see him on the news, Lemon added conspiratorially.

The others all nodded.

Cute, too, Ingrid added.

Even with that limp now, Lemon added.

Epecially with that limp, Maria thought aloud.

He's all right though – you know, otherwise. It is just the leg, right?

Lemon, please, Ingrid scolded, but, thinking a moment, asked precisely the same thing.

Oh my God, she's blushing, Ingrid said.

Maria wondered about the trial. He must talk about it with you.

The Last Great Lawsuit, Ingrid added, waving her hand as though she saw the words arcing before her.

Not really, Corinne said truthfully. Only that it was a tremendous show of strength and a bigger waste of time – ridiculous considering it was all some colossal misunderstanding. That's what he says. You know, he was only reaching for a handkerchief in his coat. He had allergies. All a misunderstanding. And he says it should have been his brother. Well, not that he wishes it upon him, but he's fairly certain they mistook him for Daniel, his brother. And likely Daniel would have been a better target from both side's views. That bullet could have been...

La, la, la! Sun said as she sat. Corinne, she said lightly, please stop. It was traumatic enough to see it on television. I mean, all day long. I remember. God, do I remember. They cancelled all the programming, every channel almost. I couldn't escape it. Traumatic! All of it. She groaned.

Everyone else stayed quiet.

Sun remembered she couldn't sleep for a week – well, four days. And sex was out of the question. She kept thinking about the newscasters.

Well, keep the sex, Ingrid said, laughing already, trying to lighten the mood.
Losing sleep is unacceptable.

//

That night, I lay in bed without sleeping.

Night has a language and logic all its own, and its argument kept me thinking.

Just before dawn, I drew my cabin's chair to the wall and stood upon its seat to look through the portal. Outside, a small crowd, all in black, moved along the walkway. A man near the railing dropped a basket of flowers overboard; red and white and yellow, they cast sleepily, obliquely, toward the water below, which, though I couldn't see, rose from the horizon to meet them. The convex glass of the portal distorted the figures in the crowd – defined by the few features uncovered, so that a pair of hands or neck or ankles seemed to emerge to speak; at the glass's center, the people outside were made tall and thin, while, at its boundaries, a short and broad population only. In the distance, a tender appeared, one of the boys' small rowing vessels; it was difficult to tell for sure, but there appeared to be three onboard: two boys and another. Just beyond my portal, one of the men held a woman who had, just then, climbed onto the railing and threatened to jump after the body (the third onboard), though, if she had been allowed to jump, she'd likely have simply struck the deck below.

Eventually, I heard them disperse.

Some lingered, indecorously chatting, while I hung just below the sill beside them. Their heads were too large; their hands, too small. Crying out, children poured from their legs, and they were scolded for it.

—Children, please, one of the women said – rather, I thought she said.

//

Corinne lay on her side in Martin’s narrow bed. She could hear the rush of the shower in the other room. She closed her eyes. —I think my bed was bigger, she said. She stretched her legs and arms. One hand touched the floor. Taller, too, she said. Martin appeared in a towel and held a toothbrush before his face. Were you saying something? The shower was still running. Corinne smiled and shook her head. Slowly, light from the portal spilled across the wooden floor, which shone though it’d probably never been polished.

A small spider dropped from Martin’s dresser and continued along the floor. It was no bigger than a fingernail, but, watching it from the bed, it seemed important. It stopped in a puddle of sunlight. Corinne moved her hand slightly toward it, and, though she’d thought it would quickly move away, it actually approached her. She raised one finger slowly, like a head, as though to greet it. Likewise, it raised one, thin leg. Corinne smiled to herself and let it climb onto her palm. Carefully, she raised it toward her eyes. Hello, she said. She sat up a little, pulling the sheets off her with her other hand. I’ll put you in the hall, she said and started to the door. Curious, without anger, the spider bit

her still. Shaking her hand violently, Shit! She immediately drew her hand to her lips as though it might help.

Martin appeared again, toweled, and still wet all over.

//

Sometimes the diaphone's calls were distorted by distance or heat; sometimes, they sounded just like your name called from a few decks above or below.

III

I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear...

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

R & R

Submerged lantern-orbs lit the pools; their light colored the water, the tiles surrounding it, and every bather with a cloudy, bluish glow. That morning, just before daylight, a visible mist lifted off of everything. With a deep breath, Corinne ducked beneath the warm water and swam toward the pale legs in the shallow end. Sound was hollowed to blunt pulses; the others' voices lost meaning. She passed the length of the main pool again and again until she'd lost count then remained slowly doing a breaststroke in the pool's middle for much longer than usual. Underwater, she turned and climbed down toward the deep end, where she hovered as still as she could before letting herself float lightly to the surface. There, it was just past five, and a breeze rolled off the water. Nothing seemed to stir 'less it was stirred; everything else was still. Many of the other early-morning swimmers appeared utterly stuck, too, in place.

Corinne changed in the cabinets and appeared on the lido again just as day broke. Dragging a lounge chair toward the railing, she lay and closed her eyes against first light. And though she didn't sleep, she reached some state of supreme rest; her thoughts felt vital and very real – a sort of waking dream, but a dream all the same; and dreams are too often shared.

//

All through the inner halls, Corinne's sandals slapped the tile floors and echoed off the shuttered shops cross-ship. Two young women – both in white robes – passed by but remained close to the wall. For a while, Corinne listened to their footsteps, sounding well beyond the last bend. Before the luggage shop, she pressed her face against the glass to see through.

I was heading to the saunas when I saw her ahead. —Going somewhere?

She looked at me briefly, smiled. Morning, she said.

At the center of the shop, luggage was arranged in a *pietà*: each piece opened and angled to hold another, slightly smaller.

—Where were you?

Last night? I said. Mara couldn't sleep, I said, and she noted the emptiness beside us at once. I couldn't either, for that matter.

Seasick again?

Something like that. I'm exhausted, I said, pointing down the hall, but I might actually make the saunas before they fill up.

Don't let me keep you, she said.

The lights inside the luggage shop came on, and its elderly manager stalked about his stock as if every purse and carry-on was still sleeping. When he saw us on the other side of the window, he tapped his watch to say it wasn't yet time, to come back, but Corinne waved him off. Though we might have called to him through the glass, she only raised her hand again when he shrugged and cupped one ear. It took him some time to

realize she was talking to me. The old shop-owner disappeared behind a door, and, a moment later, Corinne and I walked off together.

Where are you coming from?

I couldn't sleep either, she said. She confessed she'd had a terrible dream; she usually did. Anyway, she'd been up several hours by then.

Outside, I held my hand against the sun, and she pulled a hat from her bag. Its weak brim fell over her right eye. —I don't know how you make that thing look utilitarian.

She laughed. Everyone wears one, Adrian.

Yes. And everyone else looks ridiculous.

That's sweet.

A deck below, some of the boys were doing calisthenics in the artificial lawn; their crude rep chants sometimes reached us.

//

Alongside the tenders, Corinne let her fingers brush the cords, the cleats. The tethers, following them upward, seemed to attach to nothing, to simply disappear at some point above. She looked at me from the shade of her hat. —I'm curious, she said, what you must think. After a moment, she added —Of *us*?

Us?

Patients, she said. All of us in exile, cast out. Lost – whatever, she said. Me, she said finally.

I laughed.

—Don't laugh, she said sharply and stopped before me. I'm serious.

The truth is I rarely think of it.

Please, she said and continued on. You're patronizing me. You *must* pity us, don't you? Do you think we've given up? You think we can't survive it – out there, she said, throwing her arm toward the railing. —Or there, she said, pointing the other way, toward land. You're *not* like us, she said. You've got a purpose here.

Don't you? I said.

She held her hat on with both hands. Stopped at the railing, she looked at the water. Sometimes, she said, it doesn't look real. Like, if I jumped, I'd bounce right off it.

Corrine, I said, please. You're here to recover – just like everyone else. Or you're here to give yourself a chance – another one, if need be.

She covered her eyes with one hand, shook.

There's nothing to cry about.

I'm not crying, she said. It's too funny, really it is.

What?

She took a few steps along the railing, stopped, and turned. While I was swimming this morning, I kept thinking what a joke it all is – that I can blame *this*, all of this, on a bit of bad luck. Somehow, I've even convinced myself it's true.

The boys below chanted about the legs of Jolene, so lean...

Before us, a gull stuck in the air, and, though it seemed not to fight, it remained afloat. Its head slightly cocked toward us as though to speak but, of course, did not, then away. Beyond the bird, I saw only the ocean, a stretch of nothing.

She had an appointment, for which she was probably already late. She disappeared into the morning crowd.

But I remained a while longer before finally finding my way to the saunas. Standing against the breeze, my clothes clutched me tightly. I walked a bit farther on. Fastened to the binnacle was a waterproofed list. On that list, I found Corinne's name; I found Martin's. Finally, I found Mara's too – but not my own.

//

Not far from the ship, a little boat bobbed on the gentle crests. Looking occasionally from my book, I watched a pair of swimmers in the main pool, a man and woman, who spun around some secret locus, pushing one another away, laughing, and playfully, revoltingly taking one another back.

The hazy shapes of other swimmers in the cloudy rubs passed beneath the water's surface like ancient behemoths.

//

It was another humid summer night, and I sat on the café balcony long after Corinne and Martin had left, long after I'd finally put Mara to bed. I wanted to watch the coast in the distance, the last draining lights, and night's electric come on. A few patients still milled about, many of them alone, and the blue lights of the pool began to shimmer, and the spotlights started their search again for whatever it was they were always looking to find. The last diaphone of the night sounded like a plangent call of distress.

8

In the largest greenhouse, Sarah lay, near sleep, among the sedges, the false creek gurgling beside her. From the gazebo, I spotted her, a bright dash of summer dress against the gray and green. I let Paul run ahead to greet her, but he disappeared into the grass garden to chase something instead.

Still, she sat up and looked toward me. —You boys better not be hiding back there again, she said, covering her eyes against a glare of sunlight.

It's only me, I said as I approached.

She lay back again, an arm thrown over her eyes. —You're late.

I checked my wrist though I wore no watch and hadn't for years. I brought you something. I revealed a small gift wrapped in reflective, gold paper, and, suddenly upright, she clapped. I set it beside her, and she tore it open. She slumped back in palpable disappointment. I remembered her age – only a few years less my own – and that slight difference felt like an insurmountable, gaping, and vacuous chasm. I'd bought her a book, one that had meant quite a lot to me. She was kind enough to smile and politely, with some encouragement, look it over. She handled it like a tool she saw no use for, but, all the same, she promised to read it – yes, right away. —Now come and sit, she said, patting the grass beside her.

So, I sat.

—Did you know forests have to burn to thrive? she asked.

And I did know that, but I said that I didn't.

Isn't that awful?

I thought for a moment before answering. No, I said, I don't think so. It's natural – nature, I said.

For a while, she refused to speak. Instead, she pulled a fistful of grass from the ground and tossed it toward the water, but a pumped-in breeze diverted it.

Nearby, three boys were forking compost.

//

We followed the pacific paths, all toyon and desert mallow. Sarah went off along the red sand switchbacks. I stopped at an overlook; beyond the tempered glass of the greenhouse walls, everything moved silently. By the time I'd reached the greenhouse floor, Sarah was far ahead. I found her crying, settled against a decorative ruin, lost almost to encroaching moss.

Allergies, she said and dragged her arm across her face. It's nothing. From her bag, she produced a pharmacist's bottle. See? she said and popped its lid, as if that proved everything. She even shook it at me. —It smells, too, she added, laughing. So foul —Oh God. Come on and help me up, she said.

//

Sarah waded into the waist-high grass of the cramped lower gardens and skipped through its dense branches beyond; I followed her. The false hills of the foyer, unmarred by path or placard, were freshly watered; orange clay clung to our shoes all through the tight, vertical woods until we reached the wash, where, with measured steps, she forded the shallow toward a narrow peninsula of high Caratao grass and fluted pumps. She dropped down there, to feel the water with her hands.

Everything was overgrown and artfully neglected in that corner. A scented breeze gently combed the koi pond, where a knot of orange-and-white fish rolled and turned, sometimes breaking the surface to gasp for unnervingly-human breaths. Farther on, a wood-and-stone well – which, of course, was false – had collapsed almost-entirely into itself. Yet, I looked for its bottom, which I could reach if I stretched out my hand but not see.

—Can I ask you something, Adrian?

Anything. I crouched beside her near the water.

Why are you here?

You know why, I said. I have a job here.

But why here of all places? What are you doing *here*?

Same as you, Sarah. You work in the shop; I'm a nurse.

Sorta, she said.

I laughed. What does that mean?

You know what I mean. You just hang out with a nine-year-old. She's your friend. Probably the best you've ever had. She loves you. She took a deep breath. Adrian, I'm here for the summer. It's a *summer job*. My mother works here. It just makes sense. It sounded fun, kinda. Or it might look good on a resume; I don't know. I graduate college next year. Then I'll be a social worker.

No, you'll have the paperwork needed to get a job as a social worker. You won't *be* a social worker. I'm not a nurse. I have a job as a nurse.

Sorta, she said and walked off.

I followed, kicking water as I went. You really have no idea – no clue really. You're too young to understand it, but there are expectations, immense and terrible expectations of – of adulthood. I laughed, thinking of my father. There was an implicit agreement made during childhood, one that ensured us all we'd have exactly what our parents did – or better – as long as we followed the paths. Very funny, I say. Joke's on us.

You're bitter, she said, stopping and turning to face me.

—How else should I be? Tell me. Every promise made to me has been broken.

Whose promises?

I don't know, I said. I really don't. The world's, I guess!

I thought your friend was going to fix that. Her face tightened, and she refused to move.

Who?

Touch, she said, and his student revolution, the blah, blah, blah.

You —You and these weird boys that stalk about here. None of you have any idea. You were barely cognizant a few years ago, barely human. Do you even remember a time *before* all this — this insanity?

What insanity?

Yes! Yes, yes, yes. Exactly. You disparage me —You disparage *us* for being jaded, cynical, bitter — but that's just the idiocy of youth.

Sarah smiled, encouraging me to just go on and on.

So, I did, without saying much of anything.

It's good to see you mad, she said in the end.

I sighed. I'm not even mad. Disappointed mostly.

So, what are you going to do about it?

That's the post-modern problem, isn't it? I concluded. We can all point out the cracks, but we lack the ability — maybe even the desire — to fix them.

As we walked along the edge of the fountain, sheaves of coins shone along its bottom and gave the impression of movement.

//

We were stopped on one of the footbridges crossing the small stream. The water beneath us was little more than a trickle, but it had transfixed her. She pointed toward a stone,

half-emerged not far from where we stood; the water parted to go around it. It was smooth and rounded, imperceptibly smaller than it had been even a few days before.

//

At the night canopy, I pushed aside the beaded curtain that led inside. A low hum and sour smell wafted toward us, but we hardly noticed before the newts and varied nocturnal plants. Many of them were luminescent and emerged from the dark, sparking in myriad colors – in leaf, in stem, in skin. Hushed before the glass, Sarah smiled broadly, searching every corner of each display for small frogs, centipedes, snails. Isn't it strange so many things thrive at night – without direct sunlight, without light at all?

The last display seemed empty at first. Unlike the others, its internal lighting made no attempt to mimic stars and moons. It contained black entirely. Still, we stood and waited for something to emerge or for our eyes to adjust. I found Sarah's hand and held it tightly. When it seemed as though nothing would come – no unnatural beast, no flapping of wings, no murderous howl – we turned from it and exited into the burning light outside.

I whistled loudly and clapped.

What're you doing? She took a step off the trail to observe me better.

Looking for Paul.

—Paul?

The dog, I said. Paul's a dog, the lucky bastard.

//

We stopped at a bench at a protruding vista. Below, people milled. At a posted binocular, I could see the faces of those sleeping on the lido; I could see the sweat and oil on them, the way it caught the light. From my pocket, I produced a handkerchief to clean my hands. I offered it to Sarah, but she refused it.

She looked out across the water, where sky and land were indiscernible from one another. She said, I don't think I'm right for you. She looked at me, her face stripped of all emotion. In fact, she thought that maybe no one ever would be. She spoke slowly then – and she'd never spoken slowly before, not to me. Still, her face became slightly red as though she'd just come running in from the cold. She stood and tugged at the hem of her dress. Well, she said, are you coming? We walked along the deck, upstairs and back across another.

Somewhere, the ship's flags bucked and snapped at their poles.

Outside the florist's – Dr. Albert's Flowers – a man appeared: white robe open along his chest and loosely cinched about his waist. His comb-over was lofted by the wind. He was speaking to himself, but he looked at us directly, with a sort of sympathy. A loud crash resonated along the ceiling, and all three of us looked upward toward it though there was no way we might see its cause. In the silence that followed – though

the flags went still drily tugging – footsteps sounded above, belonging to others likely just like us. The man shuffled off.

At the elevator, Sarah climbed inside. For a moment, I held the door open, wishing to say one last thing. But I said nothing. With a smile, she gave a ridiculous salute, and I let the ornate doors close upon her. As I walked off, I heard the bell of the elevator doors again, looked back, and she awkwardly waved. —Sorry, wrong button. Then the doors slid shut again upon her.

//

And now the water turned in anguish, it seemed to me, its waves rising like wrestling limbs. I saw, in the distance, a ship – bent slightly through binoculars – passed lugubriously, a sad trail fading from the water behind it. We hailed them – someone did – with a long bleat, which seemed to resonate from our very souls, a failed greeting. For a while, as I watched, the other ship seemed uninterested, aloof, even purposefully cold. Perhaps they hadn't understood. Meanwhile, our boys cleaned a portion of the lido. They dunked one another in the soap, drank from the hose, and spat. Strutting, shirtless, sunken chests bared, they – and we, too – seemed ridiculous, some inchoate act. And there, I thought, lifting the binoculars again, they are living, while we wait for some sign to join in, to *know* we are living, too.

With raised mug, he referenced Arungata's opening throw, how his volo arced above the court. —Such grace, Deiger said, such grace! He turned and smiled madly with appreciation. Cappuccino foam clung to his upper lip. He bit into his second soft pretzel and chewed.

Though Arungata was no more so than any other player, he was favored as the local. All around the ship's arcade, his name and headshot, face softly lit and charming, appeared on large banners.

Fidelio, Deiger said. You saw him the other day? Artless! Absolutely *no* art. Boy throws like he's disgusted, tossing trash from the window of a speeding van. With enthusiasm, he took my shoulder and shook me, thinking it might make me see more clearly.

On an oversized placard, two boys tallied the scores and noted a pallino's placement; they announced by loudspeaker each giri and every call of a raffa. They had a symbol for each punot (~), each volo (—), and their directions (< or >). For whatever reason, bocce attracted a fair number of patients and passengers — mostly elderly men — who then filled the lower rows, drinking aperitifs, occasionally cheering and upsetting their crackers and olives. From their conversations, the hollow, melancholic sound of the colliding bocci emerged so that, no matter where one stood, the action — subtle as it was — seemed close or closer, and, if one had control, if you could sit very still, each

moment of impact and non- seemed profound, thoughtless, your mind becoming flat and serene like a plateau.

Thoughts became like the breeze.

//

At the top of the bleachers, we sat leaning against the rear stands. —Of all the things on this ship, I said, pointing in the general direction of the field below, I think this is what I get most. A meaningless game of bocce.

And that pleased Deiger greatly.

//

Calamity, the youngest of them all, played brazenly, administering his bocci with a grunt and artful arabesque, yet Fidelio continually spoked him, negating each of his turns.

Arungata delivered as always.

//

At the end of the hour and the beginning of the next, the diaphone blew, and the announcer took up his bullhorn while firing a toy pistol off into the sky. The finalists, he said, looking to both sides to be sure they were there with him —Fidelio and Arungata!

Arungata lifted his patch to reveal his recently emptied eye socket, much to his fans' chagrin.

Both players shucked their caps and weakly raised their fists in victory.

They'd play again the following day.

//

From his box, Dr. Albert solicited bets on each game and generally upset everyone around him. As Arungata made his exit, the doctor stood and clapped, calling the player's name syllable by syllable with unsuitable fervor. Meanwhile, the runners-up – Fidelio, Codette, Byerly, and “Calamity” Kalamikov – filed in for recognition. When Meln stepped up, offering congratulations for the games well played, the doctor tossed a half-bag of peanuts in his direction.

//

Coming down the stairs, I walked through a flurry of tossed losing-tickets and olives, a bevy of upset older gentlemen.

//

They lay nude on the lido. The sun, by some trick, seemed to race toward us and then recede. By noon, they turned over – he, his back; she, her stomach. She spoke German, and he listened, sometimes nodding or shaking his head. From a straw, he drank water with a wedge of lime hovering in it; she drank nothing. When he'd finished, a boy came to refill it. Though I understood nothing, it was soon clear they were arguing. The deep shade of red he'd become could not be credited to the sun alone. She lay unnervingly still, her head turned to one side. In a single, brusque act, the man dove into the water, where he splashed anyone who came near until one of the boys knelt poolside and asked him to stop.

She lowered her sunglasses and watched him. He smeared his remaining hair across his head. —You look ridiculous, she said in English.

Yes, he said and what must have amounted to an invitation followed because, in a moment, she hung about his neck in the deep end.

//

In my lounge chair by the railing, I read. Rather, I held a book as though to read and now and then turned its pages but rarely truly read. I fell asleep. When I woke, Olek

stood above me. He smiled, evidently uncertain previously if I was sleeping. He vigorously shook my hand. —What are you doing here? he said. Before I could answer, he went on. I'm only just dropping Jago at the sauna. He made his face very sad. Soon, she will be better. You know, he said, dropping upon my lounge chair. She says she can feel herself getting stronger every day. You must speak with her one day, he said. She is inspiring me all the time. I feel very badly for all that are here, like her. They too will likely get better. Some of them not, he supposed and looked skyward. He pulled the nearest lounge closer so that he could sit right at my ear. Well, what have you done today? He waited as I pushed my chair half-upright. Let me tell you then, he said as I was about to tell him. But aren't you hot beneath such a sun? He pointed at it in the sky, a burning hole. He slipped out of his sandals and lay all the way back, folding his hands across his naked chest. Anyway, Jago is well. And Mara too, yes? Yes, good. Every time I think of that poor girl, her dead parents, well... Yes, yes. They are lucky, yes, for many here it's like punching waves as they come into shore. Olek laughed, though he acknowledged that he shouldn't have. You are alive though, he said. You have your health. Which is worth nothing if you can't employ it. So, employ it, yes. —Do you know what I love most about this cruise? Olek asked. I can, for a day, be painter *without* being painter. And the next day, he said, I'm musician *without* being truly. I wear each one like a jacket I shed. Nothing defines me! Employ, he said in an incredible falsetto then suddenly fell asleep.

I went on reading.

//

And then he was awake. —Our dreams, Olek said, continuing some conversation that began in his sleep, are not for reality. They are for watering down stiff world. You Americans, he said, are unique – or perhaps not, he thought aloud. Just that it is strange to meet such people, people who despise nationalism, their homeland so much. You feel no pride whatsoever. It is bad for you, he said, reaching to pat my hand. You go on living here, but your head wanders, dreaming of what could be. Other countries change and fall. But Americans are slow. There are enough of you to do great things, but. He shrugged. Well, I must go collect my Jago, he said. Here, he said, giving me money. Buy a drink upon me.

//

—*Kir-royal*, the boy corrected, raising one finger.

With a nod, I promised I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. Anyway, it was all he knew how to make.

It was the end of August already, and the horizontal line, where a few other boats posed, was smeared with greasy heat.

Noticing the small notebook pressed to the bar before me, a woman appeared at my elbow. She wore a little square hat and long gloves. And though she'd likely had no drinks, she smiled drunkenly, stupidly – a little out of focus.

–What a thoughtful scene, she said, tapping the pages of my book, which I closed quickly. Secret?

Not at all.

She looked away and appeared ready to leave, but she turned back and tried once more. Did you spent much time on a boat before this? she asked, watching one of the yachts – a little faster than the others – scoot around along the horizon.

A whale watch, I said, for an hour or two. I got sick almost immediately.

Did you see whales?

No, I said. I'm relatively sure no one ever did. We were in Jersey, just south of Avalon.

She nodded. She'd been there once or twice – drove through.

–And canoes, I said. I've been in several canoes.

She sometimes forgot, she confessed, we were even on a ship.

Let my greenness be your constant reminder.

She'd leaned so far toward me as I spoke that her stool toppled and she fell against me. Getting to her feet, she quickly left.

From the backroom, I heard laughter, which carried over the late-afternoon conversations of the few still gathered at the bar. I downed my kir and ordered another,

taking it with me as I followed the sound of the billiards, the congress of the game's pieces.

It had been years since Corinne recognized any of the simpering stars on magazine covers – or inside, for that matter. Still, faced with a stack in a waiting room, she felt compelled to read their advice as though performing a duty to them, as though she was the only one listening – no matter how practiced, no matter how performed they came off in interviews. No matter really how they seemed. Many of them *seemed* decent enough. She smelled their perfumes and colognes sampled between pages. She even felt some joy when she read they had had a child, some earnest sadness when two separated – though she knew they would again and again, living more than one lifetime without learning from the last. Corinne finished with one magazine, closed it, and looked once more at the actress on the front. There *was* something familiar about her; Corinne tried to place it – it was her mouth maybe, supple, red, bloody almost – and so it seemed she spoke, right from the glossy front, when a nurse called, Miss Black.

–Me? Corinne said quietly without looking up.

The nurse called again.

Corinne stood, clutching the magazine to her side as though to silence it.

Follow me then, the nurse said. She smiled briefly. How are you feeling?

Fine, yes, she said, thank you. Corinne followed her from the waiting room and down the wide corridor. Though certain the nurse she followed was not the same nurse she had followed the week before – or ever before – the nurse looked like the last and every other before in nearly every way. She possessed the same gait – imperfect and

oddly wide for so short a woman – the same flaxen hair atop her head in heavy, lopsided arrangement. And Corinne, too, nodded and responded almost without thought in the same fashion she had always done while the nurse, like all nurses before her, smiled pleasantly, ticked a few boxes, or made a few notes in the chart she carried otherwise against her chest.

They continued on past the first examination rooms.

No pain?

No pain. —Yes, sleeping.

No other place on the ship was so polished, so glaringly kept, as that hall. It seemed even washed of sound, at least at first. But beyond each closed door, patients stirred. Corinne followed the nurse but stayed a few steps behind just to listen. One described a dull pain deep within, and when the nurse – also inside – asked if he – for it was a man’s voice, she was sure – could be more specific he said he could not be any more specific. —It’s deep; it’s all over.

—Coming? her nurse said, looking around the corner, and Corinne caught up.

She watched the nurse’s hips, which stressed the white fabric of her uniform to its limits and swung very widely from side to side, following, she was sure, some celestial tempo.

//

She was put in the examination room at the end of the hall and asked to undress.

With a perfunctory nod, the nurse placed Corinne's chart on the counter and disappeared out the entrance. Her perfume lingered.

Corinne undressed.

Hanged upon the door's hook, her clothes were strikingly empty. And she was strikingly unclothed, pale against the light blue wallpaper.

In the tall metal cabinet, her twisted reflection regarded her cautiously; it, too, her body, seemed in that moment to simply exist, and exist only then, unhindered by a future, by a past. It was as though her clothes contained all of history.

Then she pulled on the paper gown – though new in its plastic, it too held a whole other history – cinched it loosely about her shoulders, and climbed onto the table's padded ledge. As she'd done so many times before, she read the walls, the regulations of medicine, the precautions for the sparse machinery – all of it in stilted, oblique and exclusive language.

//

Well, Dr. Albert said and cleared his throat. Let's get to it then – apparently forgetting entirely about whatever he'd been after in the cabinet drawers. He warmed his hands, rubbing them quickly together, and then showed them to Corinne as though surrendering.

Corinne lifted her chin slightly to allow room for his prodding just below her jaw line.

He moved his hands so ineptly that he seemed still not to know what he was looking for. He turned one wrist awkwardly to see his watch. He closed his eyes and removed his hands, apparently calculating something in his head. Taking a step backward, he cracked his knuckles loudly – then his neck, knees, and jaw. Do you feel special? he asked.

Corinne almost laughed.

I mean, do you feel unique? He rephrased it once more. Miss Black, do you feel as though you are different from everyone else?

No, she said, not more than I feel I should.

And you're fairly sure one should, he continued. In the broad sense, yes?

Corinne nodded once before adding, Yes, in the broad sense.

Somehow her answer triggered a passage in her chart, and, for a few moments, the doctor was fully absorbed in writing it. The tip of his tongue appeared beneath his mustache as he wrote. Before his hand had slowed, he said, And your *attacks*? That's what makes you – in the broad sense – different?

Partly, I suppose.

Describe it me.

Corinne lifted one leg slightly from the table, and the paper stuck. It's all there, isn't it?

The doctor chortled. Oh, I can't read this. He showed her the file; indeed, it was illegible.

So, Corinne recounted an attack – *her attacks*, she corrected. The worst of them.

The attack, the doctor proffered.

The attack then, Corinne went on. —I was twenty... —Twenty-six. It was summertime. I remember because it was humid, and, really, because I'll never forget. As she continued, she realized it amounted to nothing – not really. She had fallen – not terribly far. She recalled thinking the step stool rose above her at an odd angle. She remembered the cool linoleum floor of her apartment beneath her ear. And then nothing. It was nothing. The room had flipped and rolled before her, and she'd fallen. Everyone fell.

And when you came to again?

Corinne shrugged. Nothing, she said. I'd hit my head; I had a dream.

What did you dream?

It's not important, is it? Everyone dreams.

Perhaps it was fate. He crossed his legs and propped his chin in one hand. Yes, perhaps fate put you on that stool then the floor. Perhaps, it was fate's way of making things burn brighter, longer. A reminder of an expiration and purpose.

Corinne made some noise of acknowledgement.

Yes, the doctor said. Yes, indeed.

//

Though ostensibly *La Parisien* [sic] room, only a framed photograph of Le tour d'Eiffel and a caricature of 19th century women in tight dresses gave any clue. And a wine bucket by the door, apparently repurposed for umbrellas - or bile, she supposed - was peculiarly Parisian.

A small collection of French-language erotica filled an upper shelf, several copies of *Le milieu de l'été*.

//

—Get dressed then.

And when she was left alone, she did. At any moment, she thought, she, too, will wander off, and watched her faint reflection in the glass cabinets intensely, to catch its carelessness.

Then the doctor knocked and returned. It is curious, Dr. Albert reflected while making notes in her file. You're a bit of an exception, you know? He looked at her directly. I've never had a patient onboard for quite as long as you've been. You've broken the record previous.

Congratulations? Corinne said.

The doctor smiled wanly. Ms. Black, tell me then, in your own words, what's keeping you?

It's all there, I'm sure, she said, indicating the open file. In fact, there's probably much more there than even I can tell you.

Indulge me then. He wheeled toward the counter, where he propped an elbow and angled his hand backward to support his chin. He removed his glasses, and his eyes beneath appeared so tired that she thought he might sleep. And please don't blame this, uh, this – he hurriedly searched her file – this arboreal infection you mentioned once before. I've never heard such nonsense. Caught it hiking in Costa Rica – or wherever it says you were. He laughed.

Corinne felt her cheeks flush, but she didn't speak – couldn't, she thought.

What then? Vertigo? He stood suddenly upon his stool and shook his head as he looked down at the far-off floor. His knees comically buckled. Corinne, do I look like a fool?

She didn't dare answer him.

Don't answer that. And of course you don't either. So – assuming we agree on that point – there must be some reason you're here. Something tangible, something logical. And, therefore, something *not* here in this slim file. He waved it around between them. You *are* listening, aren't you, Miss Black? the doctor said, leaning forward. This isn't for *my* health, he said, smiling wryly.

Yes, she said, and, for a moment drew him into focus, then, once again, looked past him.

The door opened suddenly, and a boy appeared in the threshold with another patient at his side. The boy smiled apologetically and closed the door. Though she'd only seen her once, Corinne recognized the escorted woman. They'd talked on the lido, maybe a month before. The woman hadn't looked well then and now looked much worse.

—You must all think I'm mad, the doctor said.

Corinne looked at her feet, hanging just above the floor. She shook her head.

Of course, you do, he said. You have to be a little mad, he said, to expose yourself to such a terrible – and wonderful – *situation*, he said carefully. We are lost at sea, Ms. Black! How exciting! Another time, it might sound romantic. Almost. But medicine is a cruel practice. We – you and I – have all been bred to *trust* men and women trained in the ...the *art*, he said, of medicine. To protect us, to diagnose us. Why? he said. Are we so helpless? Or, he offered, is it that we *want* to give ourselves over completely in the face of disease, in the face of terror? In the face of whatever it is that we're facing, the easiest thing to do is to surrender responsibility. Are those parts of our lives – the weakest parts – so terrible that we must sequester them entirely from the rest, from our own control? Look at this place, he said, indicating the walls of the room, this place where we *put* our sick, our ill. It's ridiculous, unbearable, cold. So *clean*, he said. Suddenly, he turned to her.

Corinne looked at the doctor, whose face she no longer recognized. His cheeks burned red. His eyes were made into slits.

Well?

Doctor, she began. I don't believe I put myself anywhere.

He smiled. Well, you weren't admitted here. You came of your own will.

Yes, for a cure, a cure from something I've no control over.

And?

—What else do you want to know? she said. She was upset, but, even then, she wondered with whom.

Behind him, the Eiffel Tower stood incomplete.

Corinne thought a moment before speaking again. She removed the silver ring from her thumb and held it in her hand. —All my life, I've thought something was wrong — with me, with everyone, with the world. —Or going wrong. Going to be wrong.

And now? the doctor said. His voice had slowed to a pace she recognized, one born from training, patience.

I can't help thinking I've missed something — something good. —Or, she said, looking squarely at the doctor, it's just about to happen. She shrugged.

He smiled, suddenly completely calm. Only in novels do people have meaningful ideas, thoughts that appear in order like cars of a train, well-lit and -paced. The mess behind all craft is what truly interests the soul, he said. Speech is a poor vessel.

So is the body, Corinne said.

Ah, Miss Black, he said, wagging a finger at her as he wheeled over, though he didn't seem to disagree. Corinne, he said, the body is a strange and necessary part of us. I imagine you know that though. We know our bodies far better than they know us. You may want to go on living, but it won't listen. Yet its every pain is acutely felt by you. While we tell it to go on, it quits. How stupid it must be. How stupid we are, too – to listen to it whenever it groans. Some bodies scream, and we have no choice but to listen. Others only whisper, and it's our decision to ignore it or not. You, he said, have always had an ear for that tune, haven't you? Here, he raised his eyes to hers. Disease is an opportunity, the doctor said.

But I have no disease...

For a moment, the doctor turned to her file, read – or at least appeared to do so – a page and then another. He said, at last, Well, disease in the most *metaphorical* sense is an opportunity for productive change. Without that good passport, you must stay where you are put – in the shadows, hospitals, bedrooms, childhood, the lower classes...

—A convalescence cruise.

And now? Your life, the doctor said, is a prison, and Corinne looked away. But, he said, once she looked toward him again, when you stop worrying about yourself, about what *might* be wrong, you can begin to think of others. Now, you see only the walls that keep you cornered.

Twisting her ring upon her thumb, Corinne smiled absently.

Serious people, he said, don't succeed. They get stuck in the disappointment, which is inevitable. If you can laugh, you'll survive it all, he said and abruptly stood. Her file still lay open on the table beside her.

Are you asking me if I can laugh? Corinne said.

No, I'm certain you can, if told the right joke. The doctor smiled strangely and touched her hands, which she quickly drew away. Yet, he said, there's *something* wrong. It hangs about you. You wear it like a cloak, he said. For comfort. I wonder, he said, suddenly seeming less like he was talking to himself, do you even recognize yourself in reflections?

Her clothes no longer hung on the exam room door.

No, Corinne said, not very often.

And, still, the doctor was talking – a monotonous hum, a current she felt without riding.

//

On the far side of the pool, a man in orange swim trunks sat in one of the few upright chairs. He was alone, but, by the way he routinely checked his watch and tapped his sandal, one assumed he was waiting on someone. One also assumed that someone was expected much earlier than whatever time his watch had just then reported.

The angle of his seat was oddly severe; he hunched forward with his back curved. But that didn't fully explain the look of acute discomfort he wore.

His left hand shook; he steadied it with his other, checked the time.

Two Chilean boys in European bathing suits careened by him and screamed, but he didn't seem to notice.

He did not read.

He did not sleep.

He ordered no drinks, though several boys approached him.

He moved so deliberately, as one does to avoid pain. Checking the time again, he slowly raised one arm so that it sat across the wire chair-back in an approximation of leisure, relaxation, complete and utter ease. He assessed his gut, vibrant red from the sun and too big to suck in.

Without a trace of emotion, he looked at the woman as she approached, watched her as she came around the pool; she walked with wide, impressive strides. She held sneakers, tied at the laces.

They spoke.

A moment later, she drew a lounge chair beside him, sat. Looking at the tiles between his feet, she angrily pulled on her shoes.

From across the pool, they appeared arranged as confessor and witness, though it was impossible to hear what was said.

The woman listened a while more before they both disappeared inside.

They appeared as simple figures in Corinne's sketchbook: a series of lines, curving and arching, against a few horizontal rows.

//

From the two central columns, rotating fans of water struck the tiles with continuous and heavy pressure and produced a roar, a current of lather around the single drain, and a thick fog, where, partly obscured, women in varied undress gathered and politely shoved for a place beneath to rinse. All played like a dream against a backdrop of loud lockers and general nakedness which revealed itself through the damp mist like a dream and gave the impression of endlessness – that forever someone would be lifting skirts and shorts, wrangling brassieres or cinching belts for all time, forever and ever and ever.

At the locker room's center, one woman stood naked without any indication she had any clothes to put on. She had a small birthmark beneath her left breast. She was, just then, recalling something from long ago, as though the humid room had brought it all back, clear and vivid before her in serial tableaux.

Corinne was only partly listening as she dressed but laughed with everyone else, though perhaps imperceptibly just behind.

//

Outside l'Avent, children fed birds from their plates and clucked and strutted around the tables with them. Occasionally, one of the women called to them, lifting or lowering her sunglasses as a method of admonishment. Coming quickly onto the deck, a boy tripped over a squatting child and fell into the feeding birds, which scattered. The children rolled in fits of laughter when they realized a few birds were pinned beneath him.

Strong weather dropped like a weight and forced us inside. With Paul in tow, Deiger and I made it to the aft bar, where, through the open slide door, we watched dark clouds gather and lightning split the view. It was all whipped into a violent fervor, and, with each crack of the storm, someone cried out, personally pained by the change that had come on so suddenly. Most of us were in swimsuits, still damp from swimming, and completely unprepared – shocked no one had even guessed what was coming across the water. Every hall and shop was crowded with people thinking it might come and go before they'd even dried off and, in no time at all, they'd be back to performing can openers off the dive or horse-playing. Well, in the aft bar, it ruined the television's picture, and there was no fixing it, not until the rain lightened; still, the boys were determined. One of them climbed onto the bar to assault the screen while the others traced various cord around the baseboards. From the static, few faces infrequently appeared in the outdated box's window. And these familiar shapes molded and changed, their distortion became monstrous – paled to ghostly continence or twisted to alien dimensions. And the sound, their voices: a reverberating hiss which found, now and then, a word or phrase to shout or whisper.

Meanwhile, a watery tympani crescendoed upon the outer awning, and a spotlight swung recklessly across the water before lingering on a spot just beyond the ship's rail.

Deiger descended from our elevated booth and went to see. He leaned heavily upon the doors, even ventured into the rain. He shrugged as he returned. It was nothing – not that he could see all that far out. Rain and more rain is all, he said. Soaked through, his Hawaiian shirt clung to him.

I'd been watching the ersatz-buffet line, where a man was struggling to open a rectangular case of pills but finally emptied its contents – three or four in all – and palmed them into his open mouth as he waited. With a cartoon-like struggle, he swallowed them dry. By the time he reached the silverware, he was breathing heavily through his nose, and hunching as though he carried someone else on his back. He dropped one hand into the tray of forks and nearly collapsed into the fruit trays. He'd sweat all the way through his shirt. In a moment though, he righted himself and piled high upon his plate a selection of grilled meats, candies and two slices of blueberry rye. He cut the line ahead of him to gather some biscuits.

What're you looking at?

Same as you, I said and downed the last of my beer. Another? I asked and flagged one of the boys.

Deiger had had a few drinks at the pool beforehand, and I could feel him watching my interaction with the boy like a play. Why are you still here? he asked when the boy had gone.

I could ask you the same thing, I said. Besides, you know why. I don't know why everyone keeps asking.

Mara? Please, he said and dismissed the idea entirely with a wave of his hand. As for me, myself, he said, touching his chest, I'm *sick*. Ill, he continued. Or, my favorite —Not-well.

Deiger, you're no sicker than me.

He laughed. Well, that's not comforting at all.

When the boy returned and nearly spilled our beers down the front of us, we let him towel the table in silence. But, as soon as he'd gone, Deiger began again. Some fates leave you little choice. If it's not a ship for convalescence, it's an office in the corner or an expensive house or a commitment made too young —A mistake that cannot be undone. But all fates are accepted so readily —Too readily, he said. And, besides, you know you don't belong here. Half of us don't, but I do. I'm not a by-product of some hypersensitivity. I'm old world, straight-out-of-history — just plain fucked, if you ask me.

Deiger, I began, but, before I could say anything, a man approached our booth and sat. Neither of us knew him.

Look, he said, I'll pay for whatever you want, just don't make me wait to get in here — an hour queue they're telling us now. Without waiting for an answer, he sat and snapped at a boy for a menu. I'm Almond, the man said.

Sure, you are, Deiger said. And what's wrong with you, Almond?

The man laughed smugly as he perused the entrees. Liver cancer actually. Too many of these, I suspect, he said, pointing toward our beers. He laughed again, looking

between the two of us. He was ready to order if we were. Almond asked about the dog he'd seen wandering about.

He's mine. He can take care of himself, Deiger said. In a locked room, the dog becomes his own master. Taking a gulp from his beer, Deiger raised his eyes at me.

Our boy excused himself and took our empty glasses away; in a moment, he returned with more drinks, this time with one for our guest.

Almond put a cigarette to his lips, a little disgusted by it, as if he were sucking poison from an enemy's leg. Why not, huh?

The boy asked him to put it out, but he refused. No one will mind a minute less of *this* pitiful existence.

Plucking it from his mouth, I dropped it in his beer, and the boy left us.

The man muttered something as he stood, throwing his napkin onto the table.

Deiger laughed and, when the man turned on him, laughed again.

Almond's face had turned red, and his finger had drawn back into a fist. The last great lawsuit, he said. *That* was worth laughing over! It was ignorant to hope, to let us hope. Please, he said, turning to me, keep an eye on him, though perhaps *he* should be watching you, instead. Two idiots in a car, he said, and each of them thinks the other is driving!

And you're preternaturally inclined to bullshit, Deiger countered.

Nothing but two poorly trained dogs! The man turned and spat onto the carpet before storming out, knocking over a boy as he passed.

Deiger said, a bit in awe, Does he think I'm Martin?

Yes, I think he does.

Paul sat before us. He stared contentedly up at us, but he seemed not to see us. He shook slightly, unblinking.

Look, Deiger said. He's having a memory.

//

In an hour, the rain passed, and the picture on the television swam back into focus. Still, Deiger complained: the picture kept dancing around before him. Anyway, it wasn't anything worth seeing clearly: a line of women in long gowns considering one man before them, waiting for a decision – who would return next week, whom would he send home? Smarmy, good-looking, the man paces the line like a drill sergeant. Reality, I clarified for him.

Deiger groaned. Not this garbage again, he said, lifting his beer toward the television over the bar – muddy images smeared on screen. Hey, he said, can you change it?

The boys just ignored him. Everyone along the bar's edge looked up fixedly.

I'm so tired, he said, not caring if I – or anyone really – was listening at all. Fed up actually. Tired of being shown *how* I should smile, live, eat, dress – fucking love, man. How, with grace, we should all defer to the greater good. How we should all be

heroes but not the really *real* kind. He indicated everything and everyone around us. This is decay. Complete and utter decay. And what's worse is no one seems to notice it happening. Look around. It happens slowly, so slowly that it seems natural. No one knows they should be missing something, that something once there is gone. We're left only with the shells of things; inside, if you shake them, they're empty. He lifted his glass, empty too. See?

I wasn't nearly as drunk as Deiger was.

He went on, almost in a whisper: There are a few things you might find that are still real. Keep them safe, Adrian. He grabbed my arm and refused to let me go. Keep them secret. Or they will, he said, go away. Is it even possible to *feel* – I mean, really feel – the exact weight of a day? –And, and do you think they've gotten heavier? He put his head on the table and didn't lift it for a long time. When he did, he asked me to promise him something, and I said I would, but he replaced his head to the table without ever telling me.

At some point, I had to lift him and, at the very least, carry him toward the door.

Beneath the luggage shop awning, I stood with a man I'd just met. He'd spent the night, again, in the casino, twisting a machine's arm without much luck. Well, he'd had some – *some* fucking luck, he said – but it hadn't lasted. He'd chased it all night and into the morning.

–Too bad, I said.

As he talked, he consulted his hair with his hand. Next time, he supposed.

He was a bit arrogant, a bit naïve, but he meant well –driven neither to dream nor to achievement – possessing that contemplative air particular to those whose youths were sapped by illness and the smugness that only time alone – and jealousy – can breed.

He was a sports fanatic; I was not.

He wanted to talk about the tournaments, where he might find *that elusive bitch* again. He idolized those who could control their bodies, force them into greatness. I'd said something to offend him – or his teams – and he was preparing a diatribe against me and my kind when a young woman emerged from the storefront a little way down the promenade.

With a turn of her head, she appraised herself in the glass as she went. Her legs appeared like a pale dash between a hem and tall boots.

Raising one hand, I excused myself to go after her.

I follow at a short distance before taking her elbow and pulling her into the arcade, where, as we playfully dance, her legs brush mine through her thin dress. Stupid Sarah, I say, but she is distant, even dismissive, playing the part she loves to play with me. —You know I can't stand those boots, I say, so she turns in them, to highlight that ridiculous band of fur ringing their tops. She knows. —So put it down in that silly notebook of yours, she says. Your little book of complaints, she says, gently patting my cheeks. You know, she says with a sad look, one day you might actually *do* something more. —You're so pretty, I say. She is warm to the touch, as though with fever. It's all worthless though. All of it is; everyone knows that. She looks at me despondently. Someday, I say, shrugging and holding her by the waist. In a moment, she has to leave, and, though I know she has nowhere to be, I kiss her. Now let me go, she says. Someday, I say, I won't be here, and you might sometimes think of me. She's already started down the hall. Before the busy promenade, she turns to look back. No, she says, never, and smiles. One day, I'll even forget your face. And, as she leaves, her shape burns off.

It wasn't Sarah at all; she'd gone, I'd heard, to shore, one night, a long time ago.

//

At dawn, the boys dragged stored goods 'cross deck from the orlop: wicker chairs, surplus towels, oversized umbrellas, and corded hammocks. They worked in teams to extend the sheer awnings, to prop canopies above patients, to inflate floats for the

roaming children. At lunch, they stood aside, sheltered by the fake-palms' shades, and appraised the swimmers, cataloguing them, it seemed to me, for one awful purpose or another.

//

Around the narrow field, we took seats in the stands. Old men filled the seats below us. The diaphone blew, and the match started: Arungata over Cotezelle. Cotezelle's method, I explained, is spocking, almost strictly. Kester and Glasgow. Ivaïson. I'd bet on Kester, too, so we stayed. Byerley, Tender. —Think of the pattern, I said, watching one of Byerly's balls skip across the field. When Kester appeared on the sidelines, I captioned him with cross-fingers, and Mara did the same. Kester was known for his eccentricities: pacing the court five times before sitting, his long sideburns, and festive clothes.

Mara immediately took to him, clapping whenever he seemed to be looking in our direction.

Cozetelle opened with a spocking of the local's pallino toward far court.

Gnawing my bet, I slid forward in my seat. I'd bet more than I should have. Lowering my sunglasses, I mopped my brow.

Mara began stamping her feet to build the excitement.

I cursed under my breath, and one of the old men before me turned, ready to scold me, but, looking me over, he just shook his head.

The loudspeaker announced red, and Kester took his turn, taking the challenge with aplomb, though, in a few moments, he lost miserably, and so did I. Balling up my bet, I threw it toward the court, but it fell short, striking an old man in the back of the head as he stood.

Mara laughed hysterically. Hurrying out, she pulled me toward the betting stand, and, though I tried to explain that I'd lost, she insisted we go.

At the counter, Mara produced a bet from her robe pocket, and, with a glance, the boy congratulated her, immediately handing her her stack of winnings.

When she handed half to me, I didn't ask her what happened; I simply embraced her until she wouldn't have me any longer.

//

Martin stood by the railing, and a gust of wind lifted his collar.

A hat careened down the walkway; a moment later, someone ran after it.

On the rooftops, boys polished chimneys, buffing the black columns from the scene. Somewhere, Martin had read ships added chimneys for show – rather, *some* did – but it seemed a strange aesthetic, like adding manholes to a country road. Smoke plumed from one – already polished to a mercury-like shine – but he couldn't be sure it was real even then. One of the boys shouldered a ladder and turned, nearly knocking

another to his death. Against the glare, the boys' far off movements were eroded to caricatures: thin, flat figures awkwardly scrolling.

//

At a bench near the fo'c'sle, Martin sat and removed a letter from his pocket; he held it tightly against the wind. From open portholes, pieces of the boys' rallying songs – about how and in what way this day was about to be fucked – drifted. The diaphone sounded, distant in the superstructure. Lodged in the far-off scenery was the silhouette of a ship – indeterminable in size; it tugged something, much smaller, behind it.

He read the letter from his lawyers' office, which made it clear he was free to leave.

A man in a robe approached Martin and, sitting beside him, set a suitcase on the deck between them. With the edge of his slipper, the man toed the busted corner of the suitcase as though he expected it to move. When it didn't, he tucked both feet beneath the bench and left it alone. There was a sweaty glimmer all about him. With the back of one hand, he daubed his chin and mouth.

–Leaving us? Martin asked, sinking a bit against the bench. Beyond the bowsprit, a wave discerned itself from the others; it whitened, port to starboard, and dissipated – only to reappear a bit farther out, where it rose to a small crest.

Eventually, the man said. One way or another, he said. One of these queer lads wandering about, with a broad gesture of his hand, promised to take me ashore in one of those tenders.

—Sounds a bit ominous.

With a shrug, the man said it was *all* a bit ominous. What could he do about it? Sometimes, he said, I hear my own heartbeat and I'm certain someone's in the hall. 'Just take me ashore,' I said. 'It's all the same to me,' he said. Upon the great tabletop of the world, I'm but salt crumb kept out of the grinder. You've got a look – a bit dazed and distant —Uncertain, he said, looking his companion over. Lifting his robe's collar, he coughed into it. We all get that look eventually. He said, I went to land a few months back. Fernandina Beach. He shrugged again. Though he supposed it was like anywhere else; it was difficult to say.

//

By my best guess, we were southbound – must have been, for I sat starboard on a vista and watched land slowly rise and fall in the distance, in and out of view.

A speedboat slowed portside with two men and three women aboard, four of them standing and shielding their eyes to look up at us. Some of the patients waved to them below. One of them lay supine, a tri-fold foil held before her face. In a moment, they sped off.

Whatever we've all suffered, I overheard from the bench beside me, has oddly made this a solitary cruise, despite all the others about. The man spoke with a slight accent. He sighed loudly. Well, at least, not entirely solitary, he added, smiling and reaching across the table. He gripped the other man's hands with considerable force, knuckles white, at least until his companion winced in pain and shook him free. When they stood to leave, I followed a few feet behind. They stopped once along the railing, where both of them leaned slightly forward, past the guard, as though those few inches could improve their view of the schooners briskly skittering about the horizon. Some of the boys were quite skilled, arcing and leaning into their turns.

//

For hours, the two men played game after game, immediately resurrecting the pieces at one game's end to start again. When night fell, neither seemed to notice. Unprompted, the boys brought them water, which they drank in long gulps. All the while, the two men rarely spoke. When they did, it was only to lightly remind the other of his turn, to draw him from whatever thought fascinated him just then; it was clear they were each lost in some thought at such times. And it seemed they might play all night, perhaps to better distract themselves from whatever was waiting for them or wasn't. Yet only a few minutes before midnight, the two men abandoned their chessboard unceremoniously and left the café. They left their pieces, too, where they'd stood, mid-game. Their exit

was made so suddenly that Martin hadn't seen them go. Their absence, when he did realize it, was more glaring than their presence had ever been. Even the lighting of the café offered memorial brilliance to the booth.

Corinne held her sketchbook at arm's length to observe it. She closed one eye as though it made a difference. Decisively, she took a pencil and bluntly dragged it across the page: two men hunch over a chessboard, their features are lost in the dense clothes as though they are all one crumpled fabric. She looked to Martin. Well, they couldn't play forever, Corinne offered, following his gaze.

No? It seemed they might. —Do you play? Martin asked. He stood and buttoned his coat.

The boys had wheeled out a propane heater, but the balcony had yet to warm.

Corinne rubbed her hands together. Chess? She closed her sketchbook and stretched the elastic band over its edge to keep it closed. Not very well.

Well, we'll be fairly matched then. He lifted one arm and stretched it over his head. Come on, it'll be fun.

Corinne grabbed her bag from beneath the table and followed Martin inside, but, just beyond the threshold, she stopped. She'd probably stood too quickly; the whole café began to spin. She grasped the plush back of the nearest booth and squeezed it tightly until, all at once, the room settled as though dropped.

Martin had already reset the board. All right? he asked without looking up.

Corinne joined him at the table. Just trying to remember the rules. She did her best impression of herself.

Rules? He smiled, putting all the pawns in a row. There's hardly rules really. More like strategies and constraints. Tricks, too. —You look pale, he said flatly when he saw her. You sure you're all right? He reached to touch her forehead, but she pulled away.

Fine, she said, but do you mind if we don't play just yet? Let's just sit. She slumped into the booth beside him as though from a long journey.

Martin took Corinne's hand and smiled. He moved his fingers along her wrist then suddenly turned it toward him. —I almost forgot. There's a meteor shower tonight. He looked at her watch and then, leaning toward the window, the sky. Any minute now, actually.

They waited, but the night sky remained the same.

Still watching the sky, Martin asked the date.

No idea, Corinne said. —What was that? She pointed at the sky.

Where? he said.

There, she said and pointed again.

I don't see anything.

It's the fourteenth, she said. I think.

Well, that explains it. It was yesterday, he said. Still, they watched the sky, wary for anything.

//

—I think I'll spend the night in my cabin, tonight.

All right, Martin said.

I *want* to stay with you, you know.

All right, Martin said. He went on eating; he'd ordered a basket of fries before the kitchen had closed.

But I'm afraid.

Afraid?

Yes, afraid.

Of me?

Corinne laughed. No, of course not.

Martin folded his hands before him.

Don't look at me like that, Corinne said. I don't mean to hurt you.

You're not, Martin said. I'm only listening.

Well, don't listen so hard. You look in pain.

Corinne, Martin said. Don't be afraid.

Don't be dumb. We should all be afraid. Corinne pressed the prongs of her fork; its handle jumped. She drank water. It's getting cold, isn't it? She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. Should we go?

You go, Martin offered. I think I'll stay a while more.

Corinne stood to go. She leaned down and kissed him. Good night, Martin. Don't stay up too long. You'll be cranky in the morning.

See you tomorrow. He watched her cross the room inside, and, when she appeared on the deck by the café entrance, he waved. For a while, he stayed, and, the longer he did, the stars' order only became clearer and their wonder all-encompassing.

It amounted to less than an inch, the space between unlatched door and jamb, where flesh and fabric competed – flashes of black and white cotton, a glint of light linen or harsh leather dashes as Corinne undressed completely. She leaned toward the mirror, which hung at a slight slant, and considered herself. In it, she appeared, pale still against the light blue shower curtain behind her, pulled to. She was thin, much more so than she'd ever been; it worried her, becoming less and less. From the shower, she took her bathing suit, still damp from her morning swim. She stepped into the swimsuit bottom and tied the top behind her back.

Her cabin was tidy, far tidier than Martin's – or Mara's or my own. Everything seemed to have its place, and each place seemed designed solely for that item. Her clothes were all perfectly hidden by the closet's folding door, but Martin was sure that, inside, it followed similar codes. Her shoes were all upright in a line; her bed was meticulously made. She'd even hung a yellow curtain at her portal, and, through it, daylight poured like gold upon the various carpets she'd lain on the otherwise grim, matte gray floor – though even that seemed bright.

Something heavy struck the sink's counter, and Corinne quietly swore.

All right?

It's nothing – only a whole bottle of perfume down the drain. Quite literally. She almost laughed, rubbing her fingers along the sink's edge.

Martin lifted her bed's pillow, but there was nothing there.

On her desk, she'd left a novel; it was the only thing not put away, but, even still, it seemed perfectly squared to the desk's edge. An envelope, tucked between its pages, bore his name. He pulled it slightly from the book, but Corinne called to him from her bathroom; he left it alone.

With a final look at herself, she emerged in black suit, sunglasses, straw hat and white scarf.

Martin had buried his eyes in the book he kept in his jacket to appear as though he'd not been watching her all along – following that inch of abstraction to its end. What are you reading?

Your diary, he said.

I don't keep a diary.

No? Isn't that a direct disobedience of Dr. Albert's prescription?

She shrugged. Anyway, should we go? She locked her cabin door behind and walked ahead of him through the narrow halls, occasionally turning to look at him over her shoulder.

In the lift, he smiled, and she saw it reflecting, warbling in the brushed bronze face of the wall.

//

At the binnacle, Martin lifted the cover. Someone had tried to smash the compass' glass. Its hand spun uncertainly, wavering atop the four corners without reason. Martin watched it as though it would soon settle, though of course it wouldn't.

Are we lost? Corinne said, idly touching a dull edge of broken glass.

It wouldn't matter in the least, he said.

//

When properly lowered, Martin unhooked the oars and rowed. Briskly, capably, he angled their narrow, rented boat toward the coast, though it was still far off, registering as a thin, yellow band. Corinne put up their umbrella, which stood perfectly – if only briefly – before a breeze lifted it, made it hover then disappear somewhere above them, sucked soundlessly and completely into oblivion.

Well, it's gone, she said from beneath a raised hand. Still, she tried to spot it.

Martin shrugged and steered them toward the other rented boats, all of them subtly rising and falling, carried one way or another by the current, though everything just seemed so still and the water to continue upward without end. With his back to the bow as he rowed, Martin had view of the ship, and, the farther they got from it, the larger it seemed to him: massive and impressive, central in the blue-green and gray landscape before and beyond it.

Corinne turned on her bench. It's much larger than I remembered. Look at it. It's beautiful, isn't it, in a way? When the sun emerged again, the entire ship vanished in the light. When it returned, she tried to find her cabin in line with the others, until she realized it was on the other side. Martin's, however, was there, and she pointed vaguely toward the ship.

Well before they reached the others, Martin could hear them screaming and splashing as they swam. Some of the children were catapulting themselves, despite warning, from the benches and nearly capsized their families still onboard. Occasionally, you heard a reel spinning, but they hardly ever had luck. Discarded life jackets floated here and there in the water. Someone had brought a stereo, which sporadically sounded across the water. Most dozed beneath large umbrellas, somehow secured, which turned slightly in the breeze.

A bit more, Corinne said. I'll row if you like.

Martin shook his head and brought them around, just far enough that the others could hardly be seen. There, the water was calm and smooth as a mirror.

Corinne leaned over the boat's edge to touch it. She hesitated as though her fingers would not pass, but, of course, they did to find a warm current just beneath. You've done this before? Corinne asked.

Sure, Martin said, rowing them aside. He pulled the oars on board and strapped them to the sideboards. Here we are then. Far enough?

Corinne looked back toward the others, toward the ship, all of which, just then, was lost in a glare. Think so, she said. Far enough. She leaned across the middle bench and steadied herself as the tiny boat gently rocked. Come here, she said and, when Martin had edged toward her, kissed him. Martin, I really do think the water's good for you. She smiled and put on her sunglasses. It's been good for you. Look at you, she said. You're glowing! She leaned abaft and pulled her hat around her ears. She would get some color too; sparse freckles had already appeared on the bridge of her nose.

Listen to that, Martin said. He'd taken both of her sandaled feet in his hands. He moved them from side to side.

—Yes? she said from beneath her hat's wide brim. She listened. All she heard was the dull slap of the water against the boat – surprisingly physical, like a swift hand on flesh, she thought. I don't hear anything. Oh, isn't that wonderful, she said.

No, listen, he said. There's a phone ringing.

She laughed.

They both sat very still, waiting for something, then, in the distance, yes, a phone was still ringing. Then it stopped.

Corinne took off her shoes and lifted her dress overhead. I'm going for a swim, she said, tightening her swimsuit's black strap around behind her neck. You coming?

In a fluid motion, she rolled into the water, and, stripped to his shorts, Martin went in after her.

//

Beside the small boat, the two of them bobbed, occasionally ducking under or rotating in the current. They moved apart then came back together. She paddled nearby and Martin pulled her in by her waist. She took hold of him around his neck. Treading water, she came closer, lowering her chin. She stopped not far from him, watching him before her. She floated away on her back, dove and reappeared. Her hair fell flat around her face, and she brushed it away.

They were still in the water, clutching the tie of the boat when the sun started down. It glared off the ship, alternately hiding it and staining it black. There were moments when they couldn't see the ship or anything but the water immediately around them, the rented boat, and one another.

It was dark as he slowly took them in, and she leaned over the side, letting her hand pass through the water.

She attached the lantern to the ship's head.

Around the small ripples her feet, hanging overboard, made, subtly moving, the water extended endlessly toward the bond of gray sky and again, she thought, below to a depth she couldn't begin to imagine.

//

On their backs, their heads together, they could see the round window – from their angle, it appeared oblong – above; everything, which was nothing really, within it was upside-down, the darkest of blue, almost gray. He took her hand in his.

She looked at him and started laughing –Don't give me that look, but he continued to look at her the same way, and the sky remained above them, unchanging.

//

Upon close inspection, in bright morning light, Martin's jacket was nearly threadbare in places, almost translucent at the elbows and collar. It was missing several buttons. If you reached into the breast pocket, you could push your arm to the shoulder through a hole at its bottom. And his shoes were much worse. The soles of his boots were smooth completely and lacked any trace of a heel. The lace on one boot had snapped in two places, but he'd tied it back together. Corinne almost laughed, thinking of Martin alone, struggling it seemed to her to do the simplest of things though she knew he was more than able. Still, the ship had changed him, she imagined; he seemed unwilling to do as he was expected. He never unpacked his things fully. He never shopped or gambled. He only occasionally swam with some coaxing. She picked up his boots and placed them by the door. She lifted his jacket from the floor and shook it off before hanging it in her closet.

He turned in bed but did not wake.

IV

Some crippling of body and mind is inseparable even from division of labour in society as a whole.

— Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*

Delaware

A man in a red European swimsuit used a metal detector to divine along the receding tide-line. For more than an hour, he traced a similar track back and forth, only incrementally farther inland or nearer the water, when, suddenly ripping his headphones from his head, he fell to his knees and dug desperately in the wet sand. He cried out from exertion, in Spanish, but, still, he rigorously scooped heavy clumps and tossed them over his shoulders. Some children rushed from their towels to see, kicking up sprays of sand as they hurried over; some of them even knelt to help him. A few minutes more, they'd have it – just a little more. He called out again. He had a special instrument for sifting as they got deeper. All at once, their digging slowed to a meditative shoveling, like that of gravediggers. But of course, it turned out to be nothing – or next to nothing: a scrap of aluminum, a turn of tin.

The children dispersed, and the man in the red suit donned his headphones and began his search again, tracing the same track he had a few moments before.

Beyond, not far off shore, our ship stood against a swath of brilliant daylight; but, it appeared small against the wide stretch of water on either side of it. No doubt one might have swum to it with little struggle though it seemed housed beyond an unreachable breach. Yet smaller ships came and went, delivering more and more of us in small groups ashore. By mid-morning, you could spot dozens of us claiming swathes of beach, trying to predict where the sun would sit in a few hours.

Corinne dropped in her chair and sighed. She snapped on her sunglasses and observed the early sun. She pushed off her espadrilles and buried her feet in the sand. I almost forgot what this was like, she said. She shrugged her denim shirt off her shoulders and slumped low in her chair. Excused from all responsibilities, she said –Vacation, as a verb. To be – simply be. Feels good, doesn't it?

Martin had splayed himself prone upon a towel in the sand and lay utterly motionless. He lifted his head only slightly to look at her. I don't know what you're talking about.

You'll burn like that. And she tossed him a small tube of lotion. She breathed deeply, waving her hands before her as though to draw more salt air in.

Beside her, Mara did the same.

Reluctantly, Martin sat up, angling his braced leg out before him. I think you've forgotten what it's like. He smeared a handful of sunscreen across his nose. This is *not* vacation.

Then what is it?

An excuse, he said. I don't know. A way to heave us overboard a while and clean our cabins. It's practicality. It's routine.

I know this isn't vacation, but it *feels* just like it – a simulacrum of the beach, the sand, the water. An interplay of sunlight and tanning oil. I know it's real, of course. And vacation – the very word itself, *vacation* – has always had a strange sway over me. Like I've found respite from all those things at work everywhere else. Anyway, there's no

rocking deck beneath us at least. She reclined her chair until she was completely horizontal, and that seemed to end it.

//

Each wave erased bathers from sight, and, slowly, each one of them reemerged not far from wherever we last saw them. Bathers, all in white bathing caps, bobbed lazily in a line. Others did their best paddling past the breakers on narrow surfboards.

The parenthetical curves of the shore on either side made – at least what I understand to be – a cove. All morning, people waiting to be taken ashore had used the word, to the point that it was comical. And so – because it was a cove – the waves were gentle, scrolling regularly from left to right with the breeze.

Martin stood, adjusted the brace hugging his knee, and walked toward the water. He was already burned a bright red. The day before, Corinne had given him a short-sleeved shirt with a repeating pattern: a small golfer with club raised toward a grassy mound with red flag. The shirt, too large for him, billowed in the breeze. Apparently, it reflected some inside joke to which I'd never been made privy. —I've never liked the beach before, he said. He bent slightly over to pull a small shell from the sand. He'd always found the idea of the coast much more interesting than the beach itself: the sloped and jagged ends of the earth. Not today though. It's nice to be here.

I'd gone to stand beside him. Look at these idiots, I said. Some of the boys were scrambling in the surf, gathering the towels they'd toppled from their cart. A few of the rolled towels had already come undone and floated away. One of them waded in and began diving for them.

Here, Martin said and pulled a folded piece of paper from his pocket. He let me look it over without an explanation. It had been ripped from a newspaper.

What is it? I said.

Just look. Martin pushed his hands deep into his swimming trunk's pockets.

It's an advertisement for a movie called, uh... —I can't read it. It's only part...

Martin turned it over and gave it back.

It's you, I said, recognizing him in the printed photograph. He stood with his brother, and they stood side by side before what appeared to be a courthouse. They both wore the most ridiculous smiles; their fists were raised.

It was, Martin said.

Where did you find it?

One of the boys did. He brought it to me months ago. I was in the café.

And what? You've held onto it all this time?

More or less. It was a bookmark for a while then it was in a notebook. Now, it's made its way into my pocket each morning. You keep it. I don't remember when they took that picture —I can guess though. But it's like all photographs I've ever seen from years ago — not me, not anymore. I recognize myself, of course; I even remember myself.

I can recall the feel of certain things. I don't know, the way a couch felt in an old apartment; a girlfriend's perfume; the smell of the radiator in a shitty hotel. God, they all wear emotions like weights. They feel important, but I don't exactly *feel* them. Not anymore. So, when I think about what put me here – limping, recovering – it's hard to justify. And, you know the worst part, that's just the past, but the future's no different, created by visions, all of them wrought with emotion, but not truly *emotional* – not yet.

By some trick of the light, the ship had begun to disappear.

How much by the way?

The money? Martin shrugged. A disgusting amount. Anyway, I gave most of it away. I gave it all away – to my brother, to buy a few houses, shelters in various cities, some land for farming. The rest, I'm told, is gone. Various non-profits.

You sound all right with that.

Couldn't be happier.

Corinne lifted her arm and waved.

I angled my hand above my eyes to see down shore.

We're taking a walk, Mara said as they approached.

We'll follow in a few, I said. Martin and I, for a while, could hear them, even as they continued south along the water.

//

Partly buried, several strands of barbed wire crossed the beach and dunes and ended in the water. Before it, Corinne stood holding the hem of her dress where it had caught and ripped as she'd scrambled, unaware, up the small incline. Corinne raised her hand to show Martin – walking toward her as fast as his leg would allow – a dash of blood across her palm. It's nothing, she said and, with a look at her palm, let her sunglasses drop before her eyes.

The shape of the beach's southern end, where we stood then, forced us to look back toward where we'd been dropped an hour before. From there, though we hadn't walked very far, the others looked small; those in the water appeared motionless against it.

Mara had begun digging carefully around the wire, and I knelt beside her to look at it more closely. Still taut, I said. —What's on the other side?

A public beach, Mara said. We went already.

You crossed it? I said.

Don't be ridiculous. Of course, we did, Corinne said.

Martin set out, and we followed. In the sand, we could make out two pairs of footprints, but they'd nearly been covered up already.

//

A few makeshift tents stood in a row halfway up the shore. Voices and music escaped from the open flaps. Some children worked to construct a tenuous wall of sand using variously sized buckets. One of them scooted across the wet sand and used his hand to drag out a trough toward the surf. Inevitably, it was all dragged down with the tide. When that happened, they simply relocated farther inland and began again. People clumsily tossed in the breaks or rode one another through the waves. As we continued on, women in tiny, bright suits gathered and watched their toddlers tumble around before them. Men lay buried to their necks. Beyond, a group of people were throwing horseshoes at each other.

They're staring, Corinne said. She pulled the brim of her hat lower across her forehead.

Let them, Martin said. Whether he noticed, his limp became exaggerated.

Come here, Mara, Corinne said, taking her by the hand. Tell me about the last time you were at the beach.

And so, she did.

While she spoke, I watched a man approaching. As he walked, he rubbed his right ear as though something was wrong with it. Even as he pulled on a tank top, angling himself into it like a straight jacket, he went on fidgeting with his ear. —Pardon the intrusion, he said when he'd come alongside us. Was just over there, he said, discussing whether – well, whether or not you all are from the ship. He pulled the hem of his shirt down over his protruding stomach, then, over his shoulder, he pointed toward a

half-circle of chairs arranged so their occupants – three men and two women – were facing us.

They lifted their various drinks when we looked; we waved back.

The sick ship, that is, you know as they say –No offense, of course. We heard about that, renting the cove and all. Beautiful over there. The way he pronounced the word *cove* made it nearly unrecognizable. Coov, he'd said. But you're not sick, are you? He offered us his palms as though to surrender. He rubbed his ear again and squinted against the glare.

No, I said.

Yeah, I know that much. I could tell. I told them that. But, still, I see your limping, he said, indicating Martin's leg, so a man can't help wondering. So, I asked. You know what? I envy you, the man said. You've escaped, free of the freedom and the servitude, which so deliciously intermingle here.

Martin closed his eyes a moment before speaking. We're not free, he said. Not like you think. Separated, yes. But free? Not hardly. That ship out there, he said, still feels the same pulse, the same progress.

But you're so far from it, it must be faint.

Corinne smiled politely but took Mara toward the water all the same. She sensed it wasn't a conversation meant for them.

Perhaps, Martin considered. Or perhaps it's there, where the pulse is faintest, we ought to worry the most.

The man thought that over a moment before taking another sip of his beer. Yes, maybe.

We watched the water awhile, where Mara and Corinne were hopping the waves as they crested.

And her? he said. The little one? It's not one of those invisible ailments I keep hearing about, is it? The ones that manifest manifold. Depressive, weighty things. Headaches and night sweats.

Martin turned to look after them both, considering them against the broad background of the waves.

Sometimes it's worse. Sometimes it's just a little twinge in the arch of your foot. Or insomnia, vertigo. You know, we all got some of that – all of that actually.

No, it's not that, Martin said. It's not anything really.

Yeah? Well, it's just a matter of time before it shows itself. It's all about us. In the air and water, the soil itself. I've been hearing about all these diseases that are coming back too. *Ancient* ills, I think they called them on late night news. Anyway, you're not heading into town, are you? Well, not town. Used to be. Still is, sorta. Avoid it – what's still there. Just squatters now in the burned-out buildings. A storm rolled in a few days ago – may not even be any squatters anymore. Strange times, the man said flatly just before he returned to his friends with enough story to tell.

//

Corinne tied her long dress in a knot to the side so she could follow Mara in. Farther down the shore, Martin and I settled on a large piece of driftwood; we sat in silence, watching, when suddenly a tall wave built up and crashed harder than anyone had expected. Mara came running inland. The thrust of water delivered what looked at first like a knot of limbs onto the sand, and, as they detangled, I realized they were two boys from the ship, head over heels, and, as they reoriented themselves, they saw us too, realizing immediately who we were.

All right? I asked, raising a hand toward them as they got to their feet.

—You're not supposed to be here, one said as he pulled the other — slightly more knocked off-kilter than he was.

You must be joking, Corinne said — even laughing as she appeared beside us.

No joke, ma'am. He crossed his thin arms before himself. You've got to go back. He postured.

Just calm down, she said as coolly as she could.

You've got to go back, the first boy said, now positioning himself in our path. He pointed toward the way we came. Go back, he said.

This is escalating quickly, Martin said to no one in particular.

I saw Corinne take Mara's hand.

There's no need for this, Martin said calmly.

It was apparent to me that one of the boys only wanted to end the confrontation and let whatever they'd seen pass. However, the other wasn't going to let that happen. This one, whatever he felt then had aged his face entirely. He seethed and frothed. Despite his friend's hand upon his shoulder, he lurched forward, and, though he'd meant to grab Corinne's elbow, he fumbled as she dodged and ended up taking Mara by the arm. She screamed and, for a moment, was stretched between Corinne, who held her hand tightly, and the boy.

Martin reached out a hand, but the boy swatted it away.

Then Mara spun free and immediately fell into Corinne's arms.

Without thinking, I'd clutched my right hand into a fist, but Martin noticed and, with only a word, I let it go.

He stepped between us and showed both his palms as a promise of peace.

Still, the boys pressed toward us.

Look, Martin said, we're going.

But then Corinne appeared and punched the kid directly in the nose, and he stumbled backward, in apparent shock, toward the water, where he sat. He touched his nose and examined his hand for blood. There was none, not yet.

Martin had already grabbed the other by the sleeve. Don't, he said, but the boy shook him off. Before he took another step toward Corinne, Martin had lifted the boy onto his shoulder and, with incredible strength, tossed him into the waves.

//

I'd been in the café the night before. At that dim hour, as land loomed nearer and distance and time and sound all conspired, the coast only occasionally revealed itself, a few stars, perhaps, above, perhaps not.

And, by dawn, it was as if the lights had come up on a stage to reveal the crew's work, which, though realistic in a sense, was somehow false too.

At the bow, well before the first diaphone blast, passengers contested for space, though not to take in the view – the likes of which some hadn't seen for months – but to find the misplaced shadow or too-still bird stuck in the whitewashed sky, some crack in the façade to reveal the painter's hand and bring the whole charade to an end, but it was all suspiciously well kept, polished as though for the making of a film; that everything was in place only reinforced suspicions, the cardboard waves made to move by pulley, by some chorus of stagehands that worked below.

Behind the bar, a long mirror reflected the room. Though exact copies, one revealed a perfect, strict order while the other frenetic chaos. There, a crowd circulated an invisible center, hands and feet all synchronous to the loud, disastrous music, while, here, madness reined. From the expansive throng, dancers' features emerged, flung out recklessly, wildly. One was lit with shifting color gels and strobes; the other with dramatic, dull light.

Foremost, however, a man in a corduroy coat stared blankly, unmoving, toward me, and I toward him. He appeared a few years older than myself – a few years only, not much more; he was thin, and his clothes didn't quite fit him, as though he'd borrowed them from a slightly bigger friend. He didn't appear accustomed to the tie, which weakly hung down his front and repeated an unseasonable pattern of bells and holly. And I, to him, must have appeared tired, too, an odd center to the movements and patterns behind me. He slumped against the bar's sill, hanging there as upon a cliff's edge.

I raised my hand, and he raised his: a toast to one another.

And we drank.

Only two days before, the 'Capulco 'Cappellas cancelled. So, the boys' band played. Along the stage, hired dancers strutted, chugging to-and-fro to the arrhythms of the New Mem'ries. All in black, the band hung in a fabricated, dense haze and insipid, false mystery. Still, all across the polished dance floor, people moved, grabbing onto one another desperately, gripped by choreomania as the frail singer sang and gestured in

earnest imitation toward the ceiling. Though many of them were dressed impeccably, overdressed in many ways, a few still had arrived in their robes and slippers; they still danced, swinging their cloth belts around like propellers before themselves.

—Trying to scare him off? Corinne said. She lifted her drink toward the man before us, still clinging to the cliff's edge. Clipping an olive from one of the bar's miniature plastic swords, Corinne asked if she thought it sharp and long enough to deafen her.

—If only.

I've never hated music so much, she said. Music has been bad for a long time now, but this is something new, something awful.

The dancers aren't so bad.

One of them just then made a pathetic leap into the air and landed on his knees. Another was imitating an elephant, wildly waving one of her arms in an approximation of a trunk.

Is that what that is? She'd hardly recognized it. Anyway, it's been a long time since I've seen this many people in one place, Corinne remarked. Conscious of the narrow slit of her skirt, she crossed her legs. She turned toward the band, who dispassionately played on. It's a bit strange really, to be honest. People hide so easily among themselves, oblivious to everything around them — just so long as they can hide.

After a raucous close, the band departed through a cloud of smoke, and Dr. Albert, still applauding, took the stage. He glowed with sweat. He spoke briefly, praising

the angular sounds, the unique arrangements —And stylized styles of the New Mamm'ries, he said. —Aren't they great? Now, raise a glass with me, he said, to another year at sea! As he raised his champagne to toast, he fumbled it, tried desperately to catch it, but failed; the glass broke loudly at his feet. Someone provided a well-timed rim shot from the dark stage.

Nearby, Mara danced like only a child can: without fear, without even a remote knowledge of shame.

//

The plaque outside each of the entrances all read *Grand Ballroom*, and each of the cozy conference rooms along its rear wall were haphazardly named after European cities. London was dark, though you could hear several couples inside. Copenhagen was well lit by a half dozen beaded lamps, which stood tall like sentries around the couches.

A man galloped by the door, bucking and howling, with a girl grasping his hips, and she, likewise, jerked across the passageway, followed by another and another.

Corinne shuffled the stack of papers, pulling a folded issue from the middle. A large color photograph on the front had caught her eye. Someone had drawn red horns on the man's forehead, just below where what-was-left of his hair started again. From between the congressman's lips, a forked tongue extended. And, from behind his suit's left shoulder, a pointed tail rose and curled, fattening around the end like a closed

artery. A story followed, though someone had eliminated all the dates from it, taking careful measure to hide any mention of years or months, even specific days and seasons. In fact, every article, advertisement, and obituary was similarly excised. Rectangular, black boxes pocked each page so that it was impossible to tell when the articles were written or when Eleanor Callow, Richard Blight, and Fiona Piece passed away – unless, of course, one knew them personally. Other editions, piled high on the side room’s tables, suffered the same necrotic disease.

–Is this supposed to make us feel better? Corinne said, pulling one of the boys toward the couch.

He didn’t know what she meant.

The dates, she said, pointing at the stack of papers.

Still, he said he knew nothing. I suppose, she said, these things just happen all at once.

You don’t really think *he* did it, do you? Martin asked her as he appeared in the doorway.

No, she said. I doubt it. But it helps, you know, to put your anger somewhere. Come and sit. How did you find me?

Martin smiled. The sick tend toward the shadows, don’t they? What are you reading?

I was looking for the crosswords, but I ended up in the obituaries.

Martin sat and looked over her shoulder. Oh, look, he said, pointing to a picture of two men on a stage, each scowling and gripping the podiums before them. Two rabid dogs – in a cage. Shaken.

–I never read the paper before – rarely. Now, I obsess over it, read it religiously, panic, if only a bit, until I get to it. Actually, I avoided it almost entirely. Not only did I *not* read the paper, but I went to great lengths not to read it.

//

The conga line gained a few more people and then a few more: women, men, children – of all ages, all shapes, all colors, all sizes. It was as beautiful to see as it was strange, seen as I saw it from the slightly elevated bar and in the cloudy mirror beyond.

The line shuffled around aimlessly while people joined in, clinging to the swinging hips of the person before them and following the man at the whole thing's head. And that man raised his arms into the air, let them drop, raised them into the air then let them drop, all while his hands were limp like empty gloves. He was dancing. He raised his arms again, lofted them above his head, which swiveled to the music, but this time he kept them up, like fangs, until finally he too clutched someone's waist and followed, round and round, no one leading, no one following – everyone, too, leading, following endlessly.

//

She saw through the narrow door the others spinning and watched them with a twinge of horror. —Do you dance? Corinne said.

Not very well, Martin admitted. Though I have an excuse. I swear I used to be good at it.

But it's really such a pointless thing, she said. In the end. Why move at all if you've not left the spot – or perhaps you've crossed the room.

That unending line of dancers came bucking by, and a man howled into the doorway.

—Would you like to dance, Corinne? Martin asked.

She raised her eyes and almost laughed. What? —With you? But when he offered her his hand, she gladly took it, certain she blushed.

Normally, I'm too stupid to ask.

Holding her by the wrists, I spun Mara in a clearing and the faster I worked the higher her feet rose off the floor until she was entirely horizontal.

Corinne and Martin danced together nearby; they didn't seem to notice us. They talked as they moved, dancing closely; they laughed. Corinne's hands moved slowly up his back until her fingers were interlocked behind his neck. She put her head on his shoulder, and his fingers tensed against her sides.

—You're not bad, you know?

It's taking all my effort not to be.

Well, don't think about it too much, she said. Look around. Everyone's in another world. They wouldn't even notice.

You would.

I might. But I'm looking for any flaws I can find. Desperately.

From behind his shoulder as they danced, her face would surface to survey with unnerving serenity the others: all those ridiculous dancers – and now she was one of them. Many of the women had left their shoes in a pile near the wall. Slippers, heels, loafers, sneakers. There was something sinister, Corinne thought, about the collection, and hid, once more, behind him. When the song ended, rather abruptly actually, Corinne parted from him and looked him over. —I almost forgot you were going.

//

We were all invited out to the decks. The lights in the grand room were all brought up, breaking whatever spell the dim lighting had cast. Everyone gathered their things, found their shoes and coats, and went out.

The night was pitch black however, and, all along the upper decks, remnants of the celebrations inside resurged; everywhere you could find people laughing and dancing and couples kissing even farther under awnings' shade. Even the spotlights had been put out.

At that distance, the boys' tender was invisible on the water, so that when their fireworks began they seemed to stem from nothingness, spinning discs and orbs of light streaming from the void. Between bursts, the boys' voices were carried across the water, one of them always yelling at the others. A few decks above them, others cheered and clapped after each display. A thick heat clung to the air.

Corinne pulled one of Martin's arms across her shoulders and rested her head against him. I think I might finally appreciate fireworks, she said, following a particularly vibrant red dahlia. They can't change or be improved – at least not much. They haven't really, in all this time.

Martin put his cheek against the top of her head.

God, it's been so easy with us, Corinne said.

Martin nodded. It has. It is.

Has it ever been this easy with anyone else?

Once, maybe, Martin admitted.

Corinne shivered against him. She sighed. I don't know why it's so hard then to say this. I've lost all eloquence. So, let me put it plainly.

Martin let her go and leaned against the railing.

She moved to be closer to him still. I want to leave here, she said and looked far beyond his shoulder. I want to leave here, she said again, with you though. *Only* with you. But I will need time, time here. Alone, she added. She tried her best to smile. To be sure.

Martin laughed.

What's so funny about that?

I thought you were coming with me all along.

Really? Since when?

Since the first day we met.

How modest, she said.

—I didn't prepare anything to convince you, he said, taking her by the shoulders and lowering his eyes to her. I didn't think I'd have to convince you.

No, she said. That won't be necessary.

But if I had, he went on. I might have said this. Perhaps, I wasn't as well as I thought coming to this ship. Maybe I didn't realize something was wrong, that the life I had been living – full in many ways – was missing something still. —Come with me, Martin said. And I'd have said that last part very dramatically, as I looked into your soul. Martin stood before her with his hands shoved deeply into his pockets and one leg, his good leg, turned slightly away.

Slowly, some of her color returned. She smiled. —Before I met you, I'd found places on this ship I could be alone. Can you believe that? I'm still surprised there are lonely places left. It seems people are everywhere. A true infestation, she said. She laughed. —I wasn't looking for you, she said.

Corinne, he said and lifted himself onto the rail.

Be careful, you idiot. She grabbed his knees.

I know, he said.

Really, I ought to push you overboard, she said. With one hand, she reached for his jacket's collar, but a sudden burst of light stopped her. She jumped back; it felt so close. What the fuck was that? But when she looked for him, he was gone.

A delayed whistle filled the air and then a distant splash.

Her body was slow to comprehend what had happened, though, looking at the empty space where he had been, she thought, almost instantly, she'd likely never see him again. Once she could move, she looked over the rail, and, below, she could see movement in the dark water. Then, too, there was his voice. She could have been mistaken, but she swears still he was laughing – calling her name and laughing. It was contagious, that laughter, so, as she climbed onto the rail, looking around herself as she did, Corinne held her skirt's hem in her hands and kept it taut as she slipped overboard to join him.

People gathered to watch, calling for a spotlight, and soon it found them, paddling happily together.

The boys' rescue was quick and efficient; we'd had jumpers before.

//

Martin stood in the center of the room; a pool of water had formed beneath him, of which he was suddenly very aware.

She leaned back and looked him over, nearly breaking into another peal of laughter.

He looked absolutely ridiculous, and he knew it. So did she.

She hung about his neck and they fell against the wall, knocking a vase from her desk. It shattered, but Corinne only laughed, leading him to her bed, which, once again, she'd fastidiously made.

Martin, leaning over her, suddenly stopped. Corinne, he said, there are a few things that haven't been ruined.

Of course, she said, pulling on his belt. That's how it's supposed to be, dummy. How else could you recognize the rest?

He laughed. You and I, he said.

She knew what he meant.

Her mouth was warm; her body was warm.

Martin saw the broken vase, spread across the floor.

//

It was cold that night, and Corinne turned to Martin, clinging tightly to him as though to sap his warmth.

Are you shivering? Martin asked, wrapping his arms around her. He went to find something warmer.

Before this, she said —Before coming aboard, I spent a few months in California of all places. It was warmer there.

Martin dropped two flannel comforters atop her.

There, she'd hiked the paths orbiting the mountain retreat, taking in, as she'd been directed to do, the cool mountain air, sure to fill her lungs to their fullest. —At night, she said, as I lay in bed, I swore I could hear the sounds of civilization from the valley below — car horns, voices, music — even above the rattling of the aspen leaves. She weakly laughed. Sometimes, she said, I still imagine myself amidst those sounds, adding my own, indiscernible from the rest. I don't think I'll ever forget the sound of those nervous trees, shaking all day and night like that.

Her legs were turned to him; from that angle, her face pushed aside, her body seemed a continuous line that ran from her head to her feet, tucked against his thighs.

—Did it hurt? She touched the circular scar just below his knee.

It? he said. No. Everything around it though. There was nothing there.

She had a scar, too, she told him — quite a few. Not many you can see though.

//

Restless, Martin thought that if she turned toward him, he might sleep. And — it was hard to say how much later — she did turn, yet he stayed awake, feeling, now, the long length of her body against his side, the weight of his arm across his chest and leg across

his lap, and the mortality of her breathing, regular and human. He nearly cried out beneath the heaviness of it all.

She woke suddenly and sat upright in the dark of the room. Martin, she said, feeling for him beside her.

He took her hand, which had found his face.

She'd had a dream – or something like a dream.

There's nothing to worry about, Martin said calmly, without even asking what had happened, what she had seen.

In a few moments, they both slept or appeared to sleep. Though, if you watched her long enough, her lips occasionally formed a beguiling smile, one that seemed to suggest she knew something you did not.

A dense, gray cloud laured the steam room and enfolded the bodies inside like a drape. One emerged from a fold and pressed through the exit, which let in a gust of cool, locker room air. Otherwise, occluded, people sat in the fog and breathed. The room – narrow, wet, and dimly lit – had a way of forcing you inward, to reflect, to consider yourself as a tool for living, simply that, every act merely a function of existence. Even your thoughts slowed; you wished to move a hand, and, a moment later, your hand moved.

The doctor lifted his glasses, slick with condensation, and slid them upon his nose, fixed them behind his ears. The frames seemed to have softened in the heat and, in a surrealistic droop, lay against his cheeks.

Martin sat in the corner and leaned forward with his elbows upon his knees. He breathed deeply, taking long breaths of the humid air. He angled his toes out of his flip-flops and observed his feet; they almost seemed not his own by the way they moved in the haze. He sweat.

—I'm glad you're here, Martin. Reclining, the doctor disappeared entirely. —This may be the last chance we get to talk.

Martin looked around the room and saw only pieces of people, white towels and limbs.

It's the doctor, I think, someone said from another corner. That same man stood and two more followed, leaving all together.

Only me, the doctor said and slipped across the room to sit with him. I was afraid you'd left already actually.

No, not quite.

Not at all, I'd say. He lifted his hand, as though to touch Martin's arm, but did not. Weren't you supposed to have left a few weeks ago?

Martin shrugged, but the doctor couldn't tell.

Anyway, I haven't seen you lately – not on the decks or the arcade.

I've been around, Martin assured him.

Well, and he laughed, there're not all that many places to hide. Still, I often saw you in the arcade – just wandering. You never carried bags or goods. You were alone, the doctor recalled, almost every time.

Yes, well.

—I always thought it strange that you chose the shops of all places to walk. I don't think you've bought anything but meals on board —Actually, I know you haven't. I've checked for receipts. He stopped a moment, to let Martin speak. When Martin didn't, the doctor continued. In your absence, I realized something. I realized you walked there to – well, to play along, I think —And to participate. I once saw you smiling, just watching through a window —Am I right?

Sounds about right, Doc, Martin said. He looked at his feet again, moved them against the tiles. You've got me figured out.

The doctor clapped. Well, damn it, Martin, you're an open book. He laughed again, and the sound echoed around them. Tell me this then. Do you think about the past as you walk? Oh, you must! It's all over your face. Whenever I spotted you, even from afar, I could tell you were revisiting your life, walking its halls too like those of a museum. He raised his hand again as though to find Martin in the fog but could not. I've always found a good walk puts me to reverie, as though with each step I move through a memory itself. Sometimes, you must just stop though —To think, to see. To observe a memory, like an object that cannot be touched. And unfortunately, never changed. Explored but never claimed. As much as one might wish to rearrange the pieces... He groaned. Memory is, I've decided, a foreign country in the end. And that passport, too, expires. You appear like a stranger to yourself — far stupider than you've lately assessed. He wrapped a white towel around his neck and dropped his head backward against the tiles. He audibly breathed and, in a moment, sat forward again. I think of my wife. Whenever I walk, I think of my wife. Ex-wife. The air in here is so heavy, I dare not speak her name; I may conjure her in the mist. He laughed uneasily and uselessly waved a hand to clear it. You know, we once got along quite well — quite, quite well. She was an art dealer — or something very close to that. She had her gallery, her clients, and — when time allowed — her own art too. She was impressive. Somewhere there's a portrait of me. She was very good — very, very good actually. When she painted me, I seemed to come alive upon the canvas, as though I existed for the first time but only there. Hardly a hobbyist, she had raw talent. So it was inevitable — between that and her generous

clients. Well, something – success, fame, money, who-knows-what? – put an indescribable barrier between us. We could only tap on the glass in between. I tapped and tapped and tapped. All the while, she never seemed to hear me. That glass was strong, but I was determined to shatter it.

And did you? Martin asked.

The door to the steam room swung open again; a man entered, sat, but he only stayed a moment.

The doctor looked where last he'd seen Martin but couldn't quite find him. No, he said finally. Something shattered, yes. He sighed loudly. He removed his glasses and set them on a towel between them. Memories are an affliction, he said. He stood, crossed the room, and lay out upon the far tier; from there, his voice claimed a new timbre, one that stretched the distance beyond the room, the ship. They've got me today, too, it seems. Let me tell you something else. Having somehow escaped all my appointments, I was out for a walk one afternoon. But I had to stop and sit – lie down, in fact. I let both my hands drop to the warm planks of the deck. Somewhere along my walk, I had begun thinking of my uncle, though I never really pictured him, his face; I saw, instead, his tiny plane – orange and pale blue, a faded-black stamp naming it – well, I forget its name, though it had one. Helen or Flying Minnie. Who knows? A prop plane perhaps; I don't really know. He took me up in it once. I was terrified. We turned and barreled through Ohio sky. I saw the dash, the gauges – or how I imagined the gauges in my mind; it seemed less than a memory, like something made, fabricated, shot through with lens

flares and cinematic. I was hardly eleven – and small for my age. My uncle, the doctor remembered, chuckled –He had to raise the seat with a bath towel for me. The doctor paused and adjusted himself on the slick tiles; he scratched his pale chest. In one lengthy pass, he said, overturned, my body hovered between eternities – that is, the sky and the furrowed fields below, the parted and posted grains, dry and gold, dead and useless. One couldn't justify the other; they seemed to me, only a boy, diametrically opposed. Locusts scattered when we dipped, at least in my memory. Forcing my head back against the seat, I could look below to the sky, long and blue, whenever he made us spin. Cumulus clouds gathered in pockets at the distance of the wings. –In the days following, he recalled, my boyhood mind revisited that time again and again, as it seemed I knew nothing beyond that feeling, that free-floating despair. Confusion. Perplexing. Even now, I sometimes know nothing beyond it. It flares up like some dormant infection. And those days, as my mind hovers overturned, just living – it's like I'm trying to fit into an old shoe. Much too small and worn beyond repair. No longer even the sort of shoe I like. I feel like a tourist. Like I'm spending a weekend in that foreign country, where I don't know the language – or the people, the culture, the politics. Nothing. Nothing makes sense; rather, *I* don't make sense. Anyway, I had to sit, for a feeling – that gigantic, weighty feeling – overtook me, so much so that I felt I couldn't move. Do you know that feeling? And there the doctor paused.

He paused so long that Martin believed him asleep. Sometimes, Martin said. When I lay in bed at night, sometimes. That's when you're weakest. But doesn't everyone?

The doctor stirred, sitting upright, and, briefly, he appeared fully, clearly, a vulnerable apparition in the room. That's just it, my contrarian friend. Not everyone at all. I wish they would.

Martin stood and angled his feet into his flip-flops.

Leaving?

I am, Martin said. Soon.

Left alone, Dr. Albert whipped his towel from his waist and lay naked in the steam. He breathed loudly to be certain he was there, hidden somewhere inside.

//

I hurried back upstairs to my cabin; I was sure I'd forgotten something, but, inside, I couldn't recall what it was. It was something, I was certain. I held my keys; my wallet bulged from my jacket pocket. I stood in the center of the room for several minutes, trying to think of whatever it was before returning to the hall. After all that, I still couldn't say.

As I locked the cabin door, a woman appeared at the end of the hall. She was in uniform: gray, modest dress and white apron, gloves, matte black shoes. She stood with a tall push broom beside her. She had been sweeping, but she stopped when she saw me.

I raised a hand toward her, though I felt I hadn't been meant to see her, that, more importantly, she thought she was meant to remain hidden from me, meant to exist but only just so. I felt sorry for having caught her.

She took her broom and disappeared before I approached.

//

Corinne pulled another armful of hanged clothes from her closet and set them, piece by piece, in two places. Anything on the floor was going; if it made its way to the bed, it could stay – there wasn't much there, just a few things now: black jeans, a few shirts, a jacket, bathing suits, sandals, two pairs of shoes – sneakers and flats.

—Why are you getting rid of these? Mara emerged from the adjoining bathroom with a scarf draped over her head.

Corinne laughed and wrapped it tighter around her. There, she said, that's perfect. Mara, you sure nothing will fit you?

Doubtful, Mara said, holding a clutch of dresses before her. Someday, maybe.

Here, throw these in that bag. Corinne handed her a few more skirts.

Mara stuffed them in. Won't you miss them?

No, I don't think so.

Will you get more?

Not if I can help it, Corinne said. At some point, you'll realize you have too much stuff – meaningless stuff. Just more things to hide you – to distract you.

–From what?

Oh, I don't know. Life, I guess – more important things, Corinne said. And all of this amounts to –Well, it's the past; that's all.

What about this? Mara lifted a bit of sheer lace, which didn't amount to much actually.

Corinne blushed. I'll keep that, she said and quickly took it.

Along the narrow shelf above her bed, Corinne had kept a collection of miniatures, most of them gathered from friends more traveled: a pair of wooden clogs on a key ring from Holland, a leather coin purse from Jamaica, and a turquoise brooch from New Mexico. When Corinne shoved them all into a bag, Mara went after them, pocketing each one she could, certain, someday, she'd know what they meant.

I knocked a friendly pattern upon the door before entering.

//

On the lido, the boys – all in matching white tracksuits and shoes – led calisthenics. They bound about, wind-milling their arms and high-stepping, calling out

encouragement as they jogged around to monitor and adjust, all with special attention to the two young women in the rear row. Another dozen patients had joined them in half-hearted exercise; their robes parted as they moved to reveal pale bodies beneath. With bullhorns held aloft, the boys needed them to push themselves beyond their comforts, beyond their aches and their pains, beyond their sense of self until the body took over, locomotive and pure. When asked to run, run, run, the patients shuffled; when asked to touch their toes, their upper bodies hung limply and swung like heavy fruit.

Touching knees to elbows, a boy called to Martin as he passed. —Mr. Touch, come and join us.

Martin raised his hand in polite decline.

It's good for you, the boy called as he sprinted past again. Get your heart racing, your blood flowing. The spirit rattling.

Somewhere to be, Martin said and turned inward toward the arcade.

Well, your health won't wait, the boy called and jogged backward toward the pool.

Martin's right leg suddenly felt heavier as he pulled it along beneath him. Finding a handkerchief in his pocket, Martin dragged it across his face. He shrugged off his flannel shirt and slung it over his shoulder; still, his t-shirt clung to him uncomfortably, like extra skin. He walked closely along the first of the storefronts, to stay in the slim shady aisle beneath their awnings. Where the hat shop had once been, a confectionary's stood in its place now; soft chocolate fudge rotated around a spool before the window.

At the telephone banks, Martin waited. Tucked in each booth, someone spoke, casting a line back to land and listening. Nearest, a woman cradled the receiver between shoulder and ear and whispered while considering her left hand's nails; she looked up at Martin and stared blankly toward him, unseeing really. She put her hands in her hair, scaffolded high atop her head, and sunk her fingers into the blonde tangle. In a moment, she made a kissing noise and hung up. With a last look at Martin, she left, disappearing into a nearby shop.

Martin punched his cabin's number into the machine, and it purred. When the line came to life, he fingered several digits, and, with a few whirs and clicks, he was connected to his brother.

—You're late, Daniel said after a single ring.

Just hearing his brother's voice, Martin laughed; he could have said anything. I know, he said finally. I can't keep track of time here.

For a while, despite the cost of the call, they spoke of themselves, what they'd done in the months between their last conversation and their current. In the end, it wasn't much. Nothing had changed, not really. They spoke of Martin's money, which Daniel was tending – vetting non-profits or, if nothing suited him, simply giving it away on the streets. He had, as Martin had asked, purchased a few homes. He'd done that.

—There's not much talk of you, Daniel said. Not anymore, at least. There was. It was all anyone talked about. Now, it's on to the next thing, which is... he began, but Martin stopped him.

I don't want to know.

You sure? This is some supremely fucked-up shit. —You don't sound like yourself, Daniel said.

No? Martin turned in the telephone booth, mistaking the wind through the rafters for someone calling out.

The Martin I know, Daniel went on, would never have called actually. You never did like telephones. You used to say they always reminded you of time passing, people changing. You used to say, and Daniel laughed at the thought, it was always better to think of people as you last saw them. It'll only make you miss them, if not their presence than the man or woman they'd been before. God, you were so stupid sometimes.

Though he knew Daniel couldn't see it, Martin hid his irrepressible smile. I miss you, too, Daniel.

I know, brother. And I'm sure you miss solid ground. But don't fret; it's never very steady. Something's always just about to break through it, destroy us all. May be better off if it did sometimes. Listen, Daniel said. The line dropped a beat but then returned. —Had a lot of time to think, he said. All this time away. But solitude is vital... —To be better, he said. To come back again.

Martin just listened.

You've always had this idea — all our lives. You think you're alone in this. Let that sharpen you like a tool.

I'm not exactly alone here, Martin reminded him.

Not physically, of course. But you make it that way somehow still. We both do that. All-consumed by an immense and absurd sorrow. An unfortunate family trait.

//

Striped-and-sheer umbrellas pointed from their posts and cast long shadows. With time, they inched slowly around. Beyond the shade, sunbathers turned too, their foil fans occasionally alive with light. Martin and Corinne sat poolside. She had already gotten some color; she was busy coating lotion beneath her eyes and across her nose. Before them, a man floated on his back, and the children pestered him. And nearby, I lay face down. Over me, Mara stood like a specter. Lateen sails showed themselves in the distance.

A few days of this, Corinne was saying. —At least. When she turned toward Martin, the shade beneath her broad hat lifted but only slightly. That’s what the boys say. But still they might be right, she said. It’s a heat wave. Corinne lay back on the warming tiles. And after that storm, it’s a nice change. She propped herself onto her elbows. Lowering her sunglasses, she gave Martin a look. Setting aside her hat, her book, her sunglasses, she slid into the cold water. She bounced on her toes ’til she’d adjusted. Come for a swim, Martin, she said, sinking to her shoulders. Holding the wall, she kicked her legs out behind her. She’d always been so susceptible to the weather, she said. A snowstorm had a way of turning her particularly introspective. And she adored

the rain —In moderation. She shrugged and pushed off the wall. Maybe I'm just waiting for the right moment, she said, though she didn't say for what.

On the far side of the lido, a lady's oversized scarf caught the breeze, hovering and tumbling lightly over the deck.

A woman screamed and reeled from the pool as a man spat a stream of water toward her.

Amidst the horizontal bathers, a foil fan was adjusted and flared.

Corinne couldn't help noticing as she paddled before Martin the pale scar just below his knee. Inside him, she knew, a heart pumped blood, lungs pushed and pulled air, and a stomach churned. Gently, she placed two fingers against the slight puckering of the scar. Though it couldn't have been, she imagined it was perfectly round.

People lay on the lido and sweat.

Pushing a cart of fresh towels, two boys maneuvered through the lounge chairs, stopping now and then to chat with the bathers.

A horde of children veered around them and spilled into the shallow end of the pool. There was something inherently sad about watching children play. Perhaps it was knowing they would, at other times or in a few years, not.

Angled toward the floating bar, two oversized hirsute backs glistened.

Corinne crossed the pool and turned.

Mara had returned and, shedding her robe, jumped in after her.

They held onto each other tightly, rotating in the pool's center, distracted entirely, so that they both screamed when Martin appeared beneath them, pulling them under.

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Corinne clutched the railing and climbed onto the first rung so that she could lean into the open air. With a deep breath, she screamed as loudly as she could.

Martin just laughed.

Soon, her voice returned to her from the coast, a faint warbling in the night.

—Your turn, she said.

I don't think I've ever screamed.

No? Well, just think of something that makes you mad. You can do that, can't you?

With ease, Martin assured her.

//

Martin turned the plastic page. Time moved quickly, from one photograph to the next; in two pages, he'd watched Corinne age from chubby toddler to rebellious teen. A few pages more, Martin found this: Corinne stands with a man, about her age then, posing,

chin thrust forward, his face very near to hers. She is smiling in a way Martin had seen once or twice before, though, each time, she vanquished it quickly as though she hadn't meant to allow it. —And who is this? Martin pet the photo and grinned.

A boring story, she said, turning the page, though the next photograph wasn't any better.

You look happy, he said and went back.

I was stupid then. It's easy or *easier* to be happy when you're stupid. But, she said, looking at him as he intently inspected the picture, I suppose I was — yes.

Who took this?

A friend, Corinne said. Corinne closed the book and held it in her lap. There's no context. All these memories mean nothing to you. Mistakes — all of them — robbed of their context. She felt as though she'd spoken his line. I have to find my hat, she said, and Martin nodded without asking why; it was late after all, long dark. In a moment, she re-appeared, still without her hat. You're leaving in the morning. She went to the desk, retrieving a small bottle from a drawer. She pressed perfume against her neck. When she stood, Martin took her hand and pulled her back to bed. Are you even packed?

What's to pack?

Oh, Martin, she said, throwing herself down beside him. You're going *home*, you know? Don't you feel happy at all?

Of course, I do. But, you remember, the world never really wanted me.

She knew. And you wanted to be wanted so. Yes, I know – better than anyone, I suppose. Let me show you something. She stood and went to the closet. It was there somewhere, in some suitcase, she was certain, but it would take her the better part of the day to find it.

What is it? Martin asked as he took off his boot.

My passport, she said. I'm sure it's expired by now.

You ought to renew it then. He pried off the other.

Maybe, she said. Anyway, I've got to find it first.

Going somewhere?

Someday, I'd think. Aren't we?

The boys were wrong. It rained the following morning, and every hall was choked by billowing ponchos and borrowed galoshes. Everyone had paused at the corridor ends, willing to witness the mess but unwilling to get wet, or refused to stray from the shade and cover of various dilapidated awnings. The rain, in fact, seemed to bar them in, falling as one solid wall from above. Certainly, some preferred to listen from their cots, anxiously deciding if they ought to go out and thinking perhaps it'd be the last rain they'd ever see.

//

They stopped to look toward the water and the braided stretch of land behind it. If they stood very still, Martin was explaining, it felt as though they were drawing it in like a breath.

Corinne stood beside him, inhaling deeply and concentrating on the shoreline, which, with every moment, drew nearer – though at that peculiar rate, she noted, hardly moving at all in between the diaphone's sounds. Though she didn't say it, she knew, too, that with its approach came closer Martin's departure. She'd been there when he packed, though there wasn't much to put away, a few items of clothing really.

We were somewhere within those final hours; at any moment, the end would be pulled over top us.

She said, I'm sure, to them, we're only a white spot on the horizon. If they notice us at all.

Turning back, to look at the ship above them, Martin felt pinched to a point, small. A building goes up, he said, and you must adjust to that building, to seeing and understanding that building. Make space for it in your understanding.

And when a building is taken down? Corinne asked.

Martin nodded. Often, that takes much longer, he said. But something will always come up in its place. It's impossible to look at a city or town or even suburban home without recalling the workers' hands that made it.

You're nervous, she said. I've never seen you like that. She held Martin's head in both her hands and moved her fingers slightly against his cheeks and ears. She smiled broadly. I'll miss you, you know, she said, adjusting her sunglasses, which she was careful about keeping high on her nose.

Yes, Martin said. He kissed her.

Her lips rose into another smile.

Corinne, Martin began, but she shook her head back and forth adamantly.

Don't, Martin, she said. I'll see you soon. We'll talk then. She smiled once more and slapped him on the ass as he started down the gangway toward the waiting tender that would take him ashore.

We waved until we were sure he could no longer see us.

Near where we sat stood one of those coin-operated views through which patients could propel themselves miles ahead, crossing water and, if it was close enough, land. Just then, a boy, dragging a maintenance cart behind him, appeared and left a sign hanging from the contraption's head. Broken, the sign said. Nevertheless, a woman approached and tried to look through it, feeding it coins and wringing its neck.

Mara laughed quietly, covering her mouth, as the woman began kicking the post and demanding the foul thing deliver its view or else, while I considered my one fate among the fates of all the others. Eventually, the woman grew tired and stumbled off in her slippers.

Corinne held an envelope in her hand. She turned it over and over before her without really seeing it.

What's that? Mara asked.

This? Corinne showed it to her. It's nothing.

Was it Martin's?

It still is, she said. I'm just holding it for him.

Ahead of us, the horizon lifted; on either end of its scale, there was nothing. Gulls had gathered above on the line, and, to us below, they cawed, occasionally ruffling and dropping to the deck.

Despite the efforts of a few girls in my past – and, to a lesser extent, my grandfather – birds remain strangers to me. The adjectives I could ascribe to any sort of

bird are limited to the simplistic notions of size and shade, with only a few exceptions. There was a little gray one, another big and blue. Birds had gathered above – some strange, some droll – in a line upon an invisible shelf, a trick of the light lost against the whitewash. All of them probably had escaped from the doctor’s aviary. There was a little red one in a drab frock and a larger tropical one, at least in color; most were black and mild against the bright backdrop until they alighted to peck at the floorboards. A scourge of children saw them off and returned to the feet of their parents’ tables, pulling the tablecloth over behind them like a curtain. When the adults left, the children remained, claiming that table – or at least underneath it – as their own. When the boys led a couple toward it, the children assaulted them with hard rolls.

The birds scattered as we passed and returned to their lofty spot.

V

It is our sorrow. Shall it melt? Ah, water
Would gush, flush, green these mountains and these valleys,
And we rebuild our cities, not dream of islands.

— W. H. Auden, "Paysage Moralisé"

Envoi

Martin tends the garden; he kneels among the blank rows and looks back toward the rear of the house. From there, its windows catch the light, reflect bright and blue, and the sounds of others inside carry across the yard. Beneath his hand, the tilled ground is soft and cool. Birds, hardly noticed, perch in the trees all around, sometimes all together alighting. Martin whistles sharply, just two notes, and his brother's sheep dog bounds from the abutting woods and stops attentively. C'mere, Martin says and claps. The dog comes quickly to stand before him, lowering her head so she can be greeted with both hands. As he stands, Martin is slow, careful about his leg, though not nearly as careful as the day before or the week before or as he'd been a few months ago when last I'd seen him. From an upper room, faint music can be heard – nothing Martin knows.

Inside, Martin sits at the dining room table. He angles another chair nearby to put his right leg across it. The house is quiet now. The clock in the hall clicks, just slightly; the faucet drips steadily into the basin of the sink. Doris appears at the back door again, scratches, and he lets her in. She bows to lick her front paws splayed before her.

Morning, Marnie says when she comes in. She's in a big white t-shirt, stretched tightly around her stomach, which has been showing more and more each day.

Morning. He puts last week's newspaper aside.

Did you eat? She's bent before the refrigerator, which is nearly empty. There're a few eggs left.

I ate. I'll go collect some more in a minute. Daniel up?

He's in the shower. Teaching later today. I saw Jan and Michael across the street. They seem mobile. I think they're heading to town if you need anything.

I might take the ride. Martin reaches down to touch Doris' back. You need anything?

I gave them a list. Vitamins and such. She cracks the remaining eggs in a bowl and saves the shells for composting. Sure you don't want any? She tilts the bowl toward him as though to entice him. She smiles becomingly. She makes so much noise in the morning – slamming cabinets, dropping bowls – but everyone forgives her.

Sure, he says. Again, he stands, favoring one leg to the other. I won't be back 'til later, he says and stops just short of the hall. Tell Daniel, will you?

She has the blender going by then and doesn't quite hear, but she nods all the same.

//

Just before town, Martin raps twice on the top of the truck's cab and, when Michael has slowed enough, drops as lightly as possible to the grass alongside. As they pull off, Jan's thin arm appears through the passenger-side, open window, her hand raised and flattened in goodbye. Michael veers left and right to miss the various long-untended flaws in the road before coasting through the intersection and turning toward the beach. Martin cuts to the park, which has, in the last few months, faded to a tangle of

overgrown, withered shrubs and scorched grass. Still, a few families gather on blankets in the sparse trees' slim shades. The fountain's dry, but children still stomp through it. He reads for an hour, just some novel he found in one of the houses when he'd moved in. At the park's other entrance, a crowd of people have gathered; there are not many, maybe a dozen, but it's unusual to see so many all in one place anymore. Martin hears them chanting before he can read their signs. Profit, one of them calls into a bullhorn, and the others respond, staccato, Another word for exploitation. Over and over, they perform the same rhythm. They become louder the farther he walks, and, soon, they're before him: men and women, even children, mostly in the same homemade shirts, all poorly tie-dyed green, the shade of greed – or so it says in bold font, front and back. Some of them are carrying signs.

A man with a bandana tied low around his head approaches him, sign across his shoulder like a rifle. Hey, I've got a joke for you. You want to hear it?

The others go on responding and chanting.

Go ahead, Martin says, letting the man walk beside him.

Okay, ready? A preacher, a racist, and a criminal walk into a restaurant and say, Table for one, please. He smiles broadly and hops away, sign now aloft.

Martin laughs politely and continues on.

Hey, the man calls after, same time, same place tomorrow, before taking up the chant again.

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The cashier knows him, though only by name; she smiles at him as he comes in, though not unlike how she smiles at everyone else. He goes from aisle to aisle in the small store and moves without order, often visiting one shelf again and again. But, all the same, he appears with a basket before her in a few minutes. It amounts to very little – tea bags, a small pineapple, three unripe avocados, a baguette, and a gallon of water – but the cashier handles them each carefully, placing them all, save the water, in a small box for him. As he pays, she asks if he’s seen the ship.

Ship? Martin asks.

She counts coins into her palm. Yeah, she says. It’s been just off the coast for a while now. Was there all night too.

What kind of ship? He pockets his change, lifts the box so it fits beneath his arm.

She shrugs as politely as one can. Cruise ship, looks like. There’re a bunch of little boats coming in, last I heard, bringing people ashore.

Just off the beach? he asks, though it’s the only place it could really be.

Can’t miss it. She’s chewing gum, wrangling it to one side as she speaks.

Sure. I won’t, Martin says and presses through the swinging door.

She smiles when, a moment later, someone else comes in.

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A crowd had already gathered on the beach. Martin finds Jan among them. She's taken off her shoes and, holding the hem of her dress in a knot, waded into the water to her knees. Michael has both their sandals and stands a bit apart from the others; Martin joins him.

That's not *your* ship, is it? Michael asks, pointing with one pair toward the one still on the water.

Anyone come ashore yet?

Not yet. They're coming though. See the canoes or whatever they are? Right there, he says and points again.

Even from there, Martin sees the white uniforms aboard. Well, it's definitely my ship, he says.

No shit. You know they were coming?

No idea. Watch this a bit, he says, leaving the box of groceries beside him.

Michael pushes up his sunglasses and considers the box. Where're you going?

Martin removes his shoes, his belt, and stows his wallet in the box. I'll be back, he says and pulls his shirt over his head. He doesn't quite run, but he moves quickly toward the water, diving in just beyond where Jan stands watching. She goes to stand beside her boyfriend but doesn't think to ask where their friend's going. He's going though, moving quickly through the waves and beyond toward where our tender's coming in.