

Under the Paving Stones

Ethan Joseph Feuer
Colts Neck, New Jersey

Bachelor of Architecture, Rice University, 2011

A thesis presented to the
Graduate Faculty of the University of Virginia
in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

Department of English

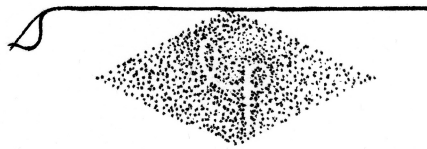
University of Virginia
May, 2017



UNDER
THE
PAVING
STONES



lp



I

may, year of the dog

a sight of Manahatta in the towering needle
multifaceted insight of the fly in the stringless labyrinth

—Frank O’Hara, “Rhapsody”

It gets so bad that people start swimming in the river. No one has been dumb enough to try that in a hundred years. Birds that land on the banks of the Sakima Canal have been known to become mired there, talons fused into the chemical muck. But it's not just the eggy, volatile chromacolor of the inlets, lined as they are with wilted factories and mills. The other trick of the Miacantic is that it's easy to get lost. There are undertows. Whenever someone takes a header off a bridge, the tidal tables need to be consulted. The distance of the moon and the tilt of the earth determine where they go from there: up to the bay, or down to the harbor. Or worse, trapped in the currents, washing up and down as the tides shift, for days or weeks or even longer.

So Gaëlle won't swim, not even to escape this heat. No, Suze is gone from the city and Gaëlle newly unemployed; accordingly, she drinks her way through the swelter backwards, upside-down, lazy, making promises she fails to keep, ditching Charles and others for podcasts, radio, screwdrivers in her bedroom, a box of Franzia in the kitchen by the window watching the kids stomp roaches down in the alleyway, sitting down in the shower and urinating into the drain without ever moving her legs, eroding her savings, texting Bean to ask if he has any spare phones then obsessively checking the one she already has (and never quite seems to replace) for word from Esha, little brother, word she wants to hear so that she can not give a fuck or take the excuse to burn him completely, and speaking of fucks, fucking strange men sometimes, not because they pay for her drinks (though they do), and not for the sex, which is gauche and dispassionate, and yes

sometimes she steals from them (little things—opal cufflinks, their wristwatches, scarves, wives' shoes or handbags), and yes one of them tries to put it in her ass, but some of them have faces that remind her of other faces she once loved better, or they dress well or make her laugh into her beer or tell her lies she can imagine are true, and after the sex they can be trusted to leave, like they're disposable and know it full well.

It's only when her little AC is no longer able to cope, sputtering out lukewarm swamp breath into her boxcar apartment as she tries and fails to surrender to sleep, that she realizes how bad it's become. That the nascent sickness inside her, the one that aches deep in her cheeks and hands, and which has her lying awake at night, confusing the meanings of words, whipsawing from one certainty to the next, also compels her to a tenderness, a nostalgia she can't explain—which impulse she indulges guardedly by helicoptering Charles' workplace in Sarks, sitting outside the gray-faced building where she knows him to be, and watching the birds roost on the sills. She even does this with Roget once or twice, stopping by the laundry where she's heard Roget now works and peering in through the sheet of glass to see her, ensconced in that aura of violence she wears at all times like a cloak. The impulse to go to her uncle's house, to see if little brother was telling the truth in his text—*coming to city for summer*, he'd wrote, *staying @ uncle Elliott's; meet up?*—that's the strongest of all of them, and she manages to subdue it only by indulging all others and drinking no end.

Outside, even trees are hot to the touch. People stare up at the sun in hurt suspicion as they wait for the bus—sadsack and dead-eyed in their loosest lightest pants, heads wrapped in damp towels or t-shirts, fanning themselves with manila folders, eating ice cubes like candy from

insulated lunch pails. Under the bridges in Sarks where the homeless once congregated, or in the parks where protesters marched, there are only the signs of their abandonment—placards, plastic bags, shopping carts, clothes—as people swarm to the overcrowded cooling shelters set up in libraries, churches, and former armories. The public pool is open eighteen hours per day.

In the street, on the subway, the news, no one can talk of anything but temperature. Everyone is shocked, the way weather shocks little children. People are dying of heat, so they say. Gaëlle might be shocked if she wasn't so liquid most of the time. Between the heat and the alcohol, she may eventually call Esha again, but if so, she doesn't remember what either of them said. What else would they say but the word "hot", over and over? She doesn't feel so guilty as before over calling him. The specific guilt and fear attached to him is lapsing into other anxieties, just as the pain in her face is spreading at times to her hands now, her elbows, her gums. She feels exhausted universally, and they are beginning to ask one another on the news—is everyone feeling like this?

Charles begins to text her about his family. His father is older and hasn't been doing well. His mother wants him to come home to upstate and be a full-time son. She works as a technician at a pharmaceutical lab up the Miacantic River. They raised Charles in the city, but exodused in his teens to some shitty rust belt town, God knows why. Charles makes to his mother like he's thinking of leaving, but to Gaëlle he emphasizes how the money he earns in the city is more good to them

than having him there. He says he belongs here in Mia, this is his home. He says two sisters already live within a stone's throw of the parents. A third, the black sheep, is in DC with his nephew.

These are stories, in the past, he'd have told to Suze. Gaëlle wants to tell him she knows nothing of families. Esha has texted again. He says the news is freaking him out, can they talk? She takes a moment to deliberately unremember calling him. What news? If little brother is scared, he brought this on himself; he came here. She would tell him that the city is the city, if she didn't think it would encourage him even to hear that from her. A city is a filthy place where people can be born and die alone together, she would say. Instead she texts Bean: *Where's my phone?* He texts back. *Same place it's been for a week. Come and get it.*

Being home alone, she dries the well more quickly. She is incapable of planning ahead because she's always promising herself she'll drink less than she does. This is how she ends up on her way down to the street and the liquor store each evening around five or seven, looking, feeling, and smelling like shit, boiling into the pregnant half-light in joggers, flip-flops, tank top, no bra. And it's on the way back from a trip like this, bottle of shiraz in one hand, phone in the other, that she pauses on the stairs, aware quite suddenly of a smell even worse than her own—a smell pungent and fecal and spoiled and sweet. She backtracks, following the scent to the door of 2A. Bringing her face close to the door frame and feeling the weak pressure of air on her lips, she almost gags on the stench. She pounds on the door. She can't remember the name of the old woman who lives there—only that she is sometimes to be seen in the lobby, scrabbling at her mailbox, or picking her teeth. Nobody answers.

At this point, Gaëlle goes upstairs and opens the shiraz.

By the time she is out through the window onto the fire escape, the sun is still up, but just barely, raking her skull with a desperate heat. She grasps at the wrought iron railings on the descent, trying to keep her eyes on her feet and the narrow lattice planks, pausing to grip at the handrails each time the wind kicks up.

It's four floors down and she's halfway before the question of why she is doing this percolates into her head. It arrives somehow mockingly, with an image of her spread-eagled on the pavement, and she carefully averts her eyes from the street, from the black-painted bolts tinged in rust that anchor the tenuous platform to the wall. She closes her eyes and breathes in through her nose, lowering herself through the final gap and down the stairs to the second-floor platform. She looks in through the glass.

What she had expected was the usual old woman silt & dross—magazines, medications, hairnets, porcelain vases and figurines, harpsichords, stuff like her grandmother used to keep in her house—the woman herself gone from the room, on a trip perhaps, and a roast left out absently on the counter, or else a rat or mouse, even a pigeon or cat dead inside on the floor by the front entrance, fur bloated and prickling. In the darker corners of her imagination, she might have considered the possibility that the smell was too strong, too redolent for an animal, that its odor wasn't the same as roadkill or the dumpsters behind the butcher's. She might have been more prepared.

But she isn't prepared.

The ambulance arrives within fifteen minutes of her call, but they have to wait for the police to open the door. The sound of the battering ram sets her teeth on edge and she comes back out of her apartment to stand on the stairs and look down at them on the landing. She folds her arms, whole body shivering, hugging her elbows. She's already vomited everything up. The couple from 3B stands in their doorway behind her. She watches the paramedics dash in then walk out. The smell becomes overpowering, just rotten and wrong; the couple shut their door, the white fringe of a towel appearing beneath it. The police look up at Gaëlle, but they don't shoo her away. She doesn't like cops. They appear to consider her. Her eyes ache in their sockets. The questions begin. Does she know what happened to the old woman, exactly? How did she find out she was dead? Does she know of any family? Can she put them in contact with the super, or owner? Gaëlle gives them the phone number of the old Puerto Rican man she pays rent to. She thinks he's the owner. "If he curses you out," she tells them, "it isn't personal. He probably thinks you're the Building Department."

After all that, they still have to wait for the coroners, who arrive on the scene via produce delivery truck. One of the paramedics explains to her that the morgues in the city are all "stuffed", due to the heatwave. We need to store them for later, he says, as if "they" were popsicles. He's a pale, soft-jawed, boyish six-footer with big white hands like pork chops, and a tic of adjusting his glasses; hard to think him a day over 20. He looks at her with an expression she knows from the

subway, of coming home late at night and crossing paths with some white-collar type whose exact line of thought runs clear as their face: what is a pretty, well-dressed girl doing alone, at this hour, in that kind of state?

She asks the paramedic what he means, “due to the heatwave.” His face becomes somehow even softer, a bed of foam sunken in the shape of her question, and he looks away to the floorboards. “We’ve had a lot of calls,” he says, “due to the heat.”

The image of the old woman’s ruined remains flash like a strobe on her retinas, black and blue and red. “But that isn’t—that can’t be—she didn’t—” she says, and he looks into her face and agrees: “No. It wasn’t. Not her.”

So she tries to ask him again—if it wasn’t the heat, what was it, because a body does not do *that* due to heat—but in answer he only pulls her aside, down to the first floor landing. Now they’re close enough that she can see the red craquelure in his eyes.

He leans closer, squinting. “Let me see your pupils.”

“What?”

“Just hold still.” He shines a penlight into each eye, then clicks his teeth. “Are you having any pain? Headaches?”

She gives it a heartbeat of thought, then nods.

“You should get yourself checked. Go to the doctor, the clinic.”

Upstairs, the radios crackle. The cops are on the phone with Mr. Camacho.

“Checked for what?” she asks, but the paramedic only shakes his head helplessly, glancing up toward the others, and touches her shoulder, just once, and lightly for so large a man, before dashing back up the stairs, two at a time.

Gaëlle arrives at the free clinic early, to her mind. She watched the sun come up from an eastbound train. Yet the parking lot already is crowded with people in t-shirts and shorts, foreheads shining in the sunlight, limbs cocooned in wraps of gauze or towel, eyes roving. The line for the doors spills out between cars and trucks and the occasional tent. A tremulous jazz solo reels from a car stereo somewhere, piercing ties and runs drowned out at regular intervals by the rumbling of commuter trains passing by on the tracks just behind the dour, gray municipal building. She shades her eyes and waits.

Inside at last reminds her of Charles’ workplace, the phone bank, but twenty years aged—cavernous, oppressive, and fluorescent-lit, boxy TVs cantilevered from the walls, anti-smoking and lead contamination PSAs on a loop. Every minute or so, an orderly will burst through the doors that lead deeper into the building and shout out a series of numbers, slapping her palm against one of the garish, outdated posters on the wall for emphasis. Industrial fans thrum by the doors, and at times, as Gaëlle passes by vents while standing in line, she wonders if the AC might not be on also. But it makes no difference. Simply too many bodies. All the chairs are full. She stands with the others, shifting her feet, not even sure what she’s in line for, wishing she’d thought to bring something to

drink. She waits and waits and waits, and at last she is given a number and told to sit down. She almost bursts into laughter at the suggestion, but the staffer looks exhausted and sad and terrified so instead Gaëlle just thanks her, finds a place to stand by the bathrooms. An hour passes, maybe two. More than once a person in line breaks into tongues, cursing and shaking their head like a terrier with a rat, or else falls down on the floor, seizing and quaking wholesale until a nurse pushes her way through the crowd, sneakers squeaking on the milky terrazzo, and either sees to them off to an exam room, or calls for an ambulance.

When Gaëlle's number is finally called, she rises, expecting to be seen, but the staffer who waves her down only hands her a clipboard laden with forms. He flips the papers up expertly to reveal a second slip underneath, a second number to wait for, before pressing the lot into Gaëlle's hands.

"When you've finished with the paperwork, and your number is called, make your way toward those doors," he says, pointing, as if everyone in the entire room were not fixated on those doors at all times.

Gaëlle scans the forms. "I thought this place was anonymous."

The staffer chews on his cheek. "It is. This information is for demographic purposes."

"Then why do you need my name and my address?"

"Ma'am, please just fill out the forms."

Gaëlle hesitates, in part overwhelmed by the impulse to simply go home, have a drink, forget this place even exists. A second part, smaller but insistent, is replaying her neighbor's face,

yellow subcutaneous fat exposed, gray hair clotted into damp red strings; and then little brother, his presence in Mia spelled out in panic and longing on the backs of her eyelids.

Something is wrong with me, she thinks. Something is wrong with me. I don't want to be a person anymore.

"I don't have a Social Security Number," she says.

"Lady," the orderly almost shouts in her face, "I don't have time for this. Fill out the forms as best you can. Number seven oh—"

Dizzy, head pounding, she finds her way back to corner she occupied before. A heavysset woman is crouched in her spot, thick lips set in defiance, and Gaëlle turns away. She finds a place to sit on the floor by the back rows of chairs; it works if she draws in her knees to her chin. She turns her eyes to the forms, becoming so engrossed that at first she doesn't hear her name.

"Gaëlle! Gaëlle, is that you?"

She turns her gaze on the speaker, a woman with dark lips, dark hair, and buttony, symmetrical features, sitting in a chair a few feet away. Her skin is the deep, luminous color of sand saturated with ocean. It takes a moment to place her: Roget's latest girlfriend, Adriana. They met at Suze's going-away party. Gaëlle was very drunk that night, but from what she remembers, the girl seemed to find everything incredibly either funny or sad. "Really?" she had spent the night saying. "Really? Is that true?"

Weakly, Gaëlle raises a hand.

Adriana turns her bright, animate face onto the man beside her, a twenty-something who slouches in his chair and grins by reflex when he realizes she is talking to him. “*Please*, mister,” she says, “is there any way my friend could switch places with you? Please. I’m about to be called, I promise.” She shows him her numbered slip of paper. “Then you could take my spot.”

The poor jerk shrugs and smiles dazedly as he and Gaëlle squeeze by one another. Sitting down next to Adriana, the air, antiseptic and sweaty, takes on a note of nectar.

“How have you been?” she says, touching Gaëlle’s wrist fondly. “I haven’t seen you in ages!”

Gaëlle contends with massive mental whiplash, looking around the desolate room. “I’m—good. You?”

“I asked Roget about you, but she didn’t—well, you know..” She bats at her hair, corralling stray locks behind one ear; trying, probably, to find a way not to say whatever Roget said about Gaëlle. “She’s not particularly cheery these days.”

“Mmm,” Gaëlle says.

“But what have you been up to?”

“Just drinking, mostly,” Gaëlle says, peering down at her legs.

Adriana lets out a full-throated laugh. “This heatwave, right?”

Gaëlle nods, and Adriana leans into her ear, close enough to feel her hot breath. “I actually have a little refreshment with me, if you want.”

Her respect for this woman increases measurably as she withdraws a plastic water bottle half-filled with red liquid from her purse. She hands it over. Gaëlle takes a long drink.

“Always prepared,” Adriana says, dashing off a mock salute.

The middle-aged woman to her left gives them a dirty look. Eat shit, lady, Gaëlle thinks.

That drink was the best thing that’s happened all day.

“Listen,” Gaëlle says, “do you know what the fuck is up with these forms?” She points to a particularly onerous passage on sexual history and recent travel.

Adriana gives a carefree shrug. “Not really. Never been here before. But they have a national HIV+ registry, so why not, right? No registry of guns, of course—that would be crazy! But queer people, sure, let’s go for it, ha ha.”

She’s not really laughing.

“Still,” she continues, barely pausing for breath, “it’s probably for the best that they’re taking things seriously. I’ve heard rumors.”

Taking *what* seriously, Gaëlle is about to ask, but Adriana has stood, cupping an ear as the staffer shouts out a series of numbers.

“That’s me,” she says excitedly. “Look, we should get a drink after this. Do you want to? We can talk about everything then. Much better than here, than lukewarm sangria—” she gives her purse a shake.

Gaëlle opens her mouth.

“I’ll wait for you outside after I’m finished. Look for me,” she calls over one shoulder, already vanishing into the crowd.

It's mid-afternoon by the time Gaëlle leaves the clinic. She pauses on the threshold, picking out the pale violet of Adriana's top across the parking lot almost immediately. She is seated on the bumper of a car, nose buried in a slender paperback, fine black hair almost hiding her face. A pair of sandals and the brand name leather tote is on the ground between her bare feet. She does not look up. It's been a long few days. Gaëlle is sorely tempted to walk on. Under normal circumstances, before Suze left, for instance, she might have done just that. But these aren't normal circumstances, and she feels an urgent impulse to explain as much to someone. Someone who will listen as Charles has not. She studies the clinic's window frames—robin's egg blue and peeling—then looks back at Adriana. She still has not raised her head.

She goes over to the other woman and touches her on the shoulder.

Adriana's pretty face lights up. Minutes later, as they make their way down into the subway, she takes the last three stairs at a leap. "Two birds, flying east," she shouts as she lands, "hit the night at three in the afternoon!"

Her voice echoes in the tile passageway, and she laughs. People look. Gaëlle wonders if she isn't on something.

For own part, Gaëlle's whole body is aching. She feels as if she's splitting in two.

"Where are we going?" she asks her, but Adriana's only response is to beckon her onward with a tilt of the head.

They get off the train in Highpark, near King's Heights, one of the few areas of Third Ward still glossy and wired. The sidewalks are full of dyejob thirty- and forty-somethings in ties and peacoats, or pumps and pencil skirts, clutching fresh produce to their chests. Gaëlle follows Adriana up the main street, past a pastry shop and local supermarket, and onto a bluestone sidestreet, where manicured stone apartment buildings sit back from the road, screened by tall, elegant sidewalk trees in full bloom.

It is before one such stone facade that Adriana pauses, just as Gaëlle is preparing to interrogate her, and descends the worn, brown steps to a basement mezzanine below.

The bar within, if it is a bar, is as unfamiliar to Gaëlle's sensibilities as the neighborhood, its pillowy burgundy loungers and cowhide rugs smelling of cinnamon, its windows and tables lit with translucent candles. Wispy electronica clicks and trills from hidden speakers, and though people hold drinks, Gaëlle doesn't see a bar.

She asks if Adriana and Roget come here a lot and Adriana smiles at the walls. She says not so often because Rog prefers beer, and they talk for a bit about Roget, her forays into kickboxing and gouache.

"She's up and down. But we're happy, you know?" The words come out plastic, rehearsed, but Gaëlle doesn't interrogate them. "We only fight about the little things. She eats my chips. I wear her beanies. What to watch on TV.

"Mostly." Adriana rubs briskly at her forearms with opposite hands. "But tell me—how did it go?"

Gaëlle's mind had wandered during the answer to her own question—as so often seems to happen lately. “How did what go?”

“Your appointment, dummy.”

She feels her brow furrow. “Oh. They were kind of vague. They gave me a scrip for some pain meds.” She pauses, unsure how far to answer.

“Ooh, let me see,” Adriana says. Then, “Eh, Naproxen.” She shrugs. “Good luck with that.”

Gaëlle shakes her head. “I'm not going to use it.”

No insurance, she doesn't add.

A man in a white, collared shirt and black apron comes by with a pen and pad to take their drink orders. Gaëlle lets Adriana do the talking, hoping she'll pay also.

“It's mostly my arms and my neck,” Adriana says, touching the delicate hills of her cervical vertebra, just beneath where her fine black hair begins. She catches Gaëlle's look. “The pain. And I've been having terrible problems with memory. Words. Meanings.” She laughs for some reason. “And words are my life.”

Gaëlle quirks an eyebrow.

“I'm a lapsed poet,” Adriana explains. “You would think it would be hard to discern oneself a failure in a discipline where even the masters aren't paid a living wage.” She adopts a chagrined expression. “But it isn't. And I am. So I work at a bookstore.”

Gaëlle nods; it seems like the thing to do.

“What about you?”

“Unemployed,” Gaëlle answers, thinking of her bygone work for Suze; her long coincident history of shoplifting and lefthanding jewelry, razors, condoms, and the occasional pack of cigarettes.

“Uh-huh. I heard as much from Roget. Suze took all the marbles with him. She’s is very bitter about the whole thing.”

Gaëlle snorts at this. “We all are. Except Charles, maybe. He thinks Suze is a visionary or some shit.” Gaëlle rubs her eyes, shrugs. “Rog is right. We had a good thing going.” About the only thing Gaëlle has ever agreed with Roget about.

Adriana hesitates, toying with a laminated menu. “So, are you two...?”

“Who, me and Charles?”

Adriana doesn’t answer. She’s watching her face.

Gaëlle shifts her eyes to the wall behind Adriana’s head, flushing. “No.”

Adriana cracks another of those coy half-smiles, this one aimed down at the table.

Gaëlle gives her an inquisitive look.

Looking up, Adriana shrugs. “Look, I don’t have to be straight to notice the tall black adonis every girl in the bar is making eyes at.”

Gaëlle tries not to move. Adriana’s eyes flick onto her, away, and back again. “Tell me,” she says, apparently bored with the topic, “how’s your mood?”

“All over the place?” Adriana asks, before she can answer. She’s talking a little too loud for Gaëlle’s comfort, all these yuppies around. Now she’s back to massaging her wrists and forearms.

Every now and then, beneath the whiskey tone of her skin, Gaëlle could swear she sees bruises.

“And they gave you nothing for it, right? For your mood?”

Gaëlle lifts the scrip. “This is all they gave me.”

Adriana flicks a crumb from the table. “They’re making a mistake, if you ask me.”

The waiter arrives with their drinks—sepia in lowball glasses, twisted lemon slivers hanging from the straws. It tastes bitter. Gaëlle must make a face, because Adriana breaks into a grin, biting her lip to try and stop herself. “You get accustomed to it,” she says. “And then it turns sweet.”

Gaëlle inclines her head, raises the glass. The conversation pauses as they both drink deeply.

“I just don’t think anti-inflammatories are going to do the least bit of good,” Adriana says.

Gaëlle is silent.

“This isn’t a tissue problem.” She taps her skull with a forefinger. “They need to start issuing scrips for neuropathy.” Her dark lips widen. “Or opioids.”

“Everyone loves opioids,” Gaëlle murmurs, not sure if she believes a girl like Adriana has ever tried anything harder than e. On the other hand, maybe opioids are exactly what girls like her are supposed to be notorious for.

They are emptying their glasses rapidly.

“So tell me what you’ve heard,” Adriana says.

“What do you mean, ‘what I’ve heard?’”

“About this. About us. What we’re talking about.”

Gaëlle tilts her head back, caressing the base of her throat with a finger. “Nothing, really. Aside from what they told me just now.”

Adriana tuts. “Which was nothing. Naturally.”

“Nothing much, no. Why, what have you heard?”

“Well—not *so* much either. But I have a feeling.” She lowers her eyes. “I’ve just heard that this problem is all over this city. Though you wouldn’t know it from the news. They’re blaming the heatwave. Broken windows. Urban disorder. Repackaging protests as ‘political violence.’ But, I mean,” she raises sculpted eyebrows, “It’s all distraction, right? I think we saw evidence at the clinic.” Adriana folds her hands, a rushed moment of idleness.

Gaëlle asks, “So you think what’s happening is—what, some kind of a plague?”

Adriana frowns, expression unfocused just for a moment. “I don’t know. I think something is wrong. People are hurting. And we’re not seeing it yet.”

Following yet another text from little brother (diffident, persistent) after Gaëlle parts ways with Adriana, the balance of the afternoon is spent in obsessive worry over what his presence here might bring, and how to cope.

It’s not that she hates little brother. The problem with Esha is what he brings along with him. Tug on the thread that connects little brother to her, and you tug in turn on the strands that

connect to mother and, worse still, to father and his “work”, to little brother’s face and the Pine Barrens and running away and all of the rest of it. Soon you are buried in your own life, unable to get out from under its weight.

So it’s not that she hates him, it’s just that she values her privacy. And he can be so dependent. It’s a drain to be around him. She practically called him by accident; she doubts she said anything that led him to think she wanted to renew their relationship. But here he is, telling her he feels the need to be in her space. *Meet up*, he says. The two worst words in the English language.

She will simply have to burn her phone, as she has been saying to herself for weeks now. Once she lifts a new one and has Bean migrate her data, the number will go out of service and Esha will get it. She boards a train for the island, Second Ward. Midtown will have plenty of stores.

On the platform, the heat pulses in the air like a living thing. Something catches her eye, down on the tracks. A soft shadow of movement, just beyond the tunnel mouth. She steps closer, intrigued, up to the yellow warning strip at the edge of the platform, and squats, allowing her eyes to adjust. As the form begins to come clear, her whole body shivers.

It’s a gray clump of fur, writhing with many bodies.

She cups her eyes to block out the station lights, and her mouth opens wide in disgust. The mass is made up of many tiny limbs and pink hairless tails, laced together tight, knitting over and under and between one another. Gaps and bulges appear, rising like pockets of air in a stew,

collapsing under their own weight. Pink faces with tiny highlit eyes turn on their frangible necks; clusters of downy spines arch and tremble. A dense, animal whine emanates.

The ones at the center of the mass don't seem to move.

It's difficult to make out the features of the track floor, dark with soot and exhaust as it has become over the years. Too, the surface is littered with refuse—soda bottles, slips of paper, lottery tickets, cigarette butts. But she can see that the mass is, if nothing else, straining ever inward, trying to compress all its many bodies into some insufficient aperture or well in the tunnel floor. Is there a wetness glimmering there, in the center, where the bodies lie still?

Her face feels like a bolt of cloth stretched tight over so much gravel.

The headlights of the approaching train come on quickly. It blares its horn, driving her back. But in that moment of illumination she glimpses the long, long stream of them, a dozen thousand rats filing toward the corpus, as if it contained some dense-packed gravity, unavoidable.

Second Ward is the region of the city that tourists used to photograph to showcase a wild and glamorous Miacantan lifestyle, back when the city was fashionable and young, and the ward is still crowded with shoppers and buskers and businessmen. But to exit the subway, they have to climb over the homeless as she does, laid out on the steps, cardboard signs propped against their ribs, worn-out spaceman Adidas hi-tops kicked off; they have to inch past the vandals and finks, young and bored, lazing in cliques against the brick walls, arms crossed or hands thrust into pockets,

shirtless or with jackets open over naked chests. One kid who can't be older than high school is seated on a folding chair in front of a dime store, near a group of his friends. He is slouched in his seat, with legs spread wide, and a girl sits on his lap, facing his face, kissing him. Her shirt is pulled up and gathered into a knot at the line of her ribs.

When she reaches Park Ave, where the tech stores reside, she cases a handful before settling on a hole in the wall with a tiny door and two huge display fronts, like a face that is all eyes and no mouth. The displays are filled with shelving and backed by a mirrorlike semi-translucent glass. Shelf after shelf is stuffed with devices: point-and-shoot cameras, interchangeable lens cameras, gag cameras, security cameras, touch phones, QWERTY phones, flip phones, burners, lenses, cases, tablets, phablets, radios, headphones, laptops, electric massage implements, media players, set-top boxes, game systems, voltage converters, spectrometers, wireless devices, electric toothbrushes, stud finders, baby sense monitors, “internet of things” components, graphing calculators, electronic dictionaries, portable translators, Speak & Spells, phrasebooks, e-books, audiobooks (now she's exaggerating), vocoders, MIDI inputs, stomp pedals, language scramblers, enigma machines, secret decoder rings, who even knows, maybe poems, or letters, love-notes, shopping lists, address books, postcards, rolodexes, branded toiletries—she can't even guess what all of it is—the mirrorlike backing makes the plastic and wires and lettering seem to recede forever. She's seen a million stores like this before, but somehow today it's new and disturbing. It has an effect in her body. She wants to go in and clip a new phone, but try as she might, she can't bring herself to move, to approach that fingernail of a doorway, the compound eye that enfolds it. And the people clot on the street

behind her, cursing the back of her head, but she sees even they leave this place a wide berth, trajectories bowing as if repulsed by some invisible force. A shiver passes through her. The light is pale even though the wind is warm, and she experiences a faint corona of mood, from here to there. She couldn't put into words what it is, but there is a definite state of mind descending, a horror, now kicking up and billowing over her vision, now settling down over the sidewalks like a low fog.

She turns on her heel and hurries away.

She and Charles had argued both on the night of Suze's goodbye party and again more fiercely the morning after, when she'd found him waiting on her stoop in sunglasses with a carton of orange juice in one hand and his phone in the other. Charles was just back from dropping Suze at the airport. "You've got some vomit," he'd said, drawing a circle in the air with his finger around her whole body, "there." It was true. Partway through the night, she'd ditched them, or they her; she'd woke up on the street.

The crux of their disagreement, then as always, was Gaëlle's being made the butt of every joke, particularly by Suze (though also Roget), and that Charles, by remaining ever quiet, ever self-contained and outwardly agreeable, was throwing her under the bus. To their group of friends she was always some kind of communal pet, she felt, a monkey they nursed with alcohol in exchange for entertainment. "Gully," Suze insisted on calling her, "a little *lebensraum*, please?" Of course,

saying all this to Charles that morning had seemed untenable through the teeth of a vicious hangover, so she'd had to distill: "Why are you such a bitch around him?"

Charles had tilted his head like he'd heard a note in a song that was just out of key. We're not lovers, his face seemed to say, I don't owe you this visit. "Do you want me to go?" he'd asked. But of course she hadn't. So he'd come in and made her breakfast and etc etc and they'd eventually reduced the argument more fully, concluding with her storming out of her own apartment and slamming the door, returning to him gone, dishes washed and dried, chairs back in place, closed curtains and cabinets, even some things straightened in the hallway. As if someone lived here, she thought.

So now, when she shows up at Charles' office unannounced to drag him out for the evening, it's under the pretense that they never fought and she never stormed out and she hasn't spent the evenings since with vodka and Sprite on her nightstand, curled fetal into the covers and praying for sleep. His new call center job is out in Sarks—a vast, gray, cavernous building that looms over its neighbors: gas stations, single family homes, Western Unions—and the interior of which is filled with clicks and ringtones and screens and voices, dogmatic promises that, no, the respondent's name will not be put on a list, and yes, we already have your address on file, thank you, and how might you rate the current administration as regards the war abroad on a scale of one to ten? "Do you identify," the room buzzes with asking, "as black, white, Asian, Latino, or other?" She waits outside on a bench for him to unfold himself from the vestibule, some great hunched bird, but in the end she has to go in and look for him, and he betrays as much surprise at her presence there as she might have expected,

given his general immovability, that calm and intransigent stoicism that is half of what makes him so attractive to her.

Then they go to dinner, pupusas, still as if they hadn't fought, and he tells her of Roget's new job folding clothes at a laundromat, which news gives Gaëlle some little satisfaction, imagining Roget miserable and simmering with continual rage at her inferior, domestic position, some old Russian Jew—Gaëlle imagines an old Russian Jew for some reason—shouting her down about how to fold a shirt. "I ran into her girlfriend," she says, faux indifferent, curious how he will react, "we went out for drinks." She hasn't told him yet about her neighbor, the clinic. Charles only sucks on his teeth, a sober and skeptical look. "Leave Roget's girl alone. It will only antagonize her." Gaëlle smiles. Isn't that half the fun?

In the line, they watch as those already served eat from tinfoil and checkered paper packages, sitting on standpipes or the curb. Inside, the place smells of pork rind and sweat and cornmeal, and Charles asks nonchalantly about her drinking, which she answers with a question: "How can you stand that job? It's batshit and loud and awful." He explains that his phonebank employer isn't really interested in convincing people, in swaying opinion, rather in knowing what biases exist already, out there in the ether, to know is to control, etc, and that this is analogous to how he deals with the job itself, in that it isn't too bad if you learn how to tune out words as meaning. This makes her laugh. "And then it's just noise," he says. And just like that it seems to be better, her anger with him not just not talked about but dissipated, never having occurred at all.

And now they walk, the sky descending around them, his hand curling into a fist and open again a few feet from hers, along the paths of a popular park that snakes down the banks of the Lesser River, the river that separates the twin islands of the city, ashlar bridge footings jutting up out of the eddies. And making their way past several small groups of police and park personnel, gathered, it seems, to chaperone a protest of some sort that plods along the riverfront, placards raised and chanting, Gaëlle and Charles ascend to an elevated footbridge, where they pause.

Everyone and everything seems to gleam in the heat and moisture. From this position they can see the sun falling behind the towers of the First and Second wards, the denser and more developed wards, and Charles remarks on this, that the sun is almost aligned to the grid, and how this event (“Miacclipse”, which occurs every year and is due in less than a month), feels different to him this time. He doesn’t mention Suze, but it feels like he has. Nevertheless, she asks what he means. He looks at her without visible emotion and asks if she knows why they celebrate the alignment of the sun to the First and Second wards, rather than the Third or Fourth ward.

“Isn’t it just because they’re older?”

“Yes. But the question is why are they older?”

“I don’t know,” she says, feeling herself beginning to get irritated.

“Because we built our city on top of somebody else’s.” He folds his arms. “We kept their roads and the names of certain things, such as the river. Everything else we razed, stole, or sold. Although,” he pauses, squinting at something, “I suppose a name is a kind of a road too, if you think about it.”

“Deep,” she says, allowing the hint of a smile to play on her lips.

He clears his throat and shifts his body away from her, as if to pretend he were saying all this to someone else, someone less simple.

“Nonetheless,” he says, not looking at her, “I am planning to watch Miaclipse again this year. And I have a good vantage point selected if you would like to join.”

He looks up at her, his large dark eyes blinking a steady rhythm. “As a way of making it up to you.”

“Making it up to me?”

He hesitates. “For the other night. The incivility.”

“Incivility.”

“Hurt feelings—I don’t want to go back into things,” he says. “I just want you to know that I have been thinking about it.”

“Okay,” she says coolly. “Thanks.”

“So you’ll come?”

She folds her hands on the rail, looking down at the side of her shoe. A moment elapses. Below them, the chanters chant. Something about habitats. Then she smirks, struck with the image of herself beside Charles without Suze, watching the sun align to the streets.

At last, she nods at him.

He turns then and crooks his mouth, rubbing his buzzed scalp with one hand. The voices below fall out of sync. “I’ve been in a foul place lately,” Charles says, “trying not to read the news,

my email. My parents call me, ask me how I'm doing. 'Fine,' I say, and they say, 'Fine,' but we are not fine. There is something wrong here and I don't know what it is."

She nods, thinking of her neighbor, the clinic. She isn't ready to say. "I've been feeling off lately," she says instead. "My head feels full of flypaper."

Charles gives her a skeptical look but says nothing.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"It isn't that," she counters. "I know what that feels like. This is different. I mean—it's weird. I have this constant, low-level pain—right here," she points to her cheeks. "And, I don't know, can't sleep, my memory is all..."

He looks at her with the helpless expression of someone who has already said what he has to say.

She bites her lip, releases it. Then, in unison, as if they had planned it, they both turn to face outward, over the rail toward the source of the shouting and chanting, and bullhorns and sirens now too, past a berm and the gray strip of a dredged beach, to a clear meadow area that in milder weather will sometimes see South American or African immigrants playing soccer late into the night by the glow of the streetlamps, but which at this moment is cluttered with the forms of the protesters, their signs now tossed to the ground. The crowd is in chaos. Some of them run full-pelt away. Others are laid out, motionless. The police are in among them, wresting people up from the ground or herding them toward a park building, where they stand with their legs spread and hands on the wall,

submitted, awaiting search or instruction or arrest. No guns are out; the handful that resist are they are knocked down the old fashioned way, and sprayed in the face with something that leaves them writhing. Further out still, at the nearest park entryway, a second group of police is turning people away.

Gaëlle looks at Charles. His face is withered and dull, as if something had passed through it. His eyes have narrowed to slivers. He breathes through his nose. He moves quickly to cross the bridge, turning on the other side toward the commotion at a brisk walk. She hurries after him, calling his name. They are still on an elevated platform, stairs below them that lead down to the scene, as he leans over and scoops up a bottle. With a bellow, he hurls it out over the ones with their hands spread on the wall, as if to spur an insurrection. It shatters some yards away from them, and as one, they and the policemen beside them look up at him, this lank figure silhouetted on the catwalk with a woman half-hidden behind him tugging at his wrist. And as the cops dash to the stairs, they two start off as fast as they can, back over the bridge and out of the park and up the hilly streets of Lafayette, away away away, until they stop at last in the alcove of a doorway, shaking and breathless, Charles without words and Gaëlle laughing her head off, gasping, unable to stop, some circuit gone haywire inside of her head, it seems to her now, conflating joy with agony, laughter with pity, hate with desire.

He calls her the next night, though—asks if she'd like to meet at a bar, a question to which he knows she'll say yes. But when she arrives there and he begins talking—poring over an article that describes the incident they witnessed together—she feels further from him than ever, aware by the tone of his voice, the look on his face, even the shapes his hands carve in the air, that he invited her here not because he wanted to see her, but because she would be willing to listen. And so as he sets his teeth about analytical policing and arrest quotas, she is down in her lap, checking her phone.

Got a job @ library in Sarkis, Esha has written. Like it, but people seem kind of angry. Is it always like this in the city?

She wants to regain control without excommunicating him completely. She wants it to be like it was with Esha: him, available, easy, distant, and clean; she, solitary, medicated, busy, and safe.

It's never safe. Never was, never will be.

She scrolls to his other text, sent minutes after the first:

I'm worried about you, he writes. Text me.

She wants it to be like it was—

Charles is going on: warring liberal-conservative op-eds, one of which has stirred up a secondary loop of infraoutrage on social media regarding use of the word “lunatic” as stigmatic of with mental health issues.

“We cannot even agree on our language,” Charles says.

“Back in a minute,” she says.

He looks up.

“I need to pee.”

“You keep checking your phone,” he says.

“I need to pee.”

In the bathroom, she lets her hair down, spongy with sweat, and breathes hard over the sink. She can't get her mind to focus, not even on Charles, not even on drinking.

Her breath fogs the mirror. As children, she had invented a game with Esha called Sledgehammer. It was her game, really. Esha was always only a follower. They began with fruits and bottles of lotion, whose guts would spatter in clouds against the walls, then moved on to toys (tiny metal cars, figurines of people), which they would crush against the asphalt of the driveway. But finally everything broke too easily. That's how they came to stones. They spent the better part of one summer afternoon with a rock taken from the garden, lifting the ten pound hammer high over their heads and bringing it down, sending the stone clattering up against the siding over and over. What, they wanted to know, was inside?

They hit it until their palms got red and black. It overjoyed and infuriated them with its indestructibility. Finally, she had told Esha to hold it to the ground, which he did with fingers thin like wild onions.

When she ran away for three days at fifteen over an argument that began with a magazine, Gaëlle spent the entire time smoking weed with Liz on her porch and watching Liz's brother, a hobby apiarist, shuffle between beehives down the hill. They ate honey from the comb.

When she came home, she found mother curled on the floor, near the back door, in the laundry room. She wasn't moving. Had Gaëlle come in that way, she would have struck her in the head opening the door. Mother's knees were nestled to her abdomen, neck bridged over her wrist, head slightly inverted. Her eyes were dark as they followed Gaëlle entering the room. She looked away from her daughter then, the way children cover their eyes when they want something not to exist.

"Are you alright?" Charles asks when she returns to the booth.

She doesn't know what to say.

"You look—" he pauses, shuts his mouth.

"I think there's something wrong with me," she says very quietly.

He pulls on her forearm, guiding her back down into the booth. A long breath escapes him as he examines his pint glass. "Wrong with you in what way?" he asks.

"I went to a clinic," she says, thoughts swirling. "My neighbor died. It was horrible; her face, I can't—they told me I have an infection."

His face is hard with concern.

"I don't know how to say it. I keep thinking about my brother, things from forever ago. They keep running around and around and around..."

"What kind of infection?" He speaks slowly, with care.

"I don't know. They said nothing serious. They gave me a scrip, but it feels like it's getting worse."

Charles licks his lips, leans forward. “Is there something I can do? I can front you some cash if —”

She gives him a look. They both know that since Suze has been gone, she’s been burning her savings, such as they were, on box wine and dinners and rent and AC, her only trickle of income pushing the odd zip for the friend of a friend or reselling shoplifted hipster shit and gewgaws at the flea market. But money isn’t what she wants from him.

“That’s where I saw Adriana,” she says.

“Where?”

“At the clinic.” Gaëlle feels here gaze drifting out of focus, eyes stuck open. “She’s sick too. She said it’s an epidemic.”

Charles’ face turns skeptical, cautious. “Don’t assume the worst. Let Roget see to Adriana. I doubt it’s anything that serious, for either of you. You may just need some rest.” He pauses, licking his lips. “A little less drinking.”

She lets her head loll between her elbows. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m saying. Forget I said anything.”

He looks at her for a long time. “If that’s what you want.”

“Yes,” she says. “That’s what I want.”

Of course she doesn't heed Charles' advice. She goes out with Adriana more than once in the weeks that follow the incident at the park. It's nice to have a friend with a credit card, even if, to Gaëlle's mind, that isn't the reason. And she enjoys imagining how this would gall Roget, if she knew—or knows—that as Roget pins a stranger's cashmere sweater to her chest with her chin, Gaëlle is out drinking with her girlfriend. Gaëlle has not forgotten the way Roget behaved that last night with Suze, the finale in a long line of bitchy, hypocritical behavior. But that isn't it either. There's something affecting about Adriana, her small nervous frame tuned with energy, or else immobilized by depression, the way mother used to get, as a matter of fact; the ease with which she can be made to break into song or poetry, an encyclopedia of obscure verse, trailing her thin fingers along the spines of books as if they were lovers' throats; the warmth she seems to feel for Gaëlle, almost an admiration, so unfamiliar, inexplicable, yet pleasurable; and of course, her willingness, always, whatever the time or weather, to get drunk or high or both, to skip work for play, in short to indulge the impulses Gaëlle has always been told to resist.

They meet at the bookstore, Daisy Alley in La Maga, or occasionally Adriana's apartment, a cozy, bright loft in Lafayette. Hot days, they lie around, arrested by the temperature to collapse on the sofa, the boxspring, the floor, between the bathtub and the wall. They eat strawberries with dulce de leche, drink rum with coffee. Adriana talks and talks as Gaëlle gets lit and half-listens, so that facts of her life glib piecemeal into her head like salt pinched over a cassoulet, like the house out in Ray

Beach, filled with traces of little brother, his crystalline grains: envelopes, dog collar, wristwatch, mirror. Is he out there? She thinks of him often. Yet for days after her diagnosis, she resists the impulse to text him, to worry at him, to ask him the questions you develop for a little brother who worms his way into your life at the worst possible time. Are you still living? Do you still want to be a person? Are you out there, looking for me?

Adriana tells Gaëlle of her earliest memories of the city, before her family moved her and her brother upstate, as Charles' family did him, though to a different town than his; she describes the hunter green playground asphalt with the white semicircles they used to play on, concrete wallball plinths jutting up in their centers. She conjures the gogo movie theaters and their cagey, hangdog clientele, cigarette ash cluttering their beards. And she mimics the strange uncanny slang of cousins come to visit from out west, down south, from anywhere but the city was strange to them; or the opposite: imitates the city's own true-blue accent, the one that had largely vanished even by the era she's recalling, when Miacantic was neat and affluent but still with worn edges, bodegas and lavanderias, elk and rotary clubs; groceries, metal shops, union halls, paper wholesalers who would not deal in quantities less than ten reams. She describes the cadmium streetlamps and the smut of diesel that sank into clothing left out to dry on fire escapes. She lists the games they would play on the courts and in the streets, the so-called so-American games: foursquare and H-O-R-S-E and handball, cards in the shade of their mothers' apartment buildings.

She tells the story of her tattoos, Mayan glyphs, or so she claims, which she inscribed on her own skin alongside her school friends in a secret pact at the age of thirteen when she knew she

would be moving away. They fashioned needles from paperclips sharpened to pinpoints, and wedged each into the gap between the pink eraser of a no. 2 pencil and the metal band that encircles it, and Gaëlle says, “I want to do that,” and Adriana says, “Let’s,” but they don’t, she goes on: Gaëlle has found some box wine and they’re talking about high school, by which point they’re high again, or it’s tomorrow, by which point, in high school, Adriana laments, she was up in the nowhere, no-account mountains, with nothing to do. “Meth,” she says, “what a shit drug. It made me straight edge until 20.” “And what happened then?” Gaëlle says over the lip of a tumbler. “At 20? I was back in a city, away from my parents. I was in school.” She laughs through cracked lips. “And what about you?” “What about me, what about me?” “What about high school,” Adriana says, and Gaëlle feels herself shrug. “I didn’t like it. I didn’t stay. I didn’t finish.” “Iciv, idiv, iney,” says Adriana, knowingly, even though Gaëlle knows by this point that Adriana doesn’t know, that she not only graduated high school, but college too, at a private academy in Massachusetts. “That’s what I like about you, you don’t pretend,” says Adriana of Gaëlle, and Gaëlle feels a little shamed by this somehow, like she’s been shown in bad light to herself, revealed as someone familiar, yet foreign.

When Charles texts her to confirm they’re still on for Miaclipse; she doesn’t mention she’s invited Adriana. (Just as Adriana hasn’t mentioned if she’s invited Roget.) Charles writes that he’s concerned—he hasn’t seen her recently, is she doing alright? This isn’t entirely true. She’s seen Charles recently enough, listened to his heated rehashings of his family drama, of rallies and meetings he’s attended, political agitprop surrounding drone warfare and market deregulation and

immigration, all the things that she can understand matter but bore her to tears, bitter recriminations on social media over the dissemination of pictures of the dead—for there are now pictures of corpses, heatwave or murder or this disease hung on her head like a warrant, it's not always clear. She feels like a timebomb. It hurts to grip a doorknob, to lift her head from a pillow. Sometimes forgets the word for pain. Yet a peculiar lightness has also enfolded her as she's taken in, via Charles, the first tentative stories to appear online and in local papers, questioning if the heat is really the cause of all this—the steady, imperturbable rise in violent incidents, self-harm, unrest. Still, he never apologizes for calling her hysterical that night at the bar. Yet her thoughts are elsewhere. “Some are dying quickly,” Adriana had said to her perhaps a week earlier, half-wasted, half-ironic, “others, like us, are lucky.” When they'd gone back to the clinic together, to try to score some stronger scrips, they'd overheard two patients discussing a woman who tore strips from her own cuticles with her teeth until long thin ribbons of red exposed flesh ran halfway up to her wrists. “She couldn't understand she'd done it to herself,” the woman had said to the man. “She kept saying to her daughter and the nurses ‘yes yes yes,’ but she was shaking her head as if she didn't believe it.”

The doctors took their blood, told them to come back in a week. “We'll know more by then,” was the male doctor's promise, but Gaëlle knew the face of a man laid low by the ease of a comforting lie like she knew the back of her own two hands.

Adriana was in one of her listless, quiet moods on the walk back to the train, kicking a can along the sidewalk and scuffing the soles of her shoes. The red and brown shapes of tenement

buildings faded to blue all around them. Birds cried on the wires. Automatically, Gaëlle had taken out her phone and scrolled to a text from Esha, his latest, panicked like baby's first summer camp:

Mom is flipping her shit. Can you at least tell me something to tell her?

She must have read it ten times by then.

Adriana, lagging behind then, must have peered over her shoulder. "Who is that?" she asked.

Gaëlle turned. "What the fuck?"

"Sorry—I didn't look on purpose."

"Not on purpose."

"I didn't know you had a sister."

She didn't bother to correct her as to Esha's sex. "How do you look at someone's phone 'not on purpose?'"

"Come on," said Adriana. "Don't get upset."

Gaëlle looked away from her then, folding her arms.

"Does she live in the city?"

Adriana had her hands in her pockets, all no-difference-to-me, though she knows by now how Gaëlle guards her privacy. "My brother lives here. I checked in with him right after the clinic," Adriana continued. "That first time. That's all I'm saying."

"Mind your own shit. That's all I'm saying."

“She’s probably concerned for you.” Adriana’s voice was quickly becoming a whine. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Gaëlle quickened her pace, hop-skipping down onto the street and turning a corner, northeast and away from the train.

“Don’t be like that—” came Adriana’s voice behind her. But Gaëlle didn’t look back, and Adriana didn’t follow.

This morning, she finds she texted Esha again. *No*, drunk-Gaëlle has written him, *do NOT tell mom anything.*

And a few hours later: *Are you feeling sick at all?*

He hadn’t replied, of course, it being the dead of night. She remembers being incensed by this. She remembers becoming so angry that she actually struck her own face.

As she slept through the morning, a reply had reached her.

No, I feel fine. You okay?

Looking down at the words, her face hurts less, but her head hurts more. The quality of the two pains is hard to disentangle. Both are dull and repetitive, like sluices in the veins of her skull.

Open, shut. Open, shut.

She thinks her face is the one that burns, and her head the one that aches.

In a sloppy rush, she writes back: *k if u do I wan u got out if the city. U go straight so moms. U LEAVE*

Then, before she can hover over his next reply like a kicked dog, she throws the phone against the wall. It makes a sharp crack. There are hot tears in her eyes as she scoops it up, expecting the screen to be shattered. But it isn't. Enraged, she throws it against the wall again, only to panic identically. She wants to kneel by it then, to pick it up, but she doesn't allow herself this—she rushes to the bed, where she tries hard to sleep as if she'd never woke up.

On the day of Miaclipse, she meets Charles at the corner of Ryder and Halsey, halfway between his place in south Highpark and hers in Kohl-Rhys. Adriana is late, and Gaëlle insists they wait.

Charles doesn't know it is Adriana they're waiting on. Annoyed, he paces the sidewalk, checking his watch, complaining the First Ward will be packed with tourists by the time they arrive.

“I thought you had a spot no one was going to use,” she says.

“Tourists are like cockroaches,” he says, fiddling his fingers, “they find their way into everything.”

“Nobody's fucking coming to Mia to watch your dumb sunset.”

“You did not even tell me you invited someone,” he fumes.

“She'll be here soon.” She holds one hand over her eye against the sunlight, watching for that shock of bleached hair to float up out of the subway stairwell.

Despite the heat, oppressive, supernal, this street corner reminds her of how, in the old days she and Charles used to meet in the winter for a walk into Sarks and soul food at May's. Charles

couldn't leave there without a fried chicken sandwich, though he always complained if she wanted to eat out on the sidewalk, where people walking by would think him a stereotype, despite the fact, he further complained, that his heritage had absolutely nothing to do with fried chicken sandwiches. It is all about systems, he would say to her darkly, categories, appearances. When I walk down the street here, I am always conscious of this. People cross away from me, they watch me or follow me. I was *born* here and I still do not understand how everything here must be A or B, this or that. You are black or you are white. You are gay or you are straight. You are American or a foreigner. If you are black you must be descended from slaves. Fuck that noise. I have a whole history and culture that nobody sees when they look at me. Here I am just color.

Now there are bags under his eyes, and a purple fringe to his lips. His father is worse, his sister is broke somehow, despite the envelopes he keeps sending her way, and he can't read the news without spitting in anger. It's not that she doesn't still find him attractive, he would be attractive to her on the very edge of death; it's that he doesn't wear uncertainty well. He wants to be able to wrap his head around the whole chaotic institution of the city. Up until now, no one in his circle, online or in person, has said the word *plague*, she would place money on it. He doesn't know anything. They inhabit a strange moment in history, she realizes—where the sick are the only ones who know they exist. It will not always be like this.

This awareness grants her a power over him, and a pity too. Where a tangled nest of rats' tails or a woman who's skinned herself might seem to Charles uncanny freckles on an everyday reality, for her the world is already inverted, white nights and black days, smoke rising down and

snow falling up—and ordinary, day-to-day moments such as this one feel to her like so many windows into a house from which she has already been evicted.

At last Adriana arrives, and Charles, recognizing her, gives Gaëlle a wearied, vexed expression. Stop making your own life impossible, he seems to say.

But of course she doesn't see things that way. Adriana befriended her, not the other way around. And she didn't like her back to spite anyone. Much.

Gaëlle is trying to hold things together, to appear not to be in pain. As is Adriana, who winces as she leans in to plant a kiss on her cheek. Gaëlle watches Charles' face over her shoulder, but it betrays nothing. He bites the inside of his cheek, peering distractedly up at the sun. Sweat shines on his chest where the V of his t-shirt collar reveals tight ringlets of hair.

"We should go," he says, beginning to walk. "We've just got an hour."

"Charles likes to be on time for everything," says Gaëlle, with a grin.

"So I see," says Adriana.

"Is Roget coming?" Charles asks, casting a glance at each of them in turn.

Adriana shakes her head.

"I will text her the address anyway," he says. "She can always meet us up afterward."

"There's really no need. I asked her this morning. She wasn't interested."

A long look but Charles says nothing to this, now on the street and now on the lattice-grooved stairs that lead down to the train, now vanishing into the black.

Half past seven, they're in Muylar, First Ward—58th Street, the platform choked with white-collar switching to the commuter rail, up or down the coast, inland, or otherwise out of the city. Hats and valises; tie clips flashing in the yellow light of the station's sconces. On the street things are different. They are a ways north of Midtown, but the sidewalks are packed, the whole city out and about—shoppers and shopkeepers, vagrants, artists, tourists, hoods, dates, messengers, high school kids spitting unselfconsciously into the gutter, and of course, as Charles worried, some Miacclipse-goers, congesting the thoroughfares with their elbows and phones and cameras and gear, ecstatic for the decisive moment (the sun already fallen into the perfect frame of the glittering towers that shoot up either side of the avenue, an egg perched on a tuning fork).

“Where are we going?” Adriana asks.

Gaëlle doesn't know and Charles doesn't answer. His legs seem about eight feet long, a backache just to keep pace with. She points to Adriana's purse with an inquisitive look. Adriana points to her backpack, same face. Gaëlle feigns confusion. Adriana shakes her head, showcasing white teeth. She pops a pill. Charles is getting away from them.

“Slow down,” Gaëlle calls.

“Keep up,” he says.

Adriana is smiling. She's having a grand time. Gaëlle's glad this wasn't a down day for her. Adriana claps her hands as they trot to catch up to Charles. “Mothers of America,” she says, “let your kids go to the movies!”

Gaëlle shakes her head.

“The earth-heaven building,” Adriana continues falteringly. Her eyes have turned vacant and hurt.

“Shh.” Gaëlle tugs her hand, accelerating.

“I’m not ride. I’m not tired,” Adriana says. “But I’m such a bad poet. I can’t even revile.”

“Come on.”

“I mean resaid. That’s what I—*recited*,” says Adriana, great long black lashes flickering up and down in the red afternoon light.

“Hey,” Charles calls from the end of the street. “Are you two coming or not?”

The impatient ones with the cameras and phones are already holding them up over their heads, clicking their shutters. The shadows are contiguous, building to building, streets a crimson gold and avenues black.

“How much further?” Gaëlle asks.

Charles raises his palms in irritation. Gaëlle hooks an arm into Adriana’s and they lean forward, breathing stiffly, shared gait erratic.

Then they are pressing their way through a final stretch and Charles has stopped at a corner lot. The building before them is perhaps twenty stories, and appears half-finished: no walls or windows or doors, floors—only great, uniform slabs of concrete that float in the air above 63rd Street.

Adriana is a minute behind, shuffling up the hill toward them. Charles tugs on Gaëlle’s elbow.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asks.

“What do you mean?”

“With her. I told you.”

“We’re friends.”

He rolls his eyes. “Does Roget know?”

Gaëlle shrugs. “Roget needs to chill the fuck out.”

“There are three million other people for you to befriend in this city,” he hisses. “I honestly thought the single positive aspect of the breakdown of our business would be you and Roget *not* at one another’s throats.

“For a change,” he adds.

“In what universe,” she asks, growing heated, “is it okay for Roget to tell *me* who I hang out with?”

“That is not the point.” His voice is precise, staccato. “The better question would be: why must you *insist* on challenging everyone and everything?”

Opening her mouth, she realizes she doesn’t know the answer to this question, so instead she says, “You jealous?”

He says nothing. His lips are flat and tight as Adriana approaches. He lets out a deep breath, eyes closed. “This isn’t about me, and it isn’t about you, except insofar as you are making it so. Please—consider what I say. Roget is not—she has trust issues. Why not pity her instead?”

Because she's been systematically cruel to me with every breath of her miserable life.

"Adriana!" Gaëlle calls out, raising a hand and waving.

Adriana trots the last few steps. "This is it?"

"Fine," Charles says, flatly. Then, turning away, he hoists the lid of a nearby dumpster and withdraws a pair of bolt cutters. "Screen me." Adriana gives that belly laugh of hers. Gaëlle grabs her elbow and the two of them press shoulder to shoulder, whispering and watching the surging crowds on the street as Charles squats behind them and clips the lock. Carefully, one by one, they slip in and shut the gate.

Inside, there is only concrete and steel and the scooped-out holes where other things were meant to go. The stair is unfinished, its makeshift handrails fashioned from two by fours. Charles lights a blunt and they pass it around as they climb. "Yes yes yes," squeaks Adriana, holding her breath in. "J'adore." Each flight, Charles pauses on the landing above them, looking back, his face half in shadow. "What happened to you?" he says to Gaëlle at one point. "You used to be fit." He is only trying to make her smile, but it doesn't work as intended. For some reason, the word "fit" just kills her. Her hysterics infect Adriana, and soon both of them are paralyzed with laughter. "What?" says Charles. "What?" And in that moment, when she looks up at his face, she remembers that night with Suze, Charles' mugging, half-dazed grin and the jokes they made about her, and she stares into his eyes as she laughs til her lungs hurt and tears well up in her eyes.

Charles says they are out of time, and they stop climbing. From the top of the stairs, framed by slabs top and bottom, the city looks like a slice of orangey prismatic layer cake. They walk slowly from the stairwell at the center to the naked gray edge.

“Holy fuck,” says Gaëlle.

“Wow,” says Adriana.

“Right?” says Charles.

Adriana has a brightness in her eyes. It makes Gaëlle nervous and giddy. Adriana walks to the edge and sits down, her calves dangling out into nothingness. She unslings her bag from one shoulder and it clinks on the concrete. Without looking back, she lifts out a bottle and holds it up over her head, triumphant. This too they pass around.

Gaëlle approaches the edge more cautiously, Charles at her side. He has his lopsided, ironic smile on—the smile of handsome men. Below them, the broad canyon of 63rd Street seethes with bodies moving in every direction. From here they can see the police cordons several blocks off, traffic backed up on the avenues. Horns and train whistles buzz in the distance.

“This didn’t use to be such an occasion,” says Charles, shaking his head.

The sun, fat and golden-orange, is wreathed in thin clouds, now almost the same distance from the glass canyon walls as it is from the paved horizon. A perfect circle within a perfect rectangle. At this remove, she could bridge it all with a thumb: the fiery asphalt, brilliant and luminous; the heads of the crowd below like so many bright grains of rice scattered over the street, each throwing its own impossibly long shadow behind it. And now she can see too, the red-lit faces

of other watchers in other buildings, looking out at the spectacle. They are out on their balconies, their fire escapes and roofs decks and penthouses. A trio of figures perhaps a hundred yards distant, bolder even than herself, Adriana, and Charles, are perched—like that famous photograph—on the nakedness of a steel girder, the building around them no more than an outline in space. Silhouetting them, almost bisecting them, the glazed facades of the extant towers warp and bend in the sunset, reflecting now ruddy red and now blue, now sky and now fire. The wind whips Gaëlle's hair. For the first time in many years, she feels free. She feels the strange, impossible urge to reach for Charles' hand, warm and firm and close, and to grip it so tight the bones would crush into dust.

Charles lies down on his back, wiggling out further and further til his head and shoulders are over the edge, looking up at the sound of a helicopter. Gaëlle, too, goes over to the edge. Still upside-down, Charles actually cranes his neck so that the back of his skull is touching the edge of the slab, and his eyes must be level with the horizon. She can see the rise and fall of his chest through his shirt, the pinpoints of his nipples, the slow fragile rhythm of his respiration. "It's like watching the world be born," he says.

Adriana makes a soft, disgruntled noise, looking over at him, and rubs her nose with the back of her wrist. "You're upside-down," she rebukes.

Gaëlle watches Charles turn to regard her, still inverted, his prototypical neutral expression evaporating, transformed into both quizzical smile and frown at once.

She has time for one breath, as if she knows she is going to need it. Then the three black silhouettes hit the crowd or the crowd hits them and the screaming begins, all at once and in earnest, as if a box had been opened: the frightened, agonized rushing and pushing and shoving and wailing down on the street. Charles and Adriana are blinking their eyes. The empty girder seems impossibly to vibrate in the sky. Charles is talking, then lifting Gaëlle by the pits, dragging her away from the sky, which now erupts across her vision with something like longing. Down below, the great machinery of the city is at work. Adriana is looking way over the edge like she isn't afraid. Sooner than seems possible, there are sirens, and a helicopter descending lower and lower, flicking great torrents of air into their hideaway, through their hair and across their faces, kicking Adriana's dress up around her thighs like a movie star. Silhouetted, she looks back at them, Charles half-dragging Gaëlle, and she bursts into tears and starts running at them. "Wait, wait," she screams. "Don't leave me behind—" Charles is screaming at both of them then, and they are screaming back, and now they are down in the stairwell. Everything hurts. She isn't afraid, but her legs are shaking and her breath is making a rattle in her windpipe. The din outside and below is growing louder and fiercer. It sounds like a whole continent stuffed into one damn crushed tin can.

They burst onto the sidewalk and someone is shouting oh my god oh my god oh my god at the top of their lungs and a thick crest of bodies is shearing in front of them where the street meets the avenue and the cops and the sirens and the woman who's trying to shield her dog with her body as a man right beside her throws a trash can through a store window and people start kicking the glass, stepping through the hole just to get out of the street and the whine of the air and crying and

shouting and even the very smallest things, the things so tangential they only buzz on her skin for a heartbeat—the faint warble of a faraway car alarm or the bright glint of the last rays of sun on a man’s watchface as he raises his wrist or fuck even the hum of the servos that drive the store security camera to bank and survey the plate glass atomizing into a sparkling fan of dust, even all that seems somehow familiar and real and normal to her in this moment as the sun goes down on the grid just perfect alignment perfect color perfect vanishing act and everything is unspeakably irrevocably perfectly fucked.

It’s only once they’re on the stairs of the subway and her heart has slowed to the speed of sound that she realizes things have happened. They have just shouldered through what felt to her like half the Ward, with the other half behind them, and Charles has let go her hand and is asking something about farecards, when she turns to ask something about farecards to Adriana and finds, instead of Adriana, a wall of desperate, frightened, sweating strangers trying to push past her and Charles to reach the turnstiles, and she opens her mouth to call out “Adriana!” and instead of the word, she expels only a great long sticky lacewing of blood and saliva. The strangers scream and swear, dodging around her. She claps a hand to her mouth and immediately feels it become slippery. It comes away almost black with red. She feels Charles’ hand on her shoulder, and as she turns to face him, he recoils from her, jaw slack, eyes wide.

What? Gaëlle tries to ask, but something is making it difficult to speak.

“You need to go to the hospital,” Charles says.

I don't know what, she is trying to say. But only a wet mute noise emerges. Charles shakes his head, just once. The only other time she's seen his face like that was the time Roget put her fist through a window, trying to flip someone the bird, and came away with a shard of glass the size of an orange wedge stuck in her wrist.

Gaëlle can feel the flaps of loose tissue slipping over her teeth. What she can't feel is her tongue.

Charles pulls on his shirt, ripping along the seam of the arm. He shoves the rag at her, but she waves him off. He insists. She takes it, pressing it against her jaw. It smells like sweat and she doesn't want to put it in her mouth.

She looks around and waves her free hand. Where's Adriana?

Charles isn't looking. He has his phone out. He's dialing. Gaëlle touches his arm, shaking her head.

“Are you fucking joking with me?”

It hasn't started to hurt yet. She knows that part is coming. Sirens are blooming on every minute marker of the compass. She knows there isn't time. She cups the rag to her chin and turns, starting back up the stairs two at a time. City Hospital is only a few blocks away.

Every bed, every chair is full when they get there. Stunned men and women from the street squint up at the old CRTs, looping aerial clips of two blocks away. Cameras still hang from cords on the necks of the watchers, and to a one they are coated in some kind of powder, eyes pinkish-red and puffy as bee stings. A man with a headwound speaks in tongues by the door, clutching his skull, and women waiting in line at the counter ask after sons or brothers without turning to look. The medical interns and nurses who shuttle through the space are bombarded with questions, but they only shake their heads and keep moving; they have forsaken rational explanations. Tongue bitten almost in half and a black eye blossoming over one cheek, Gaëlle watches it all, unblinking. She cups the rag to her mouth, jaw beginning to ache. Will she ever speak again? How will she eat and drink?

Charles is beside her. He stands between her and the thicker shore of the crowd. She is grateful for this. In this moment she considers perhaps that he loves her, even if he doesn't know it himself.

Her hands are too slick and filthy to handle her phone. It is some time before she is given a sterilized cloth to bite down on. Don't take it out, she is told. When this happens, she wipes her hands on Charles' torn shirtsleeve, matted with fluids, at least to the point where she can text Adriana. But she can't get signal, and the text won't go through. Charles watches this silently. He must be afraid too, or else he would say something.

When at last they come for her, to take her to the exam room, a nurse squints down into her face and he hovers behind, making Gaëlle's face hot. This moment extends forever, it seems: she,

staring into his face and trying to inhabit those two brown eyes looking at her, trying to see what it is that makes him so quiet. She tries to comprehend him then, the molecular way, maybe for the first time. Has he spoken to his father recently? Did they take him to church as a child? His mother makes eggs with tomato and those peppery soups he so loves to reminisce about. Was it a lie, what he told them about living here, this city, this country? What other names has he had than his name? *I don't want to be a person anymore.* Charles' eyes are so white and so black, lashes long. Like Esha's. *I have no one to call.* He has three sisters, and one little nephew. Will Gaëlle have a nephew? Will she have a brother? Charles doesn't move. Up close, the signs of age are making inroads on his face. When did his family arrive here? In what year? Who greeted them? What did they have to abandon to reach here? She knows this much: when Charles was born, stateside, they wanted him to have an American name. Adegbonmire, he once told her, had been changed to Adebun for this reason. Look in his eyes. Does he find her beautiful?

After she's finally seen by the doctor—a harried, angular white woman of forty or so who tells her there's nothing to do, the tongue isn't fully bisected and so without insurance, well I don't mean to presume, etc, etc—Charles offers to take her home. She doesn't say no; she can't. They sit side by side on the train in silence, watching the black blur of tunnel walls slide by. She keeps the rag in her mouth, though the bleeding has slowed. She wants to believe his presence here means something,

but Suze has been gone two whole months and nothing has happened between them. His presence beside her leaves her full of self-doubt.

And exhaustion, quite suddenly. Her shoulder against his, the warmth of him, the weight of the light; she feels herself, lulled by the rhythm of the train, shut her eyes.

There is Charles with Suze the night of the farewell party, laughing at her. “Gully,” Suze had said, “some *lebensraum*, please?”

They knew each other so long before her. She shouldn't have been surprised.

The bright blue lights of the train.

The night they met. Back when Suze lived on Curtis in that apartment with bay windows and a dishwasher. Party again. Gaëlle was there, lifting wallets from coats piled in the bedroom. Charles had caught her. Characteristically, he hadn't got mad. “I have someone you should meet,” was all that he said, and led her to Suze. “This one has fast hands,” he'd told him.

A sight of his broad, handsome face, looking down at her.

Whenever they were out together, girls flocked to him. The early days. Gaëlle told herself she didn't feel envious, because while she saw what they saw—a handsome, clean, articulate man—she was certain he must be arrogant and selfish. Those girls were all freckles and legs and tanlines. What else could they do but laugh and cling?

But she had had it all wrong, back when there was the chance to make a different first impression. Charles is, beneath it all, a nurturer—a mama's boy. He sends money to his sister and calls his parents and takes Gaëlle home from the hospital. She regrets icing him out. Before him,

she had never met a man who was not some sort of cosmic disappointment. She mistook him; everyone did. Even Suze. Suze saw an ally, a kindred cynic, a bookkeeper, a level head who could also be a cowboy. When Suze thought to try expanding into meth, Charles was the one who said no. When Roget wanted to get a gun, Charles was the one who dissuaded her while Suze was laying down odds. And when Gaëlle turned away from Charles, to Adriana, it wasn't because she wanted to make him jealous, or out of a desire to contradict his prototypically reasonable advice not to meddle. It was because she sincerely believed that Adriana could understand what was happening to her and Charles could not.

When she opens her eyelids, she feels as if she is opening a barn door.

The duty nurse gave her a pad and pen, with which to write any questions. They told her she'd be speaking again in a week or two. The organ of speech mends quickly, they told her.

Now she writes, *I want you to come home with me.*

He looks at the paper. "I am coming home with you."

I want you to stay with me.

It feels so strange to be so formal, so tentative. She feels like a teenager again. Giddy, demure.

He examines the rivets of the train car window as all around them the train car nurses the low chord of thunder. "Gaëlle," is all he says.

There are people, but to her it is as if they were alone. She waits.

"Gaëlle," he says again, "I can't."

Why not.

He rubs his face with his hands. "I just can't."

She looks down at the speckled pattern of the rubberized floor, letting her hair fall over her face. The rag trembles every time the train shifts on the tracks.

What is wrong with me, she writes, and underlines each word.

"It isn't you."

She waits. He raises his hands as if to say that is all. He doesn't want to go any further.

She doesn't move. She can feel her pulse in her cheeks. While the adrenaline had lasted, the pain in her face had diminished, but it is back now. She watches him fiercely. He taps his eye teeth with a fingernail, then looks at her, then looks down. "It's Suze, man."

For a vertiginous moment, she thinks he's going to say he's in love with him. But he continues: "He wants you. You know he wants you. He has always wanted you."

She looks at him blankly. She doesn't care if Suze wants her. She has never cared what Suze wanted. Suze was a fat fucking wallet, free weed, free weekends, bad karma she had to suck up to be near Charles.

I don't care, she writes.

Charles' jaw flexes. "I do." It is infuriating how quietly he speaks. It is as if he already knows what they are going to say and he is just trying to hasten through the formalities.

SUZE IS GONE, she writes, punctuating so hard she goes through the page and shoving it under his nose.

He still doesn't look at her. "He's coming back," he says.

She opens the bottle before she takes her shoes off. She uses the hookah hose like a siphon, fighting her gag reflex. It smells like iron and skunk weed and bittersweet. There is a great deal of pain in swallowing. This is the beginning of the long and arduous process of becoming drunk. Later, she has texted Adriana. No answer. She wouldn't say she is running from pillar to post, but. Nothing either from Charles or to him. She is alone. All she wanted was for Suze to stay gone. Charles confuses fixity with loyalty. All she wanted was for little brother and father and Suze and mother and everyone to stay away. Drink in the morning, sleep in the night. There's nothing she can do now. She throws the empty out the window that faces onto the alley and hears it shatter on the pavement. Through the floor, the couple in 3A argue. She stomps around real loud with her heels to signal for them to shut it, but she takes a fall. Her chin strikes the hardwood. She is thinking of home in that moment—of the sandy loam of Pine Barrens, how it felt between her toes. She lies there in this state until she feels her throat burning and rolls onto her side. She curls her body and wipes the fluid from her lips. It strings out from her mouth to her hand, viscous and shiny.

On the table, her phone is vibrating. It keeps buzzing til it falls on the floor. The crack of it hitting the floor reminds her she never did replace it. She feels a mild shock at the idea of little brother. It could be him. She is very drunk. She feels in her bones the word “intoxicated”, with its double helix of poison and acuity.

The screen says Adriana.

Gaëlle lifts Adriana to an ear, this cold plastic box that contains her voice, and which makes her think of a conch shell.

They say a conch's noise is the noise of your own blood reverberating.

"Are you all blue?" Adriana's voice says to her. "Do you see this?"

There's a quaver in it—a vivid fragility Gaëlle hasn't heard before. Something terrible has happened.

If Adriana has read her texts, she'll know Gaëlle can't speak.

When Gaëlle says nothing, only breathes out through her nose, Adriana emends, "Sorry, sorry, I forgot; tap the mic—once for yes, two for no. Are you home?"

Yes, she taps.

"You're safe?"

Gaëlle doesn't know how to answer that, so she does nothing.

"I mean, you're hurt but you're safe."

Yes, she supposes.

"I'm okay," she adds quickly. "I just got pulled away by the crowd. Sorry. Sorry for not calling back sooner." Adriana continues, as if not wanting to linger on what might have occupied her time. Gaëlle thinks of the bruises on her slender thighs, when the helicopter blew her dress up.

"Are you still there?"

Sort of. *Yes*.

“I keep thinking about the street. Sunlight blue. Well, the shape of looking down on it, everything churning. How I wanted it.”

Gaëlle understands. Suze gave over his studio to Charles’ care when he departed. Once Charles had Gaëlle over there. Suze had a white leather sectional and a bronze chandelier that looked like it belonged in a gallery. A Glen Macallan 18 and a \$700 Cabernet and a dope wet bar. When Charles had gone to the bathroom, she had experienced the inexplicable urge to jam her hand into the garbage disposal and turn it on. Perhaps that was the first time she felt this way.

But she can’t say that; she must say nothing. But she feels an anger brewing, deep in her chest, a cheatedness.

In the long, exercised silence that follows, she can hear glass clinking and fuzzy silence, and what sounds like Adriana crying.

Gaëlle wonders if this is what it feels like for little brother to receive a call from her.

A tearful psychic, Adriana says, “My brother called.”

For a moment, Gaëlle feels vertiginous—thoughts tinted and delayed, she perceives this phrase inverted—*my* brother; my *Esha* called—almost like the way she used to do before speech therapy, as a child: hopscotch of the syllables. *Metathesis*. Only this time thought to speech, blood to blood.

But Adriana is talking about herself. *Her* brother.

She tries to get her mind to sit still and focus.

“He told me—the last time we spoke it was June. He told me he was doing fine. He was lonely, but he was working, was what he said.” Adriana’s mode of speech is halting, almost incoherent. “Such a smiler—*liar*. Even if I love him. If he was going road—*home*, goddamn—he wouldn’t be here. He never could take care of sidereal.

“He just said—and this was June—that he’d been sad and lonely. Older sister, I say, I know how that goes; told him just to have some little fun and he’d forget sunlit sky happened. Get off this little island before the bridges break, my heart is, etc.”

She laughs once and weakly. Gaëlle wants to tell her she isn’t making any sense, but she’s drunk and can’t speak and isn’t sure to what extent Adriana is mixing up her words and to what extent Gaëlle is mixing up their apprehension.

“Now he calls and says he’s still room, I mean, still didn’t leave, stubborn as always, stilted pighead, and he thinks he’s got it. Like me, like you—like we—he’s got *it*. You pupil. He’s sick he’s sick he’s sick and I am so teeth for him. Oh fuck, Gaëlle, I’m so scared for all of us. Are you watching this? See their faces...

“They say in the end you hurt yourself,” Adriana goes on. “They say in the end you can’t tell a word from a hole in your head. In your brain, I mean.”

The trains aren’t running normally. Some lines are shut down, others rerouted. There are orange laminated flyers hung on yellow cords across the entrances that read, “All Interward Service Canceled.” No date or limit stated. She stumbles downstairs into station; it takes some time for her to

realize that the desertion of the platform is exactly what's so unnatural—the long, concrete plinth dead of movement like some abandoned set piece. Even given it's the middle of the night, this silence seems cancerous. There should be some disagreement, love affair, pointless conversation. A pair of kids should be scrawling dicks on the white tile walls with sharpies. There should be something. But there isn't anything.

And on the train out to Ray Beach, to her uncle's house and little brother if he's still there, it continues to be nothing and no one, inside and out. Not a man in a thobe waiting for the bus, nor a woman in a doorway—not even a beached drunk, dozing in the traincar. It is as if the city has been emptied as one empties a bucket.

In the streets are the gulls, for she is now near to the sea, gathered on the streetlamps, pecking at one another's faces. She's surprised to find that she remembers the route from the station to the house. She follows her feet down the hill and past the camera store, across the avenue, still and dark and vacant, and beneath the blue canvas awning. Past the women's center and the broken-down minimart with its Coca Cola signage. Armenian cafe. Onto the residential streets—the brick houses and cracked slate paving stones.

If Esha isn't gone already, she will make him leave.

She stays far away from the house at first. She doesn't feel at risk of being seen, not any more than usual.

It looks the same as she remembers, only it's been let go. Elliott and Susan must be gray now. It's been a decade or more since Gaëlle has been here. A scrim of creepers has overtaken the

front facade with its garage, and the white paint peels from the brickwork. The blue-leafed hedges at the stoop almost block the door. There's a car parked in the driveway, but it isn't her uncle's or aunt's. It takes her a moment to recognize it, side panels laced with long key scars, trim delaminating. She can't decide how to feel. The halo of rust on the bumper is a small shock to her. But the license plate reads the same as ever. *Garden State*.

She stands in the gloom of the street for a long half-minute watching the darkened windows for sign of him. There is no reason to suspect he would be up. The moon looms above the house. Out here at the far edge of Mia, the stars are almost visible, the air nearly smells of ocean. This far out, you might forget you're in a city.

Around the back, between the hedges, the little patio, with its plastic lawn furniture all missing or encrusted with brown pollen. They used have cookouts here. The glass patio door opens onto the den, she remembers; the lowest floor of the split-level design. With a mixture of thrill and nerves, she nears it. Her hands ache down to the tender bone as she brings them to the cold glass, cupped around her eyes to screen out any excess light.

At first she makes out nothing but the black lumpy shape of the fold-out sofa, the sharp and delicate outline of Elliott's kit harpsichord. Black on black. The counter and the cabinets, littered with the paler squares of books and sheets of paper.

But her eyes adjust. She sees him there. A shiver passes through her body, under every inch of skin.

He is lying on the couch. One dark, thin arm is draped over his face, and the other crooked to rest a hand atop his stomach. She can see, if she holds her eyes perfectly still, the movement of his chest beneath the t-shirt he is wearing. How delicate, how tiny! How many years has it been? Seven, eight, or more? He breathes like when he was a baby. His strange, uneven little face always twisted up, as if mere existence were some great task the world had set him.

She tugs on the door handle, gently at first, then harder. It is locked.

For a moment, she considers breaking the glass. She could knock out the sidelite in the mudroom upstairs, reach her hand in through the gap and flip the lock. She could break the patio door with a stone from the garden. How that would scare him. She grins.

I told you to leave, she would bellow. Surprise!

But then the wind picks up and the trees rustle in that gentle, sweet way overhead. She is drunk. Still Ray Beach trees are not Kohl-Rhys trees. They are back yard trees, wide around as casks; and far far overhead she can make out through the darkness where the blue mottling of their separate canopies begin to intersect. In the wind they look like they are caressing.

She looks back at little brother. His belly protrudes slightly. His wrist reminds her of an hourglass. On the floor beside him is a thin fleece blanket, kicked off in the night.

The buried roots of her teeth ache. Inside her head feels like bubblegum and shards of glass.

She should have thought to bring something to drink.

She thought she would confront him, but her skin, the trees, the ocean smell ... Ray Beach is not the city. If things get worse she will look out for him. Like a sister should. She will.

She wants him to know that. She feels around her pockets, searching for a keepsake. All she can find is a phone.

She never did replace it.

She places it on the ground, an offering, and squats down in the dirt beside it. She crouches like a wild animal, scratching at the soil with her fingers.

She decides to walk back to KR. In a way the eerie, deserted quality of the streets has begun to soothe her: the empty dog run and metal slide in the park, the shuttered odeon with its gloomy ticket window. Barred windows. All of it seems to reflect her experience since May of the everyday as fragile and translucent. The stillness throws her into visions of her neighbor's ruined face, streaked and swollen and torn so it will not leave her, photographs and gifs on social media of bodies twisted in lockjaw spasms, of shards of teeth littering pavement. This is what this quiet street, those tight-shut doors, are hiding from; what they are trying to deny. But when they open up things won't have changed. A hairline bump before the evening news on radio, clipping & reselling \$300 Ray Bans, a sharp stout ale in the afternoon to keep her going. All her life she's felt herself living on the fringe. But now the center is the fringe.

When she grows tired, when her ribs and hands and scalp are burning, a litany of pain, and her body no longer obeys her as she wants it to, she drops down onto the steps of a church. Iglesia

de Evangelización Misionera, the cornerstone reads. She leans her head against the granite door jamb.

“Ma’am,” he says.

Something prods her ribs. It’s light out.

“You can’t sleep here. You’re to be indoors.”

The man standing over her has his thick arms crossed. He wears a dark blue t-shirt with the logo of the police department and a pair of khaki shorts, belted with all the standard pouches, sprays, clubs. His face is homely and concerned. All around his body, a faint aureole of golden hair glitters in the sun.

Gaëlle rises to a sitting position. Behind the man are other cops decked out in this same neighborhood safari uniform, and a second group of pencil-necked individuals in street clothes, clustered in front of a van bearing the caduceus.

She shakes her head at him.

“Ma’am?” he repeats.

She mimes returning to sleep. Truth be told, she’s still a little drunk.

“You understand me? You can’t sleep here. There’s a curfew in effect. Hello?”

He reaches down and grabs her by the elbow. He is very large and it’s not hard for him to pull her up. She stumbles in coming to her feet and he rights her by the biceps. He stands before her, looking down at her face with that idiotic, uncertain look, holding her in place with his chunky sweaty meat-claws.

“Ma’am?” he says, one more time.

She looks up at him. She opens her mouth and sticks out the remnants of her tongue.

He swears and drops her arms. He backpedals two steps down and swears again. She grins.

He turns to the others and beckons the EMTs, or whatever they are, to come forward. They come at her with rolling coolers and blood pressure tools and pen lights and tongue depressors and diagnostic tools that beep and gurgle; it reminds her of some awful hospice or zombie flick, corpses risen from their infirmary beds, dragging with them all the cabling and bibs and meds that kept them sullenly tethered to life. What do these idiots think they are doing?

Eventually they put her in the paddy wagon and drive her home. In the back, they have crates full of toys for the neighborhood kids, snack packs, sports beverages, industrial quantities of condoms. The police smile when they talk to her.

Too little too late, she thinks.

They drop her off a couple blocks from her apartment. She sits down on the same stone steps where Charles had waited for her the morning after Suze’s party. The cops get back in the van and watch her, idling streetside several minutes, perhaps wondering if she really lives here. She doesn’t move. They idle. She doesn’t move. They drive away. She climbs the steps.

The curfew does not end that week as they were told it would. Its proper name, she later learns, is the Syndromic Surveillance SafeWatch Protocol. SSSP. Just be patient, good, compliant, good while

we sort this out. Pharmacy R0 incubation absentee data restricted prion transit retrovirus sanitation cloister social contract safe safe safe. All the pigeons and rats are dying, says one talking head. Well-spotted fuckwad, Gaëlle thinks.

They say, “We must show the world that we are patient, we are civilized, we are compassionate, and we are one step ahead in looking out for others.”

“It’s known everywhere how compassionate and patient Miacantans are,” they say.

This makes her laugh.

Subway and bus service stays erratic, when available; interward transit goes on being limited to police and EMS, making their rounds in those strange caduceus vans.

Phone finally divested, Gaëlle is reduced listening through the floorboards or walls to the couple argue down on three, or to walking to the bodega and shooting the shit with the owners.

Or she goes down K street in the late afternoon to the local sadsack KR dive, where her tab is becoming enormous, but because she knows the owner since way back when she was dealing and had money and because he looks at her with that damp-eyed, plangent face that she figures has to do with the one time he confessed to her she reminded him of his daughter, he lets her keep on drinking. Everyone who’s there as often as she is knows that she prefers to drink alone and silent, and so she sits at the far end of the room, over by the dartboard and dishrags, staring by turns at and through the TV news while the winos and fuckups and retired old union men drink and laugh at who’s headed to the finals. There are still plenty of people in the city who don’t give a fuck what’s going on.

Just wait, she thinks, bitterly, just wait.

As promised, her tongue slowly improves. Look, she thinks, my body is fixing itself. I'm becoming healthy again.

But the pain in her face and hands and neck doesn't abate.

Charles comes by once or twice to look in on her, but she can feel the distance mounting in between them. Suze is back and Charles is back to Suze. She misses him even when they're in the room together. And so missing Charles, she misses Adriana, and so she heads over to the bookstore where she works. No Adriana. They say she had to quit. She wasn't well enough to work, they say. It was very sad.

Do you have her number? she asks. They hesitate, but pity and their desire for her to leave get the better of them. She scrawls the digits on a slip of paper and goes to Bean's apartment. She hasn't seen him in three months. She knocks on his door until he answers. He comes out wearing squeaky white hi-tops and a western shirt with torn-off sleeves that showcase his skinny beige arms. His face is, as always, wrinkle-free and luminous.

"Gaëlle," he says pleasantly, "you look like shit."

"Benny Bean Nguyen," she says, "just the worthless lowlife I was looking for."

Bean may have sold a significant quantity of e to kids still in high school, and he certainly has a tendency to get a little carried away with his uppers, but there's not a mean bone in his body. Happy-go-lucky. She likes that about him.

"You want to come in?" he asks. "Angelina's at work."

“Nah,” she says, “I just came for that phone.”

He frowns at her and strokes his downy cheek. “The one from a month ago?”

She pauses, attempting math. “I guess.”

“It’s gone. I sold it.”

She runs a hand through her hair. “What? Come on...”

He makes a face like he stepped on a dog’s tail. “Rent’s rent. You know?”

“Well—what have you got now?”

He stares into space for a moment, then holds up a finger. “Wait here.”

He comes back with, no fucking shit, a flip phone.

“For real?”

“Take it or leave it.”

She takes it.

“You heard Suze is back in town?” he calls after her as she sets off. “You going to sail or jump ship, you think?”

She throws up her hands without looking back.

On the train ride home, Adriana’s reply text comes almost immediately. *I’ve been worried about you*, she writes. *Why’d you disappear on me?*

Gaëlle has no idea how to answer that, nor why Adriana’s so upset, so she merely writes, *Drinks?*

At first, Adriana wants to meet at a brasserie, but Gaëlle will have none of it. *In the park*, she says. *Summer will be over soon*. And it's true. The days are getting shorter. That terrible heatwave has evaporated, replaced with the regular Mid-Atlantic stickiness, with coroners making their rounds in black trucks, with the constant judder of mail and police and fire drones against the window panes, and with the buzz of portable radios, dishing rumors and politics alongside top 40 hits.

They settle on First Ward, Harbor Park. Gaëlle knows it. It's a little green patch buried down there in the bowels of the old city; it faces west over the Miacantic River, out toward Sevrans and City Port—those nearest fronts of the run-down sprawl that begins just outside of the city limits. City Port was once a shipyard. They built destroyers there. Like the Yards of Third Ward, however, what still remains now is import-export—forklifts and tariffs and bills of lading. The view from Harbor Park won't be anything special. Gaëlle doesn't want to trek all the way out there, but Adriana promises it will be worth it, there is something she's heard that she wants to confirm.

Fine, she thinks, what else have I got to do?

They rendezvous in Chinatown and walk south through the squat market stalls and bakeries, chubby white bao floating in the windows, faded red calendars hung in the vestibules; the teahouses and homeopathy clinics, the dental practices and candy shops, twinkling with gold leaf. Adriana stops once at a shop and comes back with a can of something called Calpico.

“So good,” she says, wiping her lips. “It's called Calpis abroad. But they changed it in the US because they were worried people would hear it ‘cow piss.’”

Gaëlle smiles obligingly. They each have two coke bottles full of booze they brought along. Adriana is just trying to seem normal.

Why bother? she wants to ask. Who are we fooling? But Adriana looks so happy in pretending. Her small, expressive face is screwed up with good memories. Her slim legs work like pistons. When she lowers the can, her expression returns to that glazed and in-pain look, as if something inside her were being slowly scraped out.

“How are you doing these days?” Gaëlle asks, and it feels strange to be on the asking side of that question.

“Oh, you know,” is the reply.

“It seems like you’re speaking clearer.” While each syllable takes its tithe from Gaëlle.

“I guess so,” says Adriana. “I never did get much in the way of help from the doctors.” She laughs.

“Me neither.”

“I don’t think they have the slightest idea what’s wrong with us.”

“Me neither.”

Adriana stops dead, transfixed, it seems, by a sticker on the back of a stop sign. “Nothing is ever behind us,” she reads dreamily, sipping from the can of Calpico. “That sounds familiar.”

She still has the bruises on her arms and legs, a few open cuts and scrapes, but she isn’t, Gaëlle decides, as frail and slow-moving as at Miaclipse. And her speech is definitely clearer. Less hurried.

It reminds Gaëlle, now that she thinks of it, of how mother used to get when all her medications peaked at once; not lying-on-the-carpet-all-day-crying depressed, but sort of plastic-bag-caught-in-the-wind.

“Did you ever land anything heavier?” she asks her.

Adriana only smiles and nods, as if Gaëlle were telling an interesting story.

“Where?” Gaëlle asks.

“Rog brought me something.”

“And it helped?”

“I think so,” she says with the tone of giving an opinion on a skirt. “It doesn’t hurt as much now.”

“What was it called? Where did she get it?”

Adriana shrugs like kelp underwater.

The park gates are within sight. Gaëlle can see plenty of people milling around. She takes a drink from her bottled screwdriver. It’s still cold, feels good going down.

“What happened with your brother?” she asks, almost aimlessly.

Adriana looks up, expression touched. She brushes her hair out of her eyes. The black roots are slowly overtaking the bleached blonde. “My brother ... I told you he told me he was sick? Like, sick-sick?” She shakes her head. “I was so sad. It was awful news. I felt—I felt like it was my fault somehow. But it isn’t—I mean, we don’t know what’s happening.”

As she speaks, her head lolls down so that her eyes scan the pavement. “I told him he should come live with me. Or near to me. Eastwick, Lafayette ... he’s out in Ray Beach now. I could take care of him. Rog could take care of him. We could help him, you know?”

Gaëlle watches her, tilting her head. At the mention of Ray Beach, her heart speeds up. “And did he listen? Is he coming?”

“I don’t know,” Adriana says dully. “He never wrote me back.”

Someone going the opposite way almost runs into Gaëlle. She brings her eyes back to the park, only to realize they’ve arrived. Suddenly, they are at the westernmost edge of the city, out in the sunshine like real human beings.

She wants to hold the thought, the conversation, but distractions get the better of her. The park is crowded with people; every description of body the city has to offer all competing for the same view of the river. Gaëlle and Adriana work their way through to them bit by bit, holding hands and drinking by turns from their pick-me-ups. The air smells of strangers’ sweat. She can see the Burroughs-Camden Bridge beyond the peninsula of Papermills. Police flashers are visible on the span. On the near side, she feels a small shiver pass through her to see, a construction crew is at work, guarded by a line of police in black uniforms. A squat concrete guardhouse and a chain-link fence and gate topped by barbed wire are in the process of going up. The array is fronted by several concrete Jersey barriers.

The last vestiges of heavy industry are visible too, across the river; City Port with its hundreds of thousands of shipping containers and steel-frame gantry cranes painted in fading lead

blue. Mammoth container vessels churn currents in the harbor behind a loose chain of Coast Guard ships; bright-colored three-ton containers hoisted effortlessly as flags. Gaëlle turns back to Adriana.

“Was this what you wanted to see?”

She nods slowly.

“What does it mean?” Gaëlle asks her after a beat.

Adriana doesn't answer. But Gaëlle knows what it means. It's easy to forget that Miacantic is a pair of islands. Everything can seem to simply appear here: food, electricity, information, raw materials, and water. But of course it doesn't. Two tunnels, five bridges, and millions of cables anchor them to the solid earth of a continent. On their other side, their suddenly lonely side—ocean for 3,500 miles.

When Charles comes by to tell her there will be a homecoming party for Suze later that week, she is not surprised. But she is angry. Charles stands arms crossed in the doorway, almost filling it, but he doesn't come in. As if she were contagious. He looks cheeks look full and his eyes alert, well-rested, as if Suze's return has banished any minor upset to his equilibrium the past few months might have caused. For this she resents him.

As he labors through the pleasantries, again she thinks of the night he invited her over to Suze's apartment; the night she'd thought of the garbage disposal and maiming herself.

In my capacity as caretaker I attain some free license, he'd said that night. Chandelier, lithograph prints, wet bar, 200 year old wood floor smooth as cream, view to die for, whole nine; all the gorgeous things Suze had so casually abandoned, not even bothering to break the lease or have them shipped to wherever he spent the summer. And she'd stood with her bare feet on the cold floor, looking out at the estuary through triple-pane glass. It was before the pain had really begun, before the news reports, etc, etc, and she still thought he might be gone for good. Charles had broken out some of that miraculous whiskey, smooth and smoky and unadorned, and put on a record on Suze's cedarwood hi-fi.

Everything outside that apartment had been like fog on a mirror. Charles was taking license with Suze's things. They drank the whole decanter, good and shitfaced, and began playing poker. She remembers imagining him kissing her hard and saying how he wanted her, and how she would

say no to him. Just to see his face. They played poker on the balcony. It was hot out there and they sweat. He developed boy smell, like a smell that belonged in a box in her closet for emergencies. He mopped his face with his shirt, exposing his stomach, taut and covered with hair. He laughed at her jokes. He went big on a suspect hand and she cleaned him out. No no no no no no, he'd said, grinning and laughing. No, yes! she'd said. There had been a moment, it seemed, where they had come very close.

And now here he is, standing on her doorstep, not asking to come in, not taking her to the bar to bend her ear over politics, even not chastising her over Adriana. Instead he says there's a party in the selfsame apartment where all this happened, a party for the man who has endured no waiting, no pain, no three AM shakes or insomnia or politics or surveillance or curfew or clinics. A man who has known nothing but parties.

He doesn't even say in so many words Suze wants her back, working for him again. It can remain unsaid because she is broke, with a habit, and the money will be good. Maybe better than ever with the city so jacked. We will be kings of the rubble, she imagines Suze promising, standing up on the counter. We will be the wolves who nursed Rome.

They meet at an apartment with a flawless view of Two Bridges. Second Ward towers sparkle on the estuary. Air smells like ocean. It's the type of neighborhood where you are very aware of everyone's shoes, even now.

Suze peacocks like he's Christ on Easter, all vindicated and bronzed and full of homilies. He looks healthy to the point of intoxication. There are flecks of red and gold in his beard, around the mouth, and when he smiles Gaëlle can see a newly chipped tooth, its perfect missing triangle flashing in the late summer sunlight.

The apartment looks like an interior design website: a large woven rug and white leather sectional (immaculate) center the front room, complemented by color-coded mostly-empty bookshelves, an ivory & frosted torchiere, art prints and portraits on the walls, splay-legged walnut coffee table, wicker chairs with leather arms, etc, etc. Gaëlle overhears Roget ask if he's been living here and for how long. The second part of the question he ignores completely. To the first he only says "yes" with teeth bared, and when Roget reminds him of the place in Kings Heights, that Charles was taking care of, he actually slaps his forehead. "You know, I forgot about that," he says.

Gaëlle looks at Charles, but he isn't listening. He is embracing Angelica, clapping Bean on the shoulder. She walks into the kitchen, where the island is laden with liquor and mixers, and makes herself a greyhound.

She watches the others. All the old crew is here—Bean and Roget, of course, with their respective dates. Roget grips Adriana's elbow as if she might fly away. Huey and Tomo stand by the window, popping canapes like grapes. They have tanlines from helmet straps and cycling gloves. They went back to messengering, then. A few pushers not worth remembering cluster at the picture window, and there are some unfamiliar faces in the mix as well—distributors, perhaps.

For Gaëlle it doesn't take long to remember her feelings for the man of the hour. He moves swiftly between groups. Every now and then his gaze will flash on her, and that enigmatic, softly violent smile of his will play across his mouth.

In conversation, his laughter comes too easily and fades too quickly. He's the only man she's ever known who can seem to speak and listen at once. In his expression, which signals complete attentiveness, she can read the familiar, muted Suze reactions: desire, scorn, amusement, condescension, and that confidence so firm it has petrified into indifference.

It's this self-possession, however misplaced, that draws us all to him, she decides. He is not like Charles, or me. Suze is a savant. He's a loan shark of his own approval, a pickpocket of sympathies.

But this never seems to phase anyone but her—nor even to occur to them. He always knows just the right word, the right insight to offer to elevate his own position. He knows the moment to pivot away and talk to someone else. He makes her feel small, invisible.

At one point, later on, he catches her talking to Charles. She'd been asking him about his father, who he said was not improving. "His dying wish will be for me to reach at least Yale Medical School," he is saying as Suze interrupts.

He announces that they look like shit. Charles laughs like this is funny and asks him to fill Gaëlle in on his vacation.

“Vacation?” he says. “Vacation, nothing. It was a spiritual awakening. Think of that montage from *Batman* where he goes up into the mountains and learns the ways of the Jedi. Think of Rocky and the eggs.”

“So you can punch holes in walls now?” says Gaëlle.

“Gullybird,” he says, “you look like a pillow that’s been all sat out.”

“Fuck you,” she says.

Suze smiles carnivorously and plucks a lighter from Charles’ shirt pocket. He begins to flick it on and off.

“Things are real fucked here, huh?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “Need some distraction. I had a girl in here earlier. Cul like you wouldn’t believe. Everything tight yet.” He makes a ring with his fingers and looks through it at Gaëlle, closes it off laughs. “But that was it. That was the only good.”

Gaëlle scans the ceiling.

“She was just—mildly revolting. You know the type? She was attractive enough with her clothes on, but she had birthmarks—soft in all the wrong places. Her pussy had these long lips that hung out like dogears.” He shakes his head, tsking softly. “And so thin and breakable. You know how they have gotten. Not thick like they used to make them.”

He faces his head to Charles, but she can tell he’s speaking to her.

“Seven years ago, say, this city was home to perfect ass. You agree?”

Charles shakes his head, but not like he means it.

She's irritated by this passivity. Charles knows, as she does, that stories are Suze's way of putting a crown on in the mirror. He watches your face while he tells them. Stories set the mood.

"So I wanted to want to fuck this girl, I did try to want her, you see, but she was just so, I don't know, so feeble. In truth. She didn't even *smell* like a woman."

This time he does look at Gaëlle.

"Alright," she says, "give it a rest already."

"But a woman should smell when you fuck her."

"Enough," says Charles.

"She should *stink*," says Suze.

"She shouldn't be a professional," says Gaëlle.

Suze starts to giggle. She would never fuck him, but he gets off on making her talk about it. It takes several long seconds for him to settle. When he does, he says, "Will you two stay and get tanked with me? After the party?"

"Curfew," says Charles.

"There's the couch. I have a spare bedroom."

Give me two more doubles, Gaëlle thinks, I'll get tanked and go to bed at the same time.

It's quality booze and she doesn't want to hear Suze talk anymore. It's a win-win-win—or something.

Suze pauses for a moment, then puts the lighter down. As if reading her mind, he pours out three fingers of whiskey on the side table. When he walks over to her, he stops short of putting it in her hand. Instead, he peers forward into her face.

“You aren’t well, Gullybird. Charles told me you two had been sick, but it’s doing bad bad things to your nice nice skin.”

She takes the drink from his hand.

“Stop talking about my skin.”

“I admire your skin.”

“In fact, just stop talking.”

“Well, *admired*, anyway.”

“Come over here,” Charles calls out, now at the drink table. “Tell me about this new ‘revolution’ you are peddling. Does it smell like rainwater and jasmine? Can it cure a yeast infection?”

Suze throws up his hands, a child reminded of his favorite toy. When his back is turned, Gaëlle raises her eyebrows at Charles. Charles shrugs, then raises his glass. See, he seems to be saying to her, I can be both.

No, she thinks, it’s one or the other. The question is how long til you ditch.

Later she climbs the stairs to the penthouse. The steel door opens onto the roof. The view is stunning, all blue and yellow and sea-spun. Bean is up there with Angie, the messengers, and a couple of the pushers. They’re seated in lawn chairs, a glass patio table between them, passing a

piece. As they pause to inhale, a soft orange glow rises and falls over their faces. Now that she's out, away from the music, she can hear the warbling bowstring sound of sirens in the distance.

Bean calls out to her, asks if she wants a hit. Earlier in the night he had flashed the bud at her, contained in a small square glass jar, as if it were some precious brainchild of science. Hydroponic, he'd said, sensimilla. She could see; huge nuggets, no stems, rich and green, tiny white fuzz limning the flowers. But then, as now, she told him she wasn't in the mood to smoke.

They go back to their stories.

The roof is rough material, banded by black tar seams. She's only half-drunk yet. Not unsteady at all. She follows a seam to the edge, where the low parapet rises just to mid-calf. Down on the street there are people milling about. She cannot help but think of Miaclipse—the falling figures, inverse birds—the sounds they made when they struck below, the shoving and shouting. The quiet that followed it all in the cold hospital exam room.

Her face aches. She smiles. Pain is supposed to be a signal of something wrong. But there is no signal to send back to pain, acknowledging the receipt of information. To say: I understand; I'm broken.

I am trying, she thinks, to fix it.

My body is fixing itself, she recalls thinking. I'm getting better.

She remembers the harried clinic doctor with his slight limp and weak eyes, his dress shirt all covered in food stains. Somatic, he said: issuing from damage to tissue; visceral: issuing from

damage to organs; neuropathic: issuing from damage to nerves; psychogenic: issuing from damage to the mind; idiopathic: issuing from unknown sources.

From being up here when I could be down there, she thinks. She looks down and out. The pavement is a dull yet scintillating blue.

She squats and places her drink on the parapet. She leans forward onto her knees, feeling the sharp grit of the bitumen on her skin, resting her elbows on the low wall like a pew, clasping her hands dead tight.

She allows her head fully over the edge, feels the warm breeze in her hair.

This is good, she thinks. I'm doing this.

A voice interrupts. A touch at her shoulder. "Hey," the voice says, not with alarm but genuine curiosity, "what are you doing?"

She looks back to see Adriana. Her face is in shadow, backlit by the lamp over the penthouse door, fine black hair ninetailing in the wind.

"I don't know," Gaëlle says.

Adriana is wearing a strange expression. It flickers between somber and stoned and sweet. She leans in real close and whispers into Gaëlle's ear. "I know what you were doing."

Gaëlle's smile is uncertain.

Beyond Adriana's hip, the others are watching. Bean is rubbing his chin with two fingers. Adriana follows her gaze back, looks at them. She makes a shooing gesture with her hands.

“Let’s go for a walk.” She extends her hand. Gaëlle takes it and they descend the stairs to the street. They loop around the block several times. The neighborhood is quiet, as rich neighborhoods are, and she finds the silence oddly soothing. She has always thought she preferred noise. Adriana recites a poem, though Gaëlle couldn’t remember a verse of it if she tried. Nothing rhymes. From the street, Gaëlle can see the yellow glow of the room that holds Charles and the party each time they pass Suze’s door. Once in Holyoke, Gaëlle remembers, from an angle like this, she saw Charles and Suze or two men much like them, silhouetted by the yellow worklights of the studio where they weighed and split and bagged. The one man’s wrists were up on the other’s shoulders, and it looked as if they were face to face. Slowly, they had drifted left and right, as if to music.

She had watched the figures in the window for some long minutes from the street before she turned around and left. She’d decided, in other words, not to ever know for sure.

Adriana’s pace is smooth and straight. She enunciates words clearly. But there is still a kind of cloudiness to her cognition. At one point, she says to Gaëlle, apropos of nothing, “You never told me what happened with your brother. I told you what happened to mine.” And when Gaëlle says only “I told you about him?” Adriana nods, as if this were an answer.

They are on the stairs again when they run into Roget. She is coming down from the roof and they up from the street; they meet at Suze’s door, dance music thrumming through the wall. She is immediately shouting.

“What the fuck are you doing with her?” she asks.

“We weren’t doing anything,” Adriana says quickly. “Gaëlle just needed some air.”

“Never mind what she needed—what were you *doing with her?*” Her arms are stiff at her side, mouth set.

“Nothing, Rog,” Adriana says. Then lower, “Don’t make a scene.”

“You think I’m making a scene?” she asks. “Let me ask you—which one of us disappeared randomly *again* with some fucking breeder tonight?”

“We’re friends,” Gaëlle says. “Get over it.”

“You can stay the fuck out of this,” Roget says, pointing a stiff finger at Gaëlle’s face. “I’ve told you,” she continues, turning her body fully toward Adriana, “not to hang out with her.”

“She needed—”

“Please! Please shut up and listen. She is bad for you. Okay? You—you have a history. And I don’t care. I love you. But *she*,” still pointing at Gaëlle, “she is a fuckup alcoholic piece of fucking shit —”

“Roget, chill the fuck—” Gaëlle begins, but Roget interrupts her. “Shut the fuck up, bitch. Shut up. Shut up. *Shut up.*”

She won’t lie—there’s a part of her that enjoys seeing Roget so pissed. She can dish it but she can’t take it. But then she looks at Adriana—and her expression is one of absolute terror. It’s the look of a fox caught in a trap, horse with a broken leg. Roget is shaking. It’s the first time Gaëlle’s considered Roget doing violence, real and terrible violence. Roget steps past Gaëlle, closer to Adriana.

“And she will drag you down. I have told you and told you and told you. Why can’t you just respect my advice? Why do you have to see other women? Is it that unreasonable—”

“That isn’t it—” Adriana begins.

“This is how I am.” Roget has begun to cry, though she has not stopped screaming. She is a handsbreadth from Adriana now. “You know this. This is how I look. This is how I feel. I take care of you. I love you.”

“I love you too,” Adriana says, beginning to cry also.

“Then why don’t you respect me?” Roget shouts. “You want me to do for your brother and you don’t fucking listen to the tiniest little thing I ask you to do?”

Roget takes a deep breath, as if to vault over a gap, and absolutely screams at the top of her lungs—til the veins in her neck stand out and spit flies from her mouth—“*Just fucking listen!*”

Adriana’s back is dangerously close to the edge of the stairs. Roget is almost touching her. Gaëlle steps toward them. “Rog,” she is saying, “Enough. Okay? Let’s go smoke, slow your—”

And like that, Roget has turned on her and brought the back of her knuckles across her face. Gaëlle can hear the thud of their bones colliding inside her skull. The room spins, and she is on the ground. Instantly, the pain in her face has magnified tenfold. Roget is shouting. Adriana is cringing, her hands raised, lips mouthing wordless explanations.

Gaëlle shoves the stairs away from herself and grabs Roget by the shoulders. The two of them go down. They struggle on the floor for a moment, come to a stop by slamming into Suze’s door with a dull thud that seems to echo. Roget’s arms bear down heavily on her. Adriana is pulling

at her collar. Gaëlle can see the fabric band cutting into Roget's neck. Then her forearms with their tattooed sleeves are blurring into washes of color as she punches Gaëlle over and over. Gaëlle's face feels tingly and wet. Roget pauses to shrug off Adriana and Gaëlle sits up hard, slamming the crown of her head up into the other woman's mouth. This staggers her; everyone is screaming. Then back to hitting. As she rolls onto one side, away from Roget, Gaëlle sees pairs of shoes in the open doorway. Music is pouring out. Then pairs of hands are on them, laughter and stunned murmurs and catcalls, and at last Charles' face appears overhead, black as sleep, joining the others, his arms locked under Roget's to pull her away, even as he stares unblinkingly at Gaëlle.

From the look on Suze's face when they bring her in, Gaëlle expects him to start cracking jokes, but he doesn't say anything. Half the party is on the roof now. The strangers are still in the apartment, but their looks are inscrutable to her. They step out of the way, but do nothing to help her. They put her in the spare bedroom with some bags of ice and a couple dishrags. She flops down on the bed, larger and softer than her own, and stares at the ceiling, waiting for the room to stop its spinning. She pries her teeth gently between thumb and forefinger and finds nothing loose. She casts around hopelessly for painkillers of any description. She doesn't see any pill bottles. Getting up seems inadvisable. She wonders where they took Adriana. And Roget. That was some fucked up controlling shit back there, she thinks. Get that girl some trust falls, stat.

And what happened to her, anyway, to make her so? Smothered her previous relationships, probably—cheated, now jealous as all fuck. Adriana’s easiness makes her feel inadequate, no doubt.

Outside the window, someone leans on their horn.

It doesn’t matter. It isn’t right. Roget needs to deal with her shit, not lay it on them. They are friends now, and Charles and Roget and Suze and whoever else will just have to deal with it.

After half an hour or so, Bean tiptoes in. He looks at her head cocked, curious. When near the bed, he withdraws a baggie full of green and the glass piece from his jacket pocket. “Kush,” he says. “Not as good as the hydroponic, but—” He shrugs.

Gaëlle pours out half the baggie onto the bedside table, then hands it back. “Give the rest to Adriana,” she says. “She okay?”

“Fine.” Bean doesn’t say anything for a moment. He reminds her of a bird, looking left then right, all agile-bright-eyed. He looks at her now, voice soft and low, “Did you decide if you’re coming back?”

“To work for Suze?” she asks, packing the bowl.

He nods.

“He hasn’t asked me,” she says.

Bean blinks at her. “Hasn’t talked to you about anything?”

“Nope.”

A pause.

“Well, I’ll ask Charles,” Bean says, expression puzzled.

“I don’t care if I’m in,” she says, unsure if she’s lying.

She asks him for a light. Bean’s expression softens. He leans in, lighting her. “Mother used to say—better half a loaf than none.”

“I’ll remember that.”

Everyone always telling her about their fucking mothers.

After Bean leaves, she dozes off for awhile. When she wakes, the sky is the deep bluish black of a crow’s oiled feathers, and the music in the other room has turned softer, older. It takes her several seconds to notice Suze in the gloom. He is sitting silently in one corner of the room, hands clasped in front of his bearded face, watching her. When he turns his head, his glasses flash.

“Charles tells me you’ve been making trouble,” he says softly. “I love it when you make trouble.”

She leans up onto her elbows. Her head is pounding. “What time is it?”

“It’s part of the kaleidoscope of dysfunction that is your life,” he continues. “You’re such a mess.” He clucks fondly. “The one who says what everyone else is thinking. No filter. That’s a compliment. It’s what we love about you.”

“What time—”

“After curfew,” he says, raising his eyebrows. “And much as you do need to learn,” he cranks and invisible dial in the air with his fingers, “to modulate, we can face it—Roget is easy to drive up the wall. That’s *her* dysfunction.”

He hums softly to himself for a moment, some fragment of melody. “People think it’s is bad, dysfunction. It’s not bad. Flaws are what give us dispositions. Dispositions allow us to judge people, make allies, do business. I mean,” he chuckles, “without flaws, we’d be out of work. Everyone would.”

She lets out a noisy sigh, lying back on the bed. “Where’s Charles?” she asks the ceiling. “Did he leave already?”

Despite herself, she is anxious what his reaction will be to the fight.

“Gully, the world is changing,” Suze says, softer now. “The flaws are growing bigger. The gaps between them wider too. It’s easy to fall in. That’s what all this is.”

Despite herself, she cranes her neck to look at him. He is leaned forward, forearms resting on his knees, one arm outcast to encompass the whole city.

“You understand? Do you remember what I said on the night I left?”

Which part, she thinks.

“Everyone knows their place. We’ve memorized our lines and blocking. This city—the whole nation, probably—its dysfunctions have metastasized.” He studies her face in the dark, frown turning slowly into a grin. “Sorry—have *become fixed*.”

You think I’m so stupid, she thinks. But I know what you’re building up to.

“You’re sick,” he says. This comes out of his mouth with utter gravity, even sympathy—no mocking smile, no disdainful bow of the head. “And you’re one of us—our set. That means

something. The situation's getting biblical around here—you know it, I know it. Even the politicians know it. That's why they closed the bridges." He shakes his head, rubs his eyes.

"But you drew a winning lotto number, Gullybird. You met me before the world took a nosedive."

That million dollar smile.

"Right place, right time. And I'm telling you, I've come home with a bombshell in my pocket."

He's always wanted you, Charles had said. All she can think to do to show her feelings for what Suze is saying is to wipe the sticky wetness off her face with his soap-smelling bedsheets. They come away smeared with blood.

"Beautiful," he says, bursting into strange, high-pitched laughter. "Lovely. Great."

Not the reaction she was hoping for.

He seems to echo off the walls, to illuminate the room with sound.

Is she out of her mind? Did she jump off the roof after all? Perhaps she never came to the party and she is shitfaced in bed, dreaming all this.

Suze reaches into his pocket and brings out a glass vial the size of a shotgun shell. He tosses it to her. She holds it up to the light; it's half-filled with translucent flakes, like tiny slivers of mineral bread shaved from some loaf of gemstone. They have thickness, but only a little. Their color to her suggests opal, her birthstone and that of her father, but they're clouded and smoky, and

if she squints she can almost see pictures in them: topaz and salmon and pink forming continents and faces, blood and oceans. The vial is much heavier than it should be. It hefts like a brick.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Glass.”

When she asks if that means meth, he laughs in her face. “Not even slightly. This is totally fresh, totally outworld, abi.”

He picked that “abi” up from Charles, who says it sometimes when he gets caught up. Suze goes on to say it isn’t even called glass—she could *pronounce* its name if he told her. She doesn’t believe this, but there’s no sense in telling Suze. It will only cause him to talk more.

“Did you give it to Roget?” she asks, thinking of Adriana’s equilibrium.

“Bean, Roget, Charles, T & H, Bacon, Frake, the runners—the whole lot of them.” He winks. She tries to think what this means, that he kept her for last. Then she tries not to think.

She asks him to tell them what they said it was like, but he can’t or won’t explain. She knows Charles is one of those people who can just “try” shit and say it was good. Gaëlle doesn’t try shit, she only does it for a first time.

Turning the shell in her palm, she asks him what she should expect.

He says, “Expect nothing; everyone’s different, Gullybird, each our own special snowflake, now get on with it! Lick your finger, stick a jot, and put on your eye.”

“On my eye?”

“On your little brown eyeball. Like a contact lens.”

She looks at his face. He looks hungry. Like a fire full of crumpled black paper.

She keeps that vial in her pocket overnight, through the morning, all the way back to her apartment, far and away from Suze and Roget and Charles and all the rest of them. She makes sure she's alone, door locked, curtains drawn. Then she unscrews the cap, tilts the vial over her palm, and tenders the jot between thumb and forefinger, its weight like a pellet of lead. When she sticks it to her wet fingertip, her prints show through its translucency and suggest new shapes. She puts the opal in her eye, and the pain that has hung from her body like a heavy amulet is gone in an instant. She almost forgot what pleasure was like, but it must be this; the homing of this medicine into the grooves of her blood, a certain pearling click or hot and gentle separation like the coring of an apple will become her and she couldn't talk for the sound behind her eyes.

Where does she go when she can go anywhere without going anywhere? To little brother, of course—back to Ray Beach. She knows the way things are known in dreams that she can see him and he can't see her, something like that. It's the best version of them: separate-together. She firmly believes life has no winners, only an order of losers. She would never say she's been worried for him. But she still wants what she's always wanted for him: not to be last place loser. The kid who feared spiders and mice, who slept at the foot of her bed when he was small. Who father once said "should have

been someone else's daughter" even as he insisted he loved him. Esha. She doesn't want this city to kill her little brother. She doesn't even need to consider anywhere else.

It isn't like flying. It's like transubstantiation. With her eyes closed, she closes her eyes. And she's there. As a ghost in every object in the house, filled with tingling, every part of her contracting. She's the water in a pitcher, the glow in a lightbulb. She sees him, like she saw him from the patio but closer. Count the hairs on his cheekbones.

He's standing in uncle's living room, hands on his hips. All around him is the detritus of their aunt and uncle's life together, too detailed to be etched from memory: whittled napkin rings, ottomans, trivots, and divan; Quaker dining chairs with spokes plucked from their backs, the walls of the living room lined with books they were never permitted to touch as children. Art books and novels and machine learning textbooks, aging Bauhaus posters ardent with platonic shapes, and lithograph prints stacked on the bay windowseat like firewood. Intricate jade figurines and scrimshaw letter-openers, discourses on urban planning laced with diagrams of cities Gaëlle has never seen. And through it all, a tensivity, some tiny, deafening panic that seems to have begun at the edges and expanded inward, crystalline, to engulf the entire volume of the house. It vibrates, arriving in the form of social disorganization: passwords, numbers and dates jotted down by their aunt, Susan, onto index cards and post-its, shortly thereafter forgotten or misplaced, unpaired slippers, pages torn out of the address book, circular promotions and invitations dusted in tread marks, unreturned library books, desiccated houseplants, the proliferation of photographs of family members unrecognized, absent, or dead. There are pictures of Elliott and Susan everywhere

(naturally), some in which they are young and smiling, others in which they are the age that she associates with them now, gray-age, hands linked and backed by brilliant autumn foliage.

There's a photograph on the piano that has Esha and Gaëlle's mother arm-in-arm with Elliott and Susan, crossing a night-lit city street. They are so young. There's another picture of his Elliott's parents, their grandparents, slicing their wedding cake. As if on some unknown intuition, Esha stops what he's doing and moves to examine it too. He cradles it against his chest as she watches, gazing down into it. She looks at him looking at it. Her grandmother's dress looks homemade, the pose self-aware and struck for the camera. No one in the photograph wears a camera of their own. It was that long ago.

The next time she sees Suze, his grin is voracious. He can see how fucked up his shit got her. He can see that she's in it to the hip already. She hates he can see this. She hates she liked it as much as she did. But there isn't any denying it.

"Hot shit," he says. "Supernatural shit, right?"

"Supernatural shit," she agrees without really thinking about it.

When she sees Charles a few days later, he expresses his disappointment at her confrontation with Roget in a way that makes her feel as if he is standing in the doorway of her life, bag packed and slung under one long fine knotted arm, ready to depart. If he wears disappointment, it's a muted variety. Gaëlle wants to explain, to argue with him: Adriana is her

own person; Roget needs to give her space. But infuriatingly, he talks only of little things—the radio, the price of beef—until she can't keep her feelings from her mouth. She yells and swears at him, accuses him of favoring Roget and Suze, of using and discarding her, of shunning her due to her disease.

“I do not fear you and I will not avoid you,” he says to that. “None of us is going anywhere. This is the beginning. As to Suze, you should know by now that I believe in him; if not in all of it, then enough to make it float. That does not exclude you. What he thinks we are doing and what I think we are doing—these can be different; you as well. But for me, I think we must move forward and see what we can accomplish.”

She is so angry with him she cannot speak. This far-off gaze of his can't see what's in front of him. “Just leave,” she tells him.

The day of his visit is a very beautiful fall day, crisp and cool and blue. Sirens sound almost hourly, like church bells. Drone aircraft circle First and Second, above a thin horizon. And when she locks the door behind him and opens the window, she sticks her head out into the air and the odors of fried dough mingle with the butcher's leavings in the alley, and all desire to better herself seems to leave her in an instant.

All the effort of the summer, all the hours spent wondering—sitting next to him, witnessing the fluctuations of his mood, his politics, his father's health concerns and sister's outcast money problems—it has come to nothing.

In the coming weeks, there are more parties, more meets, more introductions and rendezvous. Suze revives friendships and contacts, people who know people who want to get high, people who know people in law enforcement, customs, pushing, smuggling. Charles handles numbers, books, phones, meets, protocol, and other pragmatics. New hires are made to run. Suze says and Charles devises; Suze contacts and Charles enlists, etc, etc. A great mind in the service of a great mouth. Gaëlle helps out when she is asked. She tries to avoid Suze, but that's not the way things work. He makes certain otherwise. None of them, it seems, has been so changed by the end of the world. Their roles keep in tact, slow-motion self-destructing; shift the window dressings.

Adriana reaches out by text erratically, obscure fragments and vague allusions—a stanza before daybreak, a still from a film capped in the blurry dim of her apartment after dark, a cryptic caption. Always it seems as though she's running from something, a thing she at once fears and is in consumed by, a thing which Gaëlle recognizes from her own life. And this is the shared truth that differentiates Adriana from the men Gaëlle still meets in shops and bars, from the strangers she sometimes gets wasted or high with in bathrooms or parking garages, the anxious couples living on the lower floors, always discussing the weather—that despite all her noise and obscurity, that rich girl affect she can't shake, Adriana, like Gaëlle, lives in the shadow of her pleasures, the ease with which decisions can be taken, the slow terror of something bright and furious, sweet and bitter.

On the news, things change bit by bit: a tighter, smaller, harder city, sewn up like a pocket. Gaëlle watches people feed their bus fare into the machine with mangled fingers, look away from one another's bruises. SafeWatch doesn't end at two weeks in the slightest. If anything, it becomes

itself even more. More PSAs, more updates, more rules, and no shit but people are angry and panicked. “Actions” erupt, little skirmishes the police dissuade easily, and small pockets of riot and violence they quiet unquietly with tear gas and flashbangs.

There are good moments too, of course—police who come around in their uniform blues to play wallball with neighborhood kids, a rookie who drapes a naked woman he found wandering on Bale Street downtown in his academy jacket and helps her find her family. There are the two brothers that EMTs pull from the river still living, slick and squirming like fishbait. There are new rituals. Watching the container ships bowl into the harbor. The Friday rush to the bars when the two biggest shipments of beer come in through lockdown from the Port side and it seems, for a few hours, like the whole city is drunk and happy and free together.

More cameras are appear, thick as dandelions in June: in alleyways and bus shelters, cankers on the lips of parapets, behind doors, hooded under soffits. You might expect to find one tangled in your hair like an insect. Their lidless glass eyes are inch-thick, self-cleaning, impervious to weather and sabotage. Cases of hardened steel protect their microphones.

Above it all, her afternoon jaunts and beer runs and errands for Suze, the drones glint silver by eyeblink intervals, banking in wide lazy loops. People in the neighborhood start to call them “creeps”, as if they are some lurker at a party. A rumor circulates of them swarming in hundreds-thick clouds at the edge of the city, like crows to carrion, way way out over the barrier islands, but Gaëlle doesn’t believe, and what’s more, it doesn’t matter.

They begin selling Glass.

It's different than weed. For one, there's less regulars, a lot less delivery. It's more person-to-person. Strangers in the leeways of buildings, men and women in their cars. It's someone knows someone who needs a little bump. Word gets around that it seems to take the edge off the sickness like nothing else. People always ask if it really has to go in their eye.

Suze gets some art school dropout friend living in Mill Barrens to fashion them some flash packaging. The label looks like a holographic baseball card. She trades in cuts of her take-home each week for what they've begun to call *paqs*. Not her proudest decision, but the grace of the high is worth it.

Suze wouldn't allow it for anyone else. Normally he insists his people stay clean. That he lets her buy from him makes her skin crawl. But it is what it is: she still feels like the same week-old dogshit every morning, and Glass fixes her—more than booze ever did. She begins to drink less.

Suze's only condition is that she kif one jot in front of him—right then. He wants to watch. Don't think about it, she thinks. Initially she declines, but in time she agrees. There's no other source. Wherever Suze gets it, however it's made, nobody has Glass but him. Don't think about it. Pain does what it does. It makes you say yes.

“And remember,” he'll say, lifting the vials from his floor safe, “I want you to be Gaëlle—we all *love* Gaëlle, but you've got to be *good* Gaëlle. Don't pick fights for no reason. Stay amiable with your *coworkers*. Don't get *stuck* on things. Oh, Gully, It's not good for someone so fucked up to be so prideful.”

She deals with everything the same: The morning comes first, then the afternoon, then night. One corner, one paq, one drink, one mirror, one sight at a time. She drinks less. She's pretty certain. Not just because she's kiffing now. The price of alcohol is rising too. State can't bring enough of that legal shit through its own quarantine to sate all the drunks in this city.

More business for them.

Do you need some relief?

Are you struggling in the big city? Has the election got you down? Housing market?

Terrorism? You look sick as a dog.

Are you manic, lonely, nauseated, run-down, aging, thunderstruck, infected, or shot? Is your heart in your chest? Is it beating?

Are you, in other words, still here?

Say yes.

Glass.