

WEST ORANGE

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West Orange

By

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Abstract

My thesis has two components: the first contains six pieces of fiction and, the second, a brief critical essay.

West Orange is a collection of short stories, and while each of these stories contain individual themes and different characters and situations, they are meant to be considered as a thematic whole. “Before the Ambulance Arrives” is the story of an accident. “Remains” is a ghost story that is told without characters and without ghosts. “God” is a story about a story and concerns the way in which things can get lost, while “West Orange” is a story about something that is found on a beach. Finally, “The Seven Princesses” is a story about trying to tell a story in another land.

In the essay, entitled *Shades of West Orange*, I attempt to explain some of the ideas that went into the writing of the stories and focus one of the wider themes therein. It can be viewed, therefore, as another type of ghost story.

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Before the Ambulance Arrives

“In through your nose and out through your mouth. Relax buddy, relax. No, no, no, through your nose. In through your nose and out through your mouth. Try to relax. In through your nose and out your mouth.”

“Gnnuuuh...pfffffffffffff...Gnnuuuhh.....pfffffffff...”

“In through your nose and out your mouth. Justin. Justin! Come on, buddy. Come on. This is Mark, try to listen, okay? Breathe in through your nose and out your mouth. That’s it. Again, come on. Laura, get a towel please. Did you get through?”

She nods, her eyes are as round as coins and she sucks her lips in so that her mouth is just a soft slit, she stands there wringing her hands together against her belly, twisting cotton, until Mark speaks again, firmly, enunciating each word, holding the back of Justin’s head gingerly in a red palm:

“Laura, can you *please* get me a towel please?”

Laura turns and wallops up the patio steps in bare feet and, sliding aside the patio door, she leaps into the living room, leaving her hair band clattering on the deck behind her. Jon stands there completely bewildered. He watches her for a second without actually registering anything, lost in a moment of no-thought, and then quickly comes back to himself, and from where he’s standing he’s left looking through the strange landscape that’s reflected on the overlapping glass of the two patio doors which gives a stuttered double-image of clouds and trees that’s off-putting in the same way a 3-D movie is if you aren’t wearing the glasses; and then, all of a sudden, in the glittery gloom beyond it, he registers Laura moving inside but

he can't see her arms or legs or head, just an abstract blob of the white and pink of her shorts and tank top jerking around in the glass sky, shrinking toward the stairs, which he also can't see but he knows she's reached them when the shape begins to rise and then is sheared off by the upper moulding of the door and disappears. Then he notices himself looking at himself, superimposed on this loopy landscape which begins to make him feel a little bit off balance, and so he turns back toward Mark, who is speaking in a lifeguard's voice, hunchbacked over Justin whose eyes are jittering and jumping up into his eyelids and then down again, over and over, like a sluggish slot machine. Mark is bouncing nervously on his haunches to the rhythm of his own voice, "in through your nose and out your mouth..." which gradually, the more he repeats it, begins to sound like a skip-rope chant. On the grass, Justin makes a sound that sounds too much like an animal, too thick and guttural to be a person, like a cow or some other big creature in mindless pain, and the sound is so strange that Jon feels a big absent space suddenly yawn open in his belly. He lifts his head up and tries to focus on the actual clouds, which are hanging in heavy bulbous bergs over their heads, and he breathes in deeply through his nose, trying to close up that space again and get his head back, but the clouds are moving and so he closes his eyes, inhales, turns his head back down, opens them up again, tries to feel brave and takes a couple of steps towards them, wanting to help or do something, but his steps are floppy and feeble and he stops.

Justin's arm makes a quick, limp-wristed spasm and hangs for a moment, grazes Mark's bare knee and then comes back down to meet its own shadow on the grass: "gnnughh shhhhhhhhhh gnugh."

Jon tries to swallow with absolutely no saliva and find his voice and then he asks Mark's back: "What happened?" because he hadn't seen it happen, whatever it was. Mark doesn't answer because Justin's eyes roll and he groans and his eyebrows stretch up on his forehead, which is beaded with sweat, and Jon contrasts this with the Justin of just an hour or so ago who, suppressing a grin, made a funny expression with his eyebrows while Laura was up on the ladder, and as she strained up to reach the kite caught in the branches of the big maple, her shorts were so short that they both could see the bottom curves of her behind, smooth slopes peeking out below the cuffs as she reached, and while they held the ladder steady from the ground, Justin had looked at Jon and raised his eyebrows up and down and breathed out slightly in an almost silent *hoo*!

"I can't reach it," she'd said.

"We've got you down here. You're good. Grab that branch just up to your right. Put your foot on the bump just down there. Next to your right hip," Justin said. "We'll catch you if you fall. Go for it. no worries."

Jon steadied the joggle of the ladder with both hands and then he tried to look up at her without looking like he was trying to, and then he thought to shift around and see where Mark was, but his back was turned; he was holding clumsy pieces of shelving at arms length, and peering at the instructions. When he turned back Justin was smiling at him; he'd caught Jon's little burst of paranoia and made a dismissive *pshaw* gesture with his hand in Mark's direction and smiled, and Jon felt funny about it but returned the eyebrow motion and gazed up again but he couldn't see how the kite situation was working out, and he kept looking up

because he didn't want to catch Justin's eye again. He flexed his fingers on the ladder. He didn't like this feeling that had suddenly thinned out the air here. Earlier, Jon had seen Mark, sitting on the grass, watching Justin and Laura make the kite, quiet, with a hard to read expression. They hadn't seen him but Jon had, and now he felt uncomfortable, feeling unspoken tension that he wasn't even sure was there and, even while he doubted himself, he had already started to anticipate more.

Finally, the ladder bucked and she pulled the funny-looking kite out of the branches with a *ta da* and a satisfied smile and then bobbed one-handed down the ladder to the grass.

"Good work." Justin said, taking the kite which had a couple of small rips in it now, "wounded but still air-worthy, I think."

"I think I'll take that as a sign," she said. She lifted the kite towards them and waggled it, offering, but they both shook their heads. She swiped a fly from Justin's shoulder and walked over to Mark.

Justin slapped Jon on the arm:

"Help me with the B-B-Q," he said.

They walked to the garage and rolled a huge Cadillac of a barbeque into the sun.

"We'll wait until it gets a little cooler and then it'll be time for steaks and beer. What do you say?"

Jon nodded: "I think I'll have a run before I fill up my gut, alright?"

"Go to it."

Justin started back around the house and Jon bent to retie his sneakers, glad

to be alone, and then he stretched--calves, IT band, hamstrings--and jogged his way over the crackle of crushed stone which stopped as he left the driveway and hit pavement and was replaced with the familiar rhythmic slap he was used to. It was quiet out here. Justin's folks were in some sandy place on the other side of the planet, and Justin was left to live beyond his means for a year, escaping rent cheques while they taught verb conjugations to businessmen in long white robes.

He watched the trees and telephone poles joggle by and tried to clear his mind, but the little nagging pull on his attention was still there. The vibe that he thought he'd sensed at the house stuck to him like the metallic smell of the ladder stuck to his hands which he could smell as he wiped away a trickle of sweat from the end of his nose. He thought of it initially as a nameless little cloud of stress hanging in the air and then couldn't help but think that maybe its name was *Laura*; but this was confusing to him. He tried to re-enact Justin's hand gesture--*pshaw*--in his head again and again: did it mean *forget about that guy* or was it *stop worrying, we're all friends here*. The first was not really the kind of thing Justin would say, the second was more likely, if only because he was being told not to worry; and this was something that he was told often enough that he had recently started to see a little bit of how he must look to other people. Jon had never sensed anything between the guys before. Justin and Laura had dated years ago, Mark and Laura had been together for years but Justin's copping a look and the unconcerned wave had changed the tenor of the day somehow. Jon wondered if the tense energy he felt from Mark was manufactured from his own anxiety.

He had a moment of being irritated with himself for worrying about

something which he had no stake in either way. He'd never dated Laura--and it was this thought which pricked at his head for a little bit, making him feel excluded, not in the same league--although it wasn't as if he had ever had the opportunity, he had met her *through* Mark, but for some reason this fact didn't make it sting any less right this second. He thought of Justin from just minutes before, tanned and strong and then he was replaced by Mark, an athlete who, you could tell just by looking at him, was very obviously an athlete; and then the memory of Justin's pectorals washed up against the sight of his own forearms pumping in front of him--his skinny wrists--and it sent a little spasm of envy through him that he didn't want to acknowledge as jealousy and--to get away from it--he ran faster.

He'd gone to the doctor several years ago, and as he'd left the office he'd looked at the x-ray requisition, a little slip of paper marked up with almost illegible handwriting, the scratches and valleys of a heartbeat monitor, but he'd picked out what it said: *lateral chest film, 24 year old ectomorph, complaining of chest pains*. He'd had to look up the word--*ectomorph*--he'd never heard the term before--and since then he's not only remembered the word but, for some reason, that whole phrase. The dictionary had turned it into a sentence: *A person with a lean build of body, thought likely to be an introvert*. It had stamped him into a lean mould; he was disqualified from the world of the mesomorphs--like Justin or Mark--not to mention that it pointed out the introversion to boot--his muscle mass limited by spindly bones, and all the weights and meals of peanut butter and egg yolks would do nothing, and so here he was, cultivating a runner's build. He pictured Laura standing on the grass with Justin and Mark, each holding one of her arms,

exaggerated 'smouldering' looks on their faces, the cover of a romance novel. Her looking 'stricken' or something--'torn'. He pictured her in a huge red dress but, for some reason, the guys still looked like they had ten minutes ago. He pictured Justin's parents' place flaming behind them like a southern plantation, burned up by a sequence of events that was somehow ignited by those looks.

Finally he turned around and clopped back toward the house, the change in direction turning the unfamiliar road into a new one and he ran until he hit the crunch of stone again and walked to the outdoor tap and turned on a stream of crystal water, held his mouth to it and took big, thumping gulps. He heard Mark calling Laura's name, then a second time, and then there was the quick rising and falling of her scream in the air and then just birds. He whipped around towards the sound and felt adrenalin inflate his whole body as he saw the kite drift away, up and out over the trees, trailing a hundred feet of string, the spool dragging across the grass.

He ran around the house and when he turned the corner he could see Laura on her tiptoes with her hands over her mouth and Mark hunching and the pale bottoms of Justin's sneakers, which were clotted with cut grass. He ran up clumsily, trying to take in this weird, new tableau: Mark yelled for Laura to call 9-1-1 and she ran around the side of the house where Jon had just come from and disappeared around the corner, toward the garage, the closest phone. Everything stretched out like a rubber band, just waiting to snap back and sting them all. Mark chattered away to Justin, who lolled and sucked air, and there is the litany of Mark's voice, smooth and comforting and nervous, and then Laura came back saying she'd

gotten the ambulance. Mark talked to her in the same voice, in the same soothing rhythm he uses on Justin, questioning, telling, but then he turned and snapped:

“Laura, can you *please* get me a towel, please?”

Jon watches her thump and clatter into the house--a blob of pink and white in the glass--and she shrinks, rises and disappears; he tries his best to collect himself, and it doesn't go well, but he steps forward anyway: “What happened?” he says.

Mark doesn't answer and Jon has a quick memory of Justin's face after getting a look at Laura's ass in the tree and he takes a few shaky steps forward and says again: “Mark, what the fuck *happened*?”

“I can't... Come on buddy, don't go away... *There* you are... Jon, I can't right now. Just hold on,” he says, and Jon can't tell whether he is speaking to him or to Justin.

Jon runs his hand through sweaty hair. The waxy grey of Justin's skin, the blood, the slurping struggle to breathe, it takes the breath out of him. It hits him with an uncomfortable sense memory of voices and numbness, of the time he'd had the wind knocked out of him on a playground by the stony head of another child and the complete mindless glut of sensation he had felt as he had winged in and out of consciousness and he starts to feel it again now a little bit. All of a sudden he realizes that he's following Mark's instructions and breathing from nose to mouth and, as he realizes this, he begins to get more and more aware of the process of his own breathing, to the point where it seems like it's no longer involuntary and that it won't happen if he doesn't concentrate. He's never noticed the *weight* of his own

ribcage before. As Mark leans over Justin saying “it’s okay, it’s okay,” Jon sees himself lying in a hospital bed at the end of his life, bewildered, almost lost to himself, while people speak in trembling voices that try to sound soothing, saying things like “it’s okay. You can let go now.” He’s heard that phrase spoken aloud once before and in spite of the sun his skin raises up in bumps.

Justin’s blood looks like chocolate, shining on the blades of grass. Jon hears a thumping sound and a breathy *fuck* from the open patio door, turns and sees the pink and white shape thickening up again in the glass, this time with the white blob of the towel floating next to it. He hooks his arm in a come-on-come-on gesture, which Laura sees through the glass and feels her whole body prickle and a quick gushing rush in the corners of her eyes, and she hops back out into sunlight, the heat and light and cut-grass smell overwhelming her as if someone has just up-ended a large bucket of summer over her head, and she thumps down the steps holding the towel in a tight fist, her arm perfectly straight and rigid out in front of her. She can’t see Justin’s head because Mark’s back is cutting off her sight line, only Justin’s legs looking so white, which, five minutes ago had looked so lovely and tanned. She wheels around and kneels on the other side, across from Mark at Justin’s other arm, and she’s startled by the waxy yellow-green pallor of Justin’s face and lets out a frightened little moan. Mark takes the towel from her and slips his slick right hand out from under Justin’s head, while quickly slipping the hand with the towel underneath; Justin’s head lolls dumbly on Mark’s fingers and then rests down on the clean whiteness of the towel which begins slowly to creep red. Mark looks up at her and says: “You got through,” not a question but said as if to

remind himself that she had done it, or to confirm it to himself, speaking in a voice that she can tell is already looking ahead, and that only now is he starting to allow himself to give over to the possibility that relief is actually going to come. Mark's shadow falls across Justin's chest and it flattens out the detail, so that to Laura it looks like Justin's chest isn't moving, that his t-shirt is not going up and down, but then Justin makes another braying suck and thumps an arm against the grass again and Mark places his hands gently on Justin's shoulders and tries to hold him still, now almost cooing "*hey hey hey cool it kid, you're gonna be okay.*"

Over Mark's head Laura sees Jon sit down suddenly and heavily on the grass and put his head between his knees, breathing hard. She gently lays a hand on Justin's forehead: cold. Mark says *careful* and she hauls it away as if she's been burned. She looks at his legs again, which are just as white as his face and reaches down and starts to rub little circles on his right one, as if she can rub colour back into at least that one spot, to get rid of that unnatural paleness or provide just a little more sensation to help him back to consciousness; she feels the brittle hair on his thigh crinkle and scrape her palm. She almost expects to see that one little patch that she's rubbing to turn back to normal under each swipe of her hand and come clear and back to flesh colour like wiping away condensation on a window, but it doesn't--although the skin of his legs, in the sun, is warmer than that of his pale forehead, though not by much, and is therefore a little less disturbing. Laura sees something in Justin's hand and tries to open it, but has to peel his fingers back with her own, and she plucks out a little scrap of plastic, and then his fingers curl back rigidly, slow in the same motion as a flower wilting in time-lapse and she thinks of

the way his fingers had worked so smoothly as they put the kite together and now she reaches down and squeezes the tips of his index and middle finger with her own fingers and she can feel the stiffness in them, they were cold too. He'd accidentally pinched the knuckle on her finger as she'd held the X of the ribs of the kite together with her forefinger while he tied them together with string. He'd jerked his head slightly when he'd wanted her to lift her finger away and pulled the last knot tight. They'd done the whole thing quickly, but they'd done it before and, between them, knew the ins and outs of making a successful kite.

They'd bought balsa wood at a model shop and the cheapest plastic they could find--it was a dark red, almost black, and with strange blood-coloured paisley shapes printed on it. Justin took a pair of pointy pliers which looked like the beak of some unusual bird and snipped the ends off with a crunch; he stood up and then he held it out at arm's length:

"It looks a bit like a Satanist's kite, but I'd say it'll fly like an angel."

"Did you just think of that now, or were you holding on to it?"

"Saving it up," he said and nodded his head. "Hold this" and he passed her the spool and ran across the grass toward the spot where Mark lazed on the grass with his legs out and she waved at him but then Justin tossed the kite into the air and it wheeled around and crashed. He threw it again: bash. And then again, and Justin yelled "pull!," and this time she walked backward and the spool pulled in her hands, alive, like she'd just caught a fish on a line; she tugged hard and then she let the string play out between her fingers and it rose. As it climbed, the string burned her index finger so she shuffled her hands to the ends of the spool, let out string and

pulled it down, let it out and pulled down; the kite dived left, right and back again, then it bobbed up and up and up until it hit the breeze where it calmed itself, its motion slowing and then it just floated.

“Lift-off,” Justin said and then he walked over to Mark and sat down next to him.

Up high, she could see the plastic trembling on the frame but it was far enough away that she couldn't hear it. The tail slinked around like an underwater plant in an aquarium. She hoped that she never grew old enough that she didn't enjoy making and flying a kite, but she wondered how you make this a lifelong hobby if you didn't want children. She wondered if people would look strangely at a fifty year old flying a kite by herself. Mark probably wouldn't get involved; maybe he would take up golf like his father, or maybe he would still be swimming. She glanced down at Justin and Mark talking on the grass for a second, sitting there, their postures almost identical, but Justin laughed and Mark didn't--the laughing mask and the frowning mask. She thought about the night before when they'd had a stupid fight, spurred into something bigger than it was by their mutual bad moods rather than any actual problem. Mark had burned dinner and he thought, when she didn't say anything, that she was angry somehow and he snapped at her, defensive, and then she snapped back and then off they went--but it didn't last long. Justin had phoned to invite them out and the thought of some fun in the sun deflated the whole thing. Although Mark, today, was quiet. The little line in his forehead was there, she could even see it now from 30 feet away, and even when she looked up at the kite, that little wrinkle hung there in the sky like the glob of light that a camera

flash leaves on your vision--but not really, she was just imagining it. And it was such a beautiful day.

After a long stretch of quiet where she thought of nothing but kite-flying, Mark stood up and left Justin. He walked by and she asked him if he wanted to try the kite, knowing already that he probably didn't. He said no. His loss. She'd thought of something to say only after he'd gone by, far enough that the spontaneity was stretched too thin and she was afraid if she said it now it might come across as huffy--which wasn't how she felt. She watched the strange plastic of the kite light up with the sun and its pattern disappeared into a solid colour. Looking up the length of the string, with such a distance between the ground and the kite, the perspective made her feel a little dizzy. The gap between ground and kite fooled her brain into the illusion of being up on a big height. She started to wind it back down a little but it lost the wind and it banked very wide to the left and then sharp to the right, nose down, and she started to run backward, pulling, trying to keep it straight but it pivoted on the string and she watched it with a wince and an "aahhhhhh" as it slashed into the leaves of a big tree like a blade.

"Shit."

As Justin lifted a ladder down from the back garden, he looked at Jon and said: "I've had to do *this* before." She stuck her tongue out at him. Justin patted the top of the ladder against the tree, looking for something solid and then he swept his hand: *after you*. She climbed up and reached into the shadows of the tree, as deeply as she dared, and felt the scratches and caresses of little sharp branches and soft leaves, trying to reach the string to tug, but it was hooked taut in several places

making a crazy zigzag, up down to the side, ending at the kite which hung limp on a branch and bobbled, *comme ci comme ca*, like a butterfly. *I can't reach it*, she said and then Justin pointed out a big dull fist of a bump that she could step on and she planted a foot and leaned and grabbed the colourful tail, pulled the kite to her and moved it back and forth, unlacing the string crook by crook. She leaned out and mimed a flourish like a magician's assistant and then stepped her way back down the ladder.

"I think I'll take that as a sign," she said. She held it out: *either of you guys want a go?* They smiled and shook their heads. There was a housefly on Justin's shoulder and she slapped it away and turned from them, walked over to Mark and said, in a little girl's voice:

"*Whatcha doin'?*"

"I'm trying to get the head to go back on this hammer. How's the kite?"

She held it out, appraising the damage.

"It'll live to fly another day, but I'm taking it as a sign. I think the kite's life depends on it."

"Mind if I have a go?"

"Oh! I thought it was '*mindless*.'"

"--I also said '*fun*' didn't I?"

"Right. I was going to say: 'this from a fella who's spent huge hunks of his life swimming *baaack* and forth in pool.'"

"But that's a sport. A test of the body. Discipline."

"Right."

She laid the kite beside the wood horse and pecked him on the cheek:

"I'm going to bask for a bit. Off to the muddy banks, I go...off to the paa-tee-ooo."

She padded up and onto the patio, laid her yoga mat out and gave it a roll with her big toe and it uncurled with a slap, and she then lay down with a little sigh. In the brightness of the sun she could see the little floaters in her eyes: translucent little strings roll and twist, one looked like a little man falling, another like a worm; they jerked and rolled against the sky with the same motion as the kite, moving with the movement of her eyes and then disappeared into black when she laid her t-shirt over her face. She rocked her shoulder blades to flatten her back against the warmth of the deck and then hooked a finger under the cuff of her shorts where they're bunched to straighten them out. In the dark, the sound of everything stuck out a little clearer. When she doesn't pay attention, Justin and Mark's voices are just there: sound. And then, before she knows it, she's gone.

It only feels like a second. Somewhere she hears her name and everything swoops back to her, and there is the sound of something like a buzzer or a donkey and then the wet sound of a straw finishing a milkshake, then it repeats, the two sounds sawing back and forth and then Mark calls her name in a voice pitched to panic. She's blinded by light for a moment as she stands and the t-shirt falls, over-blinking to readjust and runs down the steps and when she sees what's going on she screams. The sound was Justin trying to breathe and Mark spoke loudly to him, told him to try and breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth, but Justin's body is tightened up like a cramp. Jon ran up, his mouth worked open and

closed but nothing comes out, he stood there and his face whitened so quickly Laura could almost see it happening.

"Laura, call 9-1-1." Mark's voice scared into stiffness and Laura could hear the former lifeguard in him, the effort of trying to take charge, of himself and everyone, making sure to delegate.

She takes a step in one direction and then over to the other when she remembered the telephone in the garage. She ran around the house and into the coolness of the garage, dialled the number and stood there huffing. Her breaths alternated with each ring, three between each one--the gap between them seemed longer than it ever had before, until a voice finally said: "9-1-1 emergency, where do I direct your call?"

When she got back, she didn't want to get too close. With Mark trying to tell him how to breathe, she felt that she wanted to leave as much open air around them as possible. Mark said something to her and she heard 9-1-1 and she nodded and then all-of-a-sudden Mark's voice hit her like a brick: "Laura, would you *please* get a towel please!" and then she's off, up the patio steps and into the gloom of the house. She ran up the stairs, the bottoms of her feet burning on the carpet, she swept through the hall and into the bathroom. She opened a cupboard on colourful medications, contact lens solution, scissors; another, nothing; another nothing but a stack of magazines, open and close, the last door opened showed nothing but a can of toilet cleanser and a rag, and she stomped her foot on the linoleum and moved back to the door, barely catching a peripheral glance of her own face in the big mirror over the sink and she saw herself with wide eyes, wisps

of hair cocked up in messy shoots: crazy. She ran toward the master bedroom and saw a closet, and when she opened it up she almost cried when she saw the neat stacks of towels and blankets inside. She grabbed a white towel and as she ran down the stairs she wished she had taken a blanket as well, but doesn't stop to go back. Near the bottom of the steps her heel slipped on the carpet, her legs shot out ahead of her and she hit the edge of a stair with her tailbone; it vibrated as she stood up, and then pins-and-needles. She swore, and as she righted herself she saw Justin out through the patio doors, pale and fidgeting with a full-body twitch. The way the late day sun hit him made him jump out against the grass as if he were superimposed there. The day almost flaming compared to the dull greyness of the indoor light. He twisted around to her, wide-eyed, and gestured: let's go let's go let's go. She felt irritated and guilty at the same time and ran the towel out to Mark as fast as she could and, having gotten over her initial shock, tried to rub some life back into her friend. Now, she rubs Justin's leg and feels completely helpless; she cocks an ear to the road in the hope of hearing a siren. It looks like Justin has gone unconscious.

Justin bends his knee a little and it shakes up and down for a second and stops.

Mark looks at Laura's hand, rubbing and rubbing, and shuts his eyes, tight, and tries to focus on nothing but the lava lamp lumps of orange that bobble and twist in the darkness, and these slowly dim to black as he scrunches his face up so tight that he feels the beginnings of a headache. He is listening so hard for the ambulance he can hear the ringing in his ears keening over the wind in the trees,

and it all starts to compress into a single sound, it starts to take on the cluttered lulling shush of being at the pool on a very busy, beautiful day. Quiet. Justin's silence makes Mark feel very sad. For the *second* time today, and this would almost make him laugh if he were somewhere else, because he feels stupid now, and the four corners of his eyes feel hot. His forehead is burning. Quiet Justin. He doesn't want this shit. He wants Justin. *You can be quiet if you want to, just wake up.* Quiet but moving. Quiet but not hurt. Not unconscious. *Stop being quiet.* Mark's body feels tuned to absolutely everything, listening to everything, stretched taut, picking up every little vibration like the string of an instrument probably does even when it just sits there not being played. The only thing Mark couldn't hear was himself. With his eyes closed the tree sounds and Laura's breathing and Justin's sucking wheeze are so crisp and so loud all of a sudden that he feels like it might drive him nuts. Laura asks "is he unconscious?" but he wishes she wouldn't speak, at least for another minute, or until he hears the ambulance and he doesn't answer her; he's suddenly irritated, he wants her to know that his closed eyes means he needs a few more seconds to collect himself but obviously she doesn't and now, as the seconds stretch out and she doesn't ask again, he feels a little pang of guilt that he hasn't answered her.

Justin is so quiet that it is making Mark scared which then makes him angry.

Silence has been a bitch all day. He'd watched them making the kite, crouched down in the shadow of the house; Laura had moved around the kite and around Justin and he around her and neither of them had said a word. Seeing them that way from where he was, sitting by himself, and with them there, with nobody

else in the frame, he suddenly felt he had caught a glimpse of how they probably would have acted together in the past, when they had been together, when no one was around; and the fluidity and casualness of the way they acted struck him with a slight, lonely pang in his brain that took him by surprise. They could be quiet together. He could picture how they had probably been that way before, with the same kind of quiet familiarity, in the same apartment, the same room, naked. Mark wasn't thinking about sex--although, just as he dismissed this there were some quick flickers of flesh and sheets that sailed through his head on a draft of heavy breath--but it wasn't this that bothered him so much as the idea of them in that privileged privacy of people with no clothes on and moving with the same quiet ease that they were now, and it bothered him in a way that knowing that they'd slept together never ever had. He'd always known that was there--it wasn't fun to think about of course--but the inevitability made it a fact of life and so it didn't bother him, and, in spite of how this harmless little scene had made him feel, he didn't think he even felt jealous; but he couldn't get his fingers around it all the same and that made it worse. It had something to do with time; something to do with the fact that even after seven years he could still see it, that little bit of familiarity, and that it hadn't been washed out by everything that had happened between then and now. But what did it matter because really *they* had only had six months together, and he and Laura have had their four years. *Six months versus four years* and this made him stop to wonder if he was imagining this--finding fear in nothing--and it all made him feel a little bit embarrassed for himself.

He saw Laura smile just a little bit and he thought about what had happened

in the last seven years of their lives.

Mark could feel it all the time now, the way that life had slowly begun to accelerate, the clock running faster. In the past, seasons and school years would drag on forever, but now the points where things begin and end--where the Spring begins to shake off the Winter, and where the Fall begins to kill the leaves--are almost impossible to pinpoint and the space in between is so telescoped that, for Mark, it's hard to get a feel for the place that you're in and not to feel that it is already passing as it happens, and even then, at least part of it is over while you're still waiting for it to begin. When he'd been young, he'd felt like he had simply inhabited a 'winter'--or even just a single day--now he watches the way everything changes too closely, and while you'd think that this would slow it down, it doesn't, it passes even faster. As everything gets quicker it gets more and more difficult to grab things as they go by. He feels nostalgic about newness, the way that novelty can take a piece of time and will make it burn brighter so that you can still see it later. In spite of four years trumping six months, Mark wondered that if he and Laura split, if seven years passed which of the two relationships would be more vivid, which of the two chunks of time would have more of that kind of memory stuck to it.

Then, all of a sudden, the little moment across the yard broke apart; Mark said something and they both stood up, and it only took a second for that little tension of proximity to be stretched out and scattered by their sudden movement away from each other--the motion of their arms and legs and of the kite brushed it away. Justin said "hold this" and handed Laura the spool and with his fingertips

clutching the edges of the kite, he ran over the grass in a sidestepping lope in Mark's direction, and then jumped and flung the bright diamond into the air where it made a quick, plastic zzzzzzz and sliced upward into the sky, where it looped to the right, up-ended itself and crashed into the ground. Justin flung it again and it crashed, and on the third try he threw it and yelled "pull!" and the kite yawed to the right, and then gradually righted itself and started to climb. Justin watched it rise while Laura yanked the line and let out slack, a yank and then slack, again and again and then it looked as if the kite was trying to get away but kept getting tugged back towards the ground. Justin watched it until it reached high enough to float without falling, he yelled "lift-off," and then turned and started walking toward him:

"Hey brother."

"Nice kite."

"Not too shabby. It looks like the kind of kite a Satanist would make, but it flies."

A few seconds went by, Mark first thought *like a bird* but then said:

"Like an angel."

Justin laughs: "Make sure to tell that one to Laura."

They sit and watch her swooping the kite through the sky; there's a lag time between the movement in her hand and the kite changing direction. Mark didn't say anything for a while, feeling self-conscious sitting next to Justin, even though he had no reason to.

They talked about the food and the BBQ, the hinge was broken, and

continued with some rigid small talk until Mark said *alright* and stood up, brushing the moisture of the grass from the backs of his legs. "I'm going to have a go at those shelves."

Laura smiled as he walked past:

"Want to fly this baby, baby?" she said.

"I'm good. The Frisbee was enough mindless fun for me today."

"Oh! Well. Your loss professor."

He dragged the box holding the shelving unit which they'd bought today, a surprise for Justin's parents, and he emptied the pieces onto the grass and started in without looking at the instructions. It helped to do something methodical.

He phased out and got lost in his head until he heard Laura saying "oh no, no, no, nol!" and he turned just as the kite disappeared into the leaves of a large tree with a hiss and Laura said: "aaaaahhhhhh. Shit." He saw her mug an exaggerated sad face at Justin and Jon.

"The wind is breezy. It's hard!" She gingerly tugged the string but it stretched taut: "Stuck."

"I'll get the ladder," Justin walked up and back towards the greenhouse which sweated in the sun. The sun was getting a little bit lower, and everything looked clearer and more like itself.

He looked back at the pieces, but suddenly they looked more confusing than when he'd turned away. Laura came over and he held up two pieces of the shelf, dowelled together, his handiwork. He tried to apologize for being flip about the kite without directly acknowledging it, softening his voice and asking if he could

use it--a peace gesture. The way she spoke, he could tell she'd been a little miffed with him, but then she kissed him on the cheek and said she was going to bathe in whatever was left of the sun and then walked away.

He picked at the pieces of wood for about half an hour, but came to realize that he hadn't actually escaped his brain when he looked at how little progress he'd made.

Justin dragged a barbeque toward him and Mark picked up the kite:

"Hey, give this a toss for me," he says.

"You got it."

Justin grabbed it from him and ran, more loping steps, and threw it up but the wind had dropped with the sun and it made one huge arc in the air and the string yanked to the left, hit the chimney, the kite wheeled and struck the roof with a tight pop.

Mark tugged the string gently, not wanting the string to snap on the brick, the kite slowly slid up the roof until it reach the chimney and stuck. He could see the ribs bend against the brick.

"Well shit."

"You'd think we'd learn."

Justin walked over to the tree and got the ladder and hefted it, trying to balance the off-kilter weight of it, and leaned it against the house. He climbed quickly up and onto the roof and with each step up the gentle slope the soles of his sneakers made a gritty, sticky sound against the hot shingles. He grabbed the kite and hugged the chimney, passed the kite to his other hand and, turning around, he

shot his hand out to catch a scrap of the tail which had torn on the brick and started to float away. He scooted like an inchworm on his behind back down to the edge of the roof, to the top of the ladder and stood up again and said “ready?” and flung the kite back up into the air and then the world swirls, blurring, and then all of a sudden he opens his eyes and he sees the sky with two dark round bites taken out of it on either side of his peripheral vision, and he feels a deep sucking weight in his chest and a yawning ache somewhere else and he hears a voice saying: “Come on buddy, come back...In through your nose and out your mouth...”

Remains

The ghosts in this house do not need to be believed in to be seen. Doubt is not only a perfectly acceptable approach, but in fact it is the best course of action, because a healthy dollop of it would allow you to see them a little bit more clearly--as they didn't believe in themselves either, when they were alive.

They are insubstantial and yet, at times, can weigh hundreds of pounds. They are recognizable yet they are very different from what they once were--like a sand castle at high tide or televised moonlight. They are disjointed. They are not hiding but hidden: in closets and a crawl space; in plain sight and in imperfect memories; in drawers and in the attic--these being the traditional places where the still-breathing seem to prefer their ghosts to haunt them from. Cardboard boxes sit under the grey wooden ribs of the house's roof like lymph nodes, swelling a little with moisture.

Yet there are plenty of these constituent crumbs that can still be found in plain sight, scattered about the house with mercifully meaningless distances hanging between them; the tranquil synapses of a ghost. There are male and female things, and a surprising number of androgynous objects as well: these being much more ambiguous, and yet all the more fertile, for being hermaphroditic.

Who is the woman? There is an obviously hand sewn tea cozy fashioned out of men's ties, a faint smell of Canadian cigarettes stuck in the thick, plush wallpaper of the living room--where little pink nubbins fill in blank spaces, arranged to create the impression of a *fleur de lis*. These walls have breathed in benzenes and arsenic and cyanide like a tree breathes carbon monoxide, but the

house is holding its breath and so the paper can only evacuate itself through the natural purging action of passing drafts. There is a Reader's Digest edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, decked out in leather, and whose bottom half has been swollen thick (unfortunately for this book, it was swollen with lavender scented bathwater rather than tears--although, someone has since given this talkative object another chance to breathe and cry since the afternoon it was so rudely fattened up and, with all of the pages flipped again, the smell has long since faded).

In the basement, a plastic grocery bag is filled almost to bursting with Styrofoam trays which had once held bleeding hunks of rump roast and steak, strapped down with transparent cling film--a couple of the larger ones are blotched with swirls of dusky purple and burnt sienna galaxies of watercolours; there is a half empty bottle of peppermint schnapps with a wool tassel around the neck. And then of course--and this seems to be the case whether you are dead or alive--there are some things which become even more important because they're concealed. There's a sealed letter with MCMLXVI in a broken pink circle of ink, rubber stamped over the postage stamp, a picture of a white rocket shooting to the sky about to break through the clouds, which in this case are in the shape of white lettering which reads "Montreal Expo." The envelope sits wedged behind the moulding along the floor of the laundry room--written on cheap hotel stationery in a neat handwriting, and in the shadows of the folded paper there is the phrase: *I can't ever forget you. Please don't forget me.*

And what is a masculine ghost meant to look like? There is a beer stein filled with pencils. A vinyl copy of a Funk and Wagnall's pressing of Schubert's

fifth symphony, with a pale marijuana seed sleeping deep inside the lower left hand corner of its cardboard sleeve. There is a copy of Arthur Janov's **The Primal Scream** with a corner folded down at page 68, a short paragraph underlined in shaky pencil: *I think that speech is but one facet of the total defensive operations of the person. When we find babyish speech, it has been my experience that we find immaturity in sexual relationships and, often in the body build (where there is a little girl's or boy's frame);* and there is an Evinrude outboard motor propped up on a complicated scaffold of two-by-four boards, its propeller hanging down into an empty bucket. There is a pair of running shoes that are stained with red clay from a Bengali monsoon, and a clumsily stuffed pigeon. As well, we have a 1983 copy of Playboy magazine--a picture of breasts on the cover, hidden behind the horizons of a zipped down track suit which slope like a valley between mountains, which is faded and water-stained into a lime colour--inside, this time in pen, there is another phrase underlined: *Human beings will be happier — not when they cure cancer or get to Mars or eliminate racial prejudice or flush Lake Erie — but when they find ways to inhabit primitive communities again.* Apparently, ghosts love to underline things. The magazine lies on its back in an otherwise empty, flattened, seam-split cardboard box originally meant for the board game **Clue**.

In keeping with that--and here is where things start to smudge a little bit--there is a complex set of material loops that are wrapped up in themselves around a steel ring, with a polyester tag that reads "Adult Games!TM *pleasure swing: Cotton 70%, Leather 25%, rubber 5%,*" and which is curled up, flaccid in the bowl of a fondue set. There is a faux leather suitcase with wheels on the bottom--it has an old

luggage tag that reads YXX that's been folded and wrinkled into a pale smoothness--and inside, in its wrinkly, soft, velveteen shadows there's a leather day planner with 1989 stamped on the cover in gold; the last entry on December 16th reading: *ribbon Tracy/long stem eggs.*

There are also invisible arms and legs and emotions: a small dent in the dry wall in the living room--the shape of which corresponds to the edge of a clock that sleeps on the mantle piece without a tick--and which is covered by a watercolour of a horse, a Clydesdale, prancing in a wood-grained, plastic frame; and a clump of cotton rag under the downstairs bathroom sink that's starched stiff with dusty toilet cleanser that reads "orld's #1 Dad."

There is a dusty pill stamped with an inset 30 and which has hidden itself in a corner of the master bedroom, its machine-crisp edges worn smooth by the sanding action of polyester carpet and sharp dust; and there is a tubular map of fingerprints on a portable chrome bedrail--the kind which has two arms that are slipped between the mattresses, to keep the sleeper from falling off the edge of their dreams and into carpeted darkness. There is a large, pebbled handle mounted on the shower wall. There are two packages of bendable straws, one half empty; and a can of protein-rich, meal-replacement milkshake in the kitchen cupboard, arrested in its chalky powder form, just granules of dust waiting to be brought to life with water like desert shrimp.

God

During the final stretch of Grade Twelve, while Rob and I were learning to smoke cigarettes before college, our best buddy Mike had spent those last five months trying to hide from God. It hadn't been easy. Near the end he'd been starting to exhibit a sort of hunted look even when it was just the three of us. Through the winter and into the spring he'd been forced to hide in the trunk of a car, in a hedge and once, under a bed: his closest encounter, when God had not only been in the same room but had actually walked over and sat down on the flowery bedspread and Mike had had to lay as still as a dead man and hold his breath and stare at the heels of God's shoes while this heavy weight shifted over him and talked in a deep, soft voice about the frustrations of peer review. The scratchy, bright red scrape, which the Berber shag had left on Mike's cheek, was proudly displayed as a mark of his bravery in his ongoing battle against the Lord. At one point, even I was press ganged into service, mainly for the fact that I have always had a surprisingly deep voice and had sounded like an adult since grade nine, and so one Saturday Mike had made me call God from the phone in his parent's rec room with a leg of his mother's pantyhose over the mouthpiece to impersonate the leader of a bible study group called The Youth Ministry of Ontario. I did my best, trying to speak in a slightly dreamy but enthusiastic voice, saying things like "praise be" and "glory," all in the service of seeming credible so that I could eventually get around to saying "Don't worry, your child is in good hands."

'God' was the name Mike had given to a 46 year old telephone company employee, the father of Mike's girlfriend, a man with a fearsome reputation who

had, according to Mike, a deep affection for V necked pastel sweaters, an abiding fear that his daughter was going to stray from the path of righteousness and no idea that Mike walked this blue earth. Mike had met Tracy during her first illicit trip to the mall and they had, up until that point, conducted a fairly chaste relationship: in parks, behind church halls and, whenever it was possible, watching television together on any available couch.

Coming from a devout Pentecostal family, Tracy, it should be said, could only have been considered a wild child according to God's unreasonable standard. She was pretty, well-groomed, well-spoken, she could play the trumpet and had a tight, polite smile that she would use whenever faced with Rob or I belching the national anthem or simulating a complex sexual act with my parent's vacuum cleaner. It seemed that their relationship had gradually escalated to the point of serious possibility, at least in Mike's mind, and they were constantly looking for ways to spend more and more time together, giving rise to the ever-increasing need for Mike to claim sanctuary in trees or in a closet full of past-the-knee skirts. While Rob and I slowly became able to inhale without coughing, and as grade twelve slowly and surely came to an end, God loomed over Mike like a chartreuse monolith; and, in this time, he'd come to have an unshakeable faith that big things were in the offing.

The thing which brought their love affair to an end happened at the big end-of-high-school celebration. It would be foolish to call it fate, it was bad luck really, and happened without any direct intervention from God. The party took place on the first weekend following the last day of class. It was the kind of social gathering

where no one knew who had come up with the idea and details had been passed around by word of mouth. The idea was that everyone would congregate on that Saturday evening at the Clearing.

The Clearing was basically a natural break in the trees near the end of an old logging access road off the highway and was always spoken of in a reverential voice where the capital 'C' was implied and it held a kind of aura in our collective cosmology that would have definitely seemed a little bit overstated to anyone over twenty, but for us it was like a low-rent Shangri La. It was miles away from anything, and no matter how loud or unruly things could get, there was never anyone close enough to hear it happening and it was too far out of the way for the police to keep tabs on it. The Clearing sprouted legends like ragweed: that a young guy had eaten a pair of eye glasses one night after taking 101 hits of L.S.D.; that it had been used as a location for a home made porn movie that had somehow found its way around the city, although none of us had been able to find a copy, as hard as we'd looked; and there were confusing but intriguing stories of hippies performing satanic rites with a stuffed Alsatian.

We had been given directions on a ripped open paper coffee cup, a series of lines and arrows unevenly scratched onto its waxy inner surface in pink sparkly ink. Rob and I had been waiting all week and left from my parent's house in the late afternoon, saying that we were going camping, which wasn't entirely untrue--we did have sleeping bags, but they were wrapped tightly around beers so that they wouldn't clink and then stuffed into their sacks like seeds in a pod.

It was about a two-hour drive and, in our excitement, Rob and I had been

the first to arrive and when we turned the final corner of the access road the Clearing opened out in front of us like a bud and jounced around in our windshield until we stopped with a scrunch of gravel and Rob pushed the gearshift up to P so that it made a satisfying clunk. Rob and I got out, we unrolled our bags and cracked open beers and I remember so well the way that Rob drank the first one down in a single gulp, breathing out with a soft *haaa*. Almost all of my memories of this day and the night after it are ear-marked with these little gestures of finality and satisfaction.

We took a little stroll through our new home for the night. The sun was shining and the whole clearing was offering its harvest up to it--the rich brown glint of beer bottles; flowers of rock circles and soot and blackened wood; and condoms that bulged like gourds, filled with rainwater that was stained a jaundiced yellow with the pollen of buttercups; the potato chip bags warmed their silver-foil faces in the sun--all of it bloomed up joyfully around us, the first fruit of the early summer. Basically, the Clearing was a small patch of forest floor, cleared long ago and gone to seed, with a few gnarled stumps punching up through the ground cover like rotting teeth, and it all looked like pure freedom. An unwholesome looking outhouse squatted in a big flare of grass and an old mattress leaned against a tree, offering up its stuffing to nesting birds and mice. When we stopped shinning our way through the underbrush for a minute there was almost no sound except for the breeze sifting itself through thousands of tiny evergreen needles and the occasional flap of a stray piece of the plastic sheeting nailed to the outhouse roof. As the evening approached everything looked incredibly clear and vivid, and our

excitement was mixed with an almost imperceptible, slightly nervous expectation of the oncoming darkness.

Ten minutes later we heard the rhythmic hum of other cars on the rutted road, and every so often there would be the sharp *whock* of shock absorbers squeezed to the limit or the crunch of a muffler or undercarriage scraping on gravel as someone hit one of the deeper potholes which the spring rains had etched into the road; and then they started to appear around the bend, creating light brown clouds of dust which blossomed up in round, brainy shapes which then, as more cars started to appear, began to overtake one another and thickened up into a brown haze. The dirt drifted onto our shoulders and into our hair like icing sugar and I could taste the earth in it and feel it rasp in between my teeth. I noticed that every car to a one speeded up slightly just as it came around the corner, a last little burst of excitement once they realized they'd arrived. There were excited faces peering through dusty windshields and silhouettes of heads peeking around headrests. In all, there turned out to be about 17 or 18 cars and the late arrivals had to stop farther back on the road and they walked in as the sun finally dropped into the trees, with smiles of anticipation and cases of beer and sleeping bags crooked under their arms. The quiet of a few minutes before was filled up with voices and music poured from open car doors and there was the constant screech and wallop of the outhouse door opening and closing on spring hinges, and a line of girls stretched away from it like a crimped and blow-dried vine.

Mike had been one of the first arrivals and greeted us by shooting his arms up in the air and scrunching his eyes shut and sticking out his tongue. Tracy sat

sideways in the passenger seat, with her legs hanging out of the door. She gave us a little wave, a polite hello as she always did, her tight little smile. According to Mike, other than the fact that there was a very real possibility that God was starting to get suspicious, overall things had been going very well for the two of them in the last couple of months. He had been saying for weeks that he hoped to see an end to his virginity sometime before the Rapture and, from the moment that he arrived, it had seemed pretty obvious that he thought that there was at least a chance that the end was nigh--that the months of wheedling and backseat baby steps were going to come to an end and the rest of his life was going to begin because, as we walked up, he was in the process of splitting heavy green garbage bags up along their seams with a windshield scraper, fastening them into the windows of his Citation with duct tape. When Tracy excused herself and headed to join the line up at the outhouse, Rob said:

“So...tonight a boy becomes a man, yes?”

“I don’t know, we’ll see,” Mike said, holding the palms of his hands together, casting his eyes up toward the sky.

“Well,” Rob said, “I guess we’ll know the deal has been sealed when the big bolt of lightning comes down out of the sky and smites you into a smoking crater.”

We left Mike at the car and moved off to set our own plans and machinations into motion and the rest of the evening gradually grew hazy and happy as sun was replaced by fire and the darkness seemed to close us all in together in a soft space of shadows and noise. Now that I think about it, I have quite a few other memories of that night which are completely separate from what

happened later. I can remember the clarity of the acne scars on the surface of the moon, which was full and had an orange tint, like the colour of the fire which was frequently being jumped over by whippet-boned guys; they leapt through it with their long legs curled up like pincers, sneakers flashing out through the flames before they landed on the other side. Rob disappeared into a squall of teenager-shaped silhouettes and I spent a long hour with a pig-tailed girl, who was on her way to some ivy-covered college to study Anthropology, and who passionately used words I didn't understand, while I painstakingly tried to steer the conversation toward the Trobriand Islanders, which was the only thing I knew that related in any way to Anthropology.

Much later, I began stumbling around looking for Rob or Mike. After making almost a full round of the Clearing, I found the two of them sitting on a fallen tree over near the outhouse. Mike wouldn't speak and finally Rob turned to me and said: "Tracy's speaking in Technicolor tongues, if you know what I'm saying," and then clunked his bottle against mine. I tried to be as sympathetic as eight beers would allow. We all sat quietly and every so often there would be a retch followed up by wet slapping sounds that would drift over to us from the motley little shack. Each time this happened Mike would shake his head, breathe out with a huff and follow it with a deep fluorescent gulp of Tracy's wine cooler; every time he lifted it up I could see the light of the fire through it, splintered up into sparkles of orange and pink. I tried to not let the sounds from the outhouse affect the integrity of my own stomach.

We'd sat quietly for about five minutes until Rob turned to me and said,

“she actually had a little accident over there in the Pleasure Dome as well,” for which Mike had punched him in the arm, but it was a weak punch.

A blonde girl in army fatigue shorts came out of the dark and started to walk towards the door with a roll of toilet paper in her hand, trailing a tail four or five feet in length behind her and Mike had had to yell out: “Hey! It’s occupied.”

She wobbled a little as she came to a stop, and we all saw a smooth brown leg with a white running shoe at the end of it rising up a little like a counterweight and then coming back down, leaving her legs in an slightly exaggerated V which we could see she had to think about changing before she did, making small steps back to centre; and then she said: “I’ll wait,” in a bright alcohol chirp.

“Don’t bother,” Rob said. “Better take it to the woods, sister” and I saw her brows start to knit in confusion, gearing up for a disagreement right up until the moment that the outhouse emitted another little clicking gag and the girl winced dramatically and silently mouthed *ooooh* and pigeon-stepped away, disappearing in a dark hiss of tree branches.

We sat with Mike for a while, trying to be supportive, but the noise and energy of everything else started to catch us back up in its pull, until finally Rob clapped him on the shoulder and said: “Good luck, my son,” and we left him there on the log, and walked back into the din.

When I woke up the next morning, lying across the back seat, everything was just a silhouette of itself and it was cold enough that I could see my breath. In the watery grey light that filtered in through the condensation of the windows I could barely make out the lump of Rob’s sleeping bag between the seats. My own

sleeping bag, the upholstery, everything was damp and chilly under my hands as I tried to prop myself up and keep the world in its place with my forearms. I swiped a hole into the streaming window and looked out into the Clearing which was quiet and looked like it was holding its breath, with just enough grey light in the sky to start outlining the tops of the trees. I opened the door and after checking for any other pale, groggy faces in the grey windows of the other cars I shivered over to the tree line and stood there yawning through chattering teeth while I watched the curls of steam I was making at my feet. It was when I was making my way back to the car that I thought I saw the grey wood door of the outhouse opening, but it was happening so slowly that I immediately thought it hadn't happened, and it was still fairly dark, so I thought I was imagining it or that it was a trick of low light, but then I heard a small sound from a hinge and it sounded very loud against nothing. The door would freeze in place with every little squeak, pause for a second and then would start to open up again. After thirty more seconds of this I saw a figure, who I was pretty sure was Mike, squeeze out of the gap holding what looked like some sort of gnarly piece of a tree.

When I waved in his direction, the little clouds of breath in front of his face disappeared for a moment and he tossed the spindly piece of wood he was holding into the woods behind him and then leaned ahead, squinting into the gloom of the morning, trying to pick me out of the shadows of the trees. As I walked over to him, his face displayed a strange compound emotion, somewhere between being caught doing something he shouldn't be doing mixed with relief at seeing a familiar face and, as I got closer, I could see that he looked as if he might be about to cry.

"I have a serious serious serious problem. Tracy's lost something."

"Congrats," I said; but it was the wrong time to joke because when I said it Mike bent his head down and dug his thumb and forefinger into his eye sockets. I apologized and asked him what was wrong, and in a voice filled with a mixture of fear and relief he launched into a story that came out in one long breathless whisper. He explained that Tracy had had an accident when she was a kid. She'd tripped up while she had been out playing in the back garden and when she fell she had fallen face first onto the edge of her father's wheelbarrow, basically breaking the fall with her face, and that she had knocked out five or six of her top front teeth. She had been thirteen at the time and so they weren't baby teeth, which had necessitated a trip to the orthodontist and a new set of false ones to replace the ones she'd lost. Mike stopped here for a minute. I think now that he was hoping that I would be able to intuit what he was going to say next, but I was tired and my head felt like it had been inflated with flammable gas. After I failed to figure it out he told me that, as she had been suffering and heaving her way through her first experience with alcohol, digging her fingernails into wood to keep a hold on the world spinning around her, she hadn't thought to remove her teeth and had accidentally heaved them down into the dark hole as well.

Mike had been digging into the muck for hours with sticks and branches, scaring away approaching footsteps by making subtle heaving and straining noises of his own, and while he'd held everyone at bay, he'd had no luck in retrieving the teeth.

"It's so dark down there. I don't know how they dug this thing so fucking

deep,” he said.

When I looked over at Mike’s Citation it was completely still but to me it looked like it was poised and ready to flee at any sound or movement. The windows were still blocked with garbage bags and, even though there was nothing to indicate anyone was inside, I could practically feel the anxiety radiating from it in waves, like heat.

When Mike asked for my help, the look on his face was too desperate to ignore. Even though I wanted to help I had to stop and take a moment to evaluate the general weather conditions of my stomach, just to see if it would be able to hold up to the task, but when I looked at him I knew I had no choice and I retrieved the emergency flashlight from the trunk of the car and I jumped into the breach with him, trying my best to hold my breath without passing out.

Trying to shine a light, while simultaneously attempting to root around in one big, wet, shifting mass with a long stick, all through a little dark hole was incredibly difficult and the whole process was about as grim as you would expect it to be. The root of a tree looped out of the sludge like the arm of an octopus or a segment of the Loch Ness monster. During our search we found a hammer, what I think was an oven mitt and an incredible number of beer bottles, but no teeth. At one point I had an irrational surge of anxiety and a little tingle on the back of my neck when I had the thought that, if we kept digging, we might find a matted, snarling, glassy-eyed Alsatian staring up at us.

“Why is this happening to me!” Mike said.

I didn’t say anything but I couldn’t help but look over at the Citation which

still sat there like a bunker.

As people started to stagger over to where we were, Mike initially told them he had lost his watch, but as the morning progressed, somehow the truth of what we were actually doing had bounced around the clearing--Mike said later that the likely culprit was another girl here from Tracy's school who was somehow aware of her infirmity--and whenever I would pull myself out of the cramped little space to get some air, I could see small groups of people standing together and whispering, with an occasional giggle.

Rob pitched in without a word, giving Mike and I the chance to get some fresh air; and then the hour when Mike had said they absolutely *had had had* to leave in order to get back in time enough to cover their tracks and to avoid the inevitable wrath of God from coming down on poor Tracy's head came and went on by like a cloud. As the morning passed into the early afternoon, most of the other cars gradually disappeared around the corner trailing their brown, brain-like clouds, until there were only a couple of late-risers sitting on the hood of their car eating cereal out of the box. With almost everyone gone, Mike's Citation sat out on its own. As the sun got higher and higher in the sky, I thought it had to be getting awfully hot in there, what with the dark garbage bags over the windows.

It was then that I heard Mike yell that he'd found them and slowly, gently we shakily raised them up, picking up this tiny delicate thing with enormous chopsticks.

Mike ran to the car holding them wrapped in a t-shirt and knocked on the window. He opened the door and tore the garbage bags away and all I could see

was a shape with Mike's coat over its head. Mike jumped in crunched around in the little drive, almost snagging a bumper on a stump.

The girl in the fatigue shorts, one of the late-risers, said: "Oh my god, I feel so bad for her, what do you think her parent's are going to say?"

All of us who were left watched the Citation bounce away, still with a few ragged scraps of plastic and duct tape clinging to the back window; Rob watched it disappear around the corner and said: "My guess, they'll say 'your breath is terrible.'"

I watched the road even after they'd gone, feeling as grimy as I have ever felt and completely exhausted. Then Rob and I waved goodbye to the girl and her friends and the Clearing and we left.

That lump hidden under a jacket was the last we saw of Tracy.

While Mike never did meet God face to face, I do believe, after the events at the Clearing, that he had become aware of Mike's existence, the nemesis that he hadn't even realized that he'd had, because she disappeared not long after. I can only imagine that the meek and good-hearted Tracy must have eventually confessed during the inevitable inquisition that would have happened after she had made her way home five hours late and her cover story had crumbled hours before that with one or two phone calls. I was sorry to see Tracy go, but I was happy I didn't have to pretend to be the prayer leader again. Rob and I hadn't even had a chance to say goodbye and, after a final tearful goodbye around the corner from her house, Mike never saw her again either until much later in life.

I've told that story countless times over the years at small parties, usually

with names changed to protect the guilty and the innocent, but I hadn't thought about any of that for quite some time until last week during an impromptu reunion with Mike. On my way back from a software demonstration in Hawaii, a lightning storm forced our plane down out of the sky. It had been incredibly beautiful to watch but also absolutely terrifying. The pilot set us down in Abbotsford and I had the better part of an evening and a night to wait it out. I knew that Mike had moved here some years before and I looked him up in the book and told him that I was in town, and would love to see him, but I was afraid to leave the airport in case there was any change in the flight, so he came out and we sat in the airport bar together and we compared each other to our memories. I'd never seen him wear glasses, he'd never seen me in a tie. We drank rum and cokes and I longed for a cigarette and we talked about what used to be our native land. Mike told me that when he'd been home for his mother's sixtieth birthday he'd run into Tracy in a bakery--she'd had a two year old in one arm and a loaf of sour dough in the other, and they had a shy conversation for a few minutes and that's when she told him that God had died just last year.

West Orange

*Ex orient lux, ex occidente frux,
from the East light, from the West fruit.*

McEwan squints out over the world, his shameless and shameful paradise, where the evening takes on weight as the sky darkens and it falls over the beach like the carcass of the day, still but still warm. *Still beautiful even in death*, he thinks and tries to come up with some historical sweetheart to apply to this but can't and with a brown hand he waves away a mosquito and the nagging whine of his own pretentious shit. It is definitely a rare moment, rare only in that it's quiet, as pleasant as it is uncommon and in the couple of seconds he's got he enjoys the shush of water and nothing; but then it doesn't last: a woman's voice says something in high-pitched Tagalog and then there is a crack of something hitting something else that clatters off out over the sea, the sound bounces on the water like a stone skipping over it and then it's gone. Over to the East, silvery tendons of cloud stretch out along the others above them, which still catch the last of the sun coming over the hills, turning them a muscular pink like the flesh of a cold-water fish.

He sits in a canvas deck chair on the second-floor landing of his guest house in a short-sleeved, collared shirt and Bermuda shorts: he looks at his sinewy, tanned legs, and grimaces again at the grain of his skin--the dry brownness of it. He had always enjoyed being tanned. It had made him feel healthy and vigorous to be stained with the strength of the sun; but now he can only think that it's ruined him,

that someone could probably make a wonderful purse out of him; maybe a coat. Something to remember him by. He moves his feet and feels the coolness of the tiles in this new spot under his heels. On the beach, down to the right, a pack of mutts, skinny as greyhounds, gang up on one of their own for what seems like no reason, and begin to pull and whip in a ball of mangy violence, shifting away, scratching a trail that looks like a beanstalk into the sand; the dogs disappear for a bit behind a bright red banca and then gradually twitch back into eye-line and they squeeze under an outrigger, snarling up the shoreline on a trajectory that, in thirty seconds or so, looks like it will intersect with a group of divers who are trudging backwards through the water towards the beach, clumsily readjusting to their own heaviness, chattering in earnest voices and tripping over the coral. He waits for it, scratching his head, but his attention is pulled away for a moment to a few young locals who slouch along the beach, taking their time, with the bottoms of their t-shirts gathered up into their armpits, carrying pouches of handmade jewellery and other such bullshit. McEwan waves down at them and receives a quartet of pale smiles in return; one of the boys waggles a bale of colourful wristbands in his direction--an inside joke--and then they all turn back to themselves and continue on up the beach toward Big La Laguna.

Cleopatra.

He starts to think a thought about morticians but there is a squeal from the direction of the divers, and he turns just in time to see a rubber-covered girl jump, hair whipping wetly as she arcs away from this angry mess of dog, she leans in a bow shape and scampers backward until the picked-on dog finally separates itself

from the group and streaks away, ears back, running up the beach with the others falling into line behind it, barking and moving on the same sinuous trail. He closes his eyes and lets his head roll backward, listening again to the jumble of languages and sounds, hoping for another few accidental seconds of quiet.

He hears a jeepney backfire in the distance, which startles him slightly and which goads him up out of the damp plastic chair. He opens the door to his little apartment which exhales a cool, heavily conditioned breath that raises bumps on his skin; he reaches his hand in around to turn the lock and closes it again, slips on his flip flops and slaps down the stone steps to the hard-packed dirt of the alleyway, where a couple of rose bushes crouch against the mortar walls, the dark leaves looking black and almost a little threatening growing there in the shadows. He waves to his house mama sweeping the lower deck and walks through tourist clogged alleyways, back into the town toward the photo developing shop to get the packet of pictures back before it closes.

A couple of days of ago, while he'd been walking home after a night out, he'd found a roll of film.

It was on the beach. He had been walking back to his place, angling home in a pulsing throb of stomach gas and brain-glitter, watching the ground move beneath him, when his sandal came up short on something sticking out of the sand and he'd kicked it skittering ahead of him. He had had to squint and bend to see the small smooth shadow, blacker than the rest. He plucked it up, a canister--it rattled when he shook it--and so he had pawed it into his pocket without thinking too much about it and forgot about it until the next afternoon. He'd hauled it out of his

short's pocket mixed up in a handful of pesos and a ball of tiny neckerchief shapes made out of napkins. He popped it open; the roll dropped out into his palm and he looked at it closely. The little tag of film that you feed to the teeth of the camera's sprocket wheel had already been sucked in between the felt lips that hide the film away from light, meaning that it was clicked out, used and done with. For McEwan, who didn't own a camera, this didn't matter much. He had a very brief thought about not spending a second trying to bother to find the person who may have lost it: just the idea of it made his legs tired. It was used, and so it was useless to Sunflower, who was the only person he knew and or spoke to on the beach who actually owned a camera. But there was a little sea-sparkle of something that cut through the swollen skull and the white-slime on his tongue, which was followed by a slow worm of curiosity moving in his head. There was something about seeing his home through someone else's eyes that tugged at him, the possibility that he might see himself somewhere in the background and if nothing else there was the prospect of a nude picture of a wife or girlfriend looking shy but fierce on a rented bed, made braver by the carnival atmosphere of vacation, a marriage casting off the ropes of home after an exciting night out on the beach. So, he had taken the roll to the shop to be developed.

Now, he drops his tag and a little haystack of pesos on the counter, and waits for the counter girl to extract the right amount: he has never learned Tagalog, she basically knows 'hello' and 'thank you,' but she looks honest. He passes out of the hum of fluorescent lights and into the hush of the evening. As he walks he opens the packet and sees a smiling face and a pale arm jutting up over the bottom

lip of the envelope, which has the developer's name and address, so that the little figure looks like she's standing behind a billboard, waving; but the light is low and his eyes can't see much more than a blank greyness, so he closes it up again and walks down the concrete road, past *Jeanette's Sari-Sari Store and Rice Dealer* on his left--inside Jeanette looks like a moving mannequin under the fluorescent light--and, on his right, some young turk thumps his chest at a girl who covers her face with her hands and shakes her head. McEwan winks at the man and makes a quick turn back into the alleys, towards his part of the beach. Where two of the alleyways intersect, bored-looking Filipino men stand straight and crowded in white lab coats and shower caps, jammed up among a tangle of tubes and other strange plumbing, humourlessly purifying water and squirting it into white bottles for the tourists, who pay them no attention as they walk by, some of them--these new pale-faced trespassers--just starting to become familiar to him in the last week, gradually taking on personalities that will vanish all-of-a-sudden in a day or a week or a month, rarely more than that; just a pool in a stream of temporary faces: the young woman from a terse, beautiful family from Milan; a young man from what looks to be Israel with beautiful, corkscrew hair--sullen and slightly damaged about the eyes, as much in the figurative sense as in the literal, McEwan thinks; and just ahead, annoyance in sandals himself--the middle-aged English teacher from Korea, or maybe Japan, with soft white features and a loud, slow voice, whom McEwan has already dismissed as a probable pedophile, although they've never spoken, and McEwan winces as this *teacher* laughs with exaggerated interest at something that the Milanese woman has just said. A day, a week, a month, they're gone. The

teacher and the girl pay him no attention so he has to side-waddle past them and he takes a quick right into gloom, back toward the beach. In the closeness of the alley, he bends his neck uncomfortably under the arch of heavy leaves which loom in and over to make a tunnel, the crackle of his knees makes little rhythms with the more steady clicking of the cockroaches which chitter along in the shallow concrete sluice along the bottom of the wall next to him; the sounds are similar and different, clicking together in a kind of freeform counterpoint of hateful biology.

He pads out and along the beach, groans up off the sand onto the concrete slab at its edge and steps into a deep bamboo box with a hand painted sign nailed over it that reads **Doyle's** and he drops into a wicker chair with a little settling slap on its arms. Rosa the waitress sweeps over wearing a sarong-skirt and a Doyle's t-shirt carrying a San Miguel.

"And a good evening to you, my sweet Cleopatra," he says.

She slaps his arm:

"Hey! Whatchoo say to me? Bad boy! Very bad, I think!"

"It's a good thing I'm saying to you. Cleopatra was a very beautiful lady."

"Well!" She cocks her head, rolling her eyes into her lids with a smile.

"You funny man."

She walks away and he sees her face fall back solid.

And you can kiss my asp. He plucks the little napkin neckerchief off the neck of the bottle, wipes the lip with it and puts it in his pocket and tips up the bottle for a gulp. He tips it up again and sucks away half of the bottle and then looks down to the water. He sits comfortably in the pleasant fatigue of a day's-end

dehydration, which he has always said 'is what makes drinking in warm climates so wonderful,' and half-thinks this thought again while taking another mouthful. He looks at the string of Christmas lights that is strung along the wall beside him and which glow and smear coloured light against the bamboo. He reaches into his pocket and flips the packet open to the face and the arm and draws them all out. This first picture is of a pretty woman in a bikini standing somewhere dark; she is close to the camera and is overexposed; the flash flattens out the finer details of her body, her ribs and collarbones are lost in flash, her skin is a gleaming whiteness; the light looks almost as if it's radiating from her and it catches in the pupils of a Filipino in the background and turns them bright red. The next shows a small group, and the shining girl is there, all of them kitted out in rubber, all caught in a smile; the pictures are all different points along the beach: there is an Asian girl sitting in a deck chair with a clothespin on her nose, holding her arms out in a shrug; another shows a handsome blonde guy doing a handstand while the Asian girls laughs, her hands in mid-clap. As he flips through them all, skins gradually get browner, the sharpness and clarity that the excitement of their first days gives to their faces starts to dull a little bit, and the smiles get softer, and the expressions are a little more tired and contented *and hung over*. There is a picture of the handsome guy leaning and wincing, ringing the huge bell at the bar on the point, declaring that he's buying a round for everyone. McEwan flips past a picture of the shining girl eating pasta and flips again and then stops short on a picture of blondie with a familiar-looking planter filled with red flowers, and McEwan looks up and sees it about 10 feet away from him, over by the entrance to the bar. He brings his eyes up

and around, looking for any of these faces and then looks out to the darkening beach, self-conscious to be holding someone else's photos all-of-a-sudden, but he sees no one he can recognize and then he looks at the picture a little closer. The angle of the shot is almost directly in sync with McEwan's eye line, taken at the next table over just a few feet in front of him, which is now empty. The handsome one is leaning back in his chair, another girl is just an arm and a little piece of face sticking out of the right edge. His little shot of adrenaline starts to dissipate when he realizes that this is no surprise, not really much of a coincidence, it's a small beach, there are only four tables in Doyle's, and all of the tourists usually end up hitting every bar on the beach during their stay, in search of the one with the most local colour. He looks closely at the picture and when he looks up again at the empty table he finds it disorienting, something about the change in perspective feels like an echo in his head and, each time he looks back and forth, he is almost surprised that no one is sitting there. He turns back to the first picture and stares at it, trying to figure out what the shining girl is doing--what it is that she's signalling or saying with this gesture, which the picture seems to have caught midway through the action.

Jamison walks in wearing pretty much the same outfit as McEwan. He's paunchy with red cheeks; a peppery, crudely trimmed moustache; his clumsy thick-framed glasses have smoked lenses, so he has them perched on the end of his nose for taking a nearsighted evening walk up the beach. Jamison always makes McEwan want to tidy himself up a bit.

"And a good evening to you, asshole," Jamison says and sits and looks over

his shoulder, sticking an index finger straight up in the air to get Rosa's attention, holding it there, but she doesn't see him and so he reaches across and sticks the finger into the mouth of McEwan's beer, lifts it back into his other hand and drinks.

"That is good."

"You're welcome," McEwan waves at Rosa.

"What are those?"

"Pictures."

Jamison sticks out his tongue and looks up as two young, wooly-headed bare-chested guys walk in, they look like they could be brothers: "I would give my life for a beer at this point, mate," one says to the other and they bob past towards the bar.

Jamison pulls at his nose a couple of times, shifts in his seat and mutters: "Yeah? I would too."

"And by that, you don't mean yours."

Jamison's face makes an angry, rigid grind of yellow teeth and stubble, and he clomps the table with McEwan's bottle: "Christly hippies and dirty backpackers, *'we don't want you...go the fuck home!'*" He jerks two fingers upward in the direction of the bar, and smoothes some sweaty weeds of hair across his reddened pate before leaning away from the table to spit a gob of thick saliva out onto the concrete. "Pongy pricks."

"You're in the wrong place," McEwan says.

"What?"

"I said, you are *in* the wrong place."

"It's diabolical."

"Go back to sunny Lancashire then."

Jamison is still looking over at the bar while Rosa clunks down more sweating bottles with little paper kerchiefs tied at the neck making the bottles look like formal little people standing at attention, and McEwan says: "That *was* where you came from, was it not?"

"I am from Lancashire."

Rosa swats his arm again: "Where you home, Kewan?"

"Here."

She giggles and Jamison snorts:

"Originally, nimrod."

McEwan goggles his eyes at Jamison, turns to Rosa: "New Jersey," he says.

"U.S.A."

Jamison: "New Jersey, hey? Well--something new every day."

"Up in the Oranges. The Townships. Home of the light bulb."

"Home of a dim bulb more like it."

"Bulb." Rosa knits her brow, "bulb?"

"The ancestral home of a dim bulb!"

McEwan draws an upside-down pear in the air and makes shooting rays from this invisible figure with his fingertips.

"*This?*" she says pointing to one of the Christmas lights.

"Pretty much," he says.

Rosa pauses for a second and then coos "ooooh U.S.A." and smiles wide,

turns around and walks away, her smile immediately winks out like a light.

A thin man with tattoos at another table stands up slightly, holding his stringy forearms out to his tablemates, trying to punctuate a dramatic crest in his drivel: "I was dying, I was really dying! Right? I was killing myself. Absolutely I would have died without her..."

Jamison looks at McEwan and says: "has she honestly never asked you where you're from before?"

"--but she ended up fucking leaving me."

"A smart cookie," McEwan says.

Jamison says: "what?"

"Thomas Edison, he had a think-tank factory in my home town. He was one smart cookie."

"Smarter than you."

"That's true, but I've had a lot of bright ideas in my time."

"--but I did do the deed with a girl from her school--right? So, I *do* understand why she did it. Absolutely."

McEwan breathes slowly out: "You are most definitely in the wrong place, my friend. And you know it. And god help you. Or somebody help you. I might be too but it's too late in the day to do anything about it."

Then Divemaster Dan shows up and with him comes pear-shaped Sunflower in a simple brown dress, wafting to the table, bringing the soft hope of a break in the storm clouds that Jamison has dragged in with him; she jerks her hands out widely in a *hello my friends!* gesture.

"Really though," McEwan turns back to Jamison as they sit, "I'll ask again, for the whateverth time, *why* are you here? Why do you stay in a place where you hate almost everyone who passes through?"

"This again--you and your--what's--"

"Because, in three years I don't remember you ever giving me an answer--"

"Yeah, *your* memory--when I came here for the first time! Back--"

"So, it's nostalgia, then."

"No it's not nostalgia. Listen it's--"

"--purely your own bullheadedness?"

"Fuck off--and you have the balls to wonder why you don't have this answer you want so much--"

"The straightest thing I ever got from you was something about all the bikinis."

"That mitigates it--"

"Uh oh, bad moods all round," Sunflower says.

"But it's not just purely out of a love of this place, this particular time and space, and that's what I'm saying," McEwan turns on the others, "what do you know? Has he told you?"

"What I think is, Jamison feels more like himself the more he has to bitch about," Sunflower says with a laugh and joggles Jamison's shoulder, and he shoots a look over his glasses at her, stretching out the whites of his eyes wide, almost smiling.

Dan and Sunflower begin to talk about the heaviness of the surf over on the

big beach. Outside, the evening shrinks down to the size of the light from the bar that falls across the bar's concrete apron and the sand. Scrawny Arms drones: "I've been to Alaska. I spent a year in an empty apartment in Albuquerque, there was fuck all there. That was a shit time. So then to pay myself back I chilled for a year in a commune on...ah...? Down near Phuket..." In the darkness under the table McEwan surreptitiously reaches up under the leg of his shorts and scratches at the wrinkly softness there and does his best to stop listening. He gradually scoops more and more tissue paper into his pockets, scanning the bar for particular faces. He sees nothing that warrants his attention until some people stand up and leave the inner table and across the room his eyes settle on a young guy who looks half-asleep sitting on a bench against the wall beneath a big decorative fan, his head directly at the apex where the fan's ribs slant together to the place where you would hold it in your hand, and the way the fan spreads out from the boy's sweat-matted head, the dreamy, drunken look on his face, the wavy lines of its design, it all makes the fan start to look as if it's this kid's tropical daydream made visible; and McEwan regards the frozen blue doodle of water and paint palm fronds and starts to feel as if he can read minds; there are some long, vertical strokes of white and yellow: the insinuation of some long-legged bird, standing up among shooting green squiggles that go off in every direction: marsh grass. Then McEwan twitches as the dream breaks out of its frame and comes alive for a second, a little green gecko wiggles out from behind the fan, pauses and darts back in. And then Jamison pokes him with an insolent finger, hands him a beer and plucks at his shirt sleeve, *let's go*.

They move just two doors down onto the flagstone patio of Dan's shop and

pull in around a plastic table, and Sunflower lights a joint--a lush smell that seems to have some connection to the way all of the palm trees around them smell lush. Somehow, Scrawny Arms has ended up with them. It passes hand to hand and as it's going around the second time McEwan starts to follow it with his eyes, watching drizzles of smoke move upward.

In the damp darkness, the heat sits on everyone and there are only muffled voices drifting over from Doyle's.

"Hey!" McEwan sits up straight, and reaches in his pocket, "I have pictures."

Sunflower looks interested and surprised.

"I found them on the beach."

"Anything hot?"

"Scamp."

"Some of the people are sweating in them. I found the film. On the beach."

He grabs almost all of them out and passes them in the same direction as the joint is travelling, but for some reason he decides to leave the photo of the waving girl stuck in the pack.

"...and so, being the creepy beggar that you are, you got them processed."

Jamison takes them from McEwan and passes them on without looking, and the sun has gone so everyone else tilts them, looking for light, rifles them a little without really looking and passes them again, until they end up back in McEwan's hands.

"I was just interested."

"I would be too," Sunflower says. "I'd be too curious not to get them developed."

"Right."

Somewhere behind him there is a hollow thud of a coconut hitting sand, McEwan looks along the rough-skinned twist of the palm tree curving up next to his chair; he looks along the bark until it fades out into sagging darkness above his head. The sound of the coconut has made them all quiet with a slight expectation of another sudden sound but there's nothing until, a few seconds later, a little breeze rustles the fronds over them and the noise smoothes them all back together again.

"Why would you want pictures of what you see everyday?" Jamison says.

McEwan shrugs.

"Someone else's pictures no less."

"You're a voyageur," says Scrawny Arms.

"... Why are *you* here?"

Sunflower: "I don't know. A little inside peek at someone else. Of someone having those little real, personal moments, you know?--"

"Meh."

"--people having those little genuine experiences, having a good time."

"*Genuine*. Just because it's something that's happened to you doesn't mean it's genuine." Jamison says. "You," he points at Sunflower, "you always want the stars to be aligning and the doe eyes and all of that nonsense. All the garbage that gets shat out in films and the like. Buttercups and *happy endings*."

"Why not?"

“Hey!” says Scrawny Arms, who makes a little wavering jerk against the dark.

“There’s a--”

“Hey! Excuse me. I have something to say. I happen to like happy endings. I am a strong...and proud supporter of happy endings. I happen to have had several in my life thank you very much and sure yes, I *know*, the hour grows dim, the candle at both ends and what not; but why, and I want *you* to tell me, why you seem to think I shouldn’t give a shit, number one?” He half-stands with his arms out for emphasis, flicking a second finger out from his palm in Jamison’s direction: “and *two*, what gives *you* the right to piss all over it and say I’m an asshole for having the hope to have at least one or two more before all of it gives out and my shit hits the fan and what not, yes? Absolutely.” He slaps the table.

“Mr. number one and number two, listen--”

“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with looking forward to the happy moments, where everything works out great,” Sunflower says. “It’s sweet when something nice happens, especially when it happens *against all odds*,” she says, pumping her arm three times in the air.

Scrawny Arms hits the table again and says “*that’s* what I’m talking about! Run into each other’s arms! Let the music swell up to the sky! Come on!”

“Quietly, quietly, captain...”

McEwan blinks back to life and tries to think of a few moments like that that he may have had, but he feels that this is definitely the wrong road to be on and then he leans in: “Ask that pudgy German gentleman in the little speedo over there

behind the...talking to the bar girl with the--over at the bar there? The gold watch. Let's see what his idea of a happy ending is right at this moment. Ask him. What would he say now if you asked him?"

Sunflower says: "Oooh, you have no romance in you at all, do you?"

"He's a fucking dim bulb cynic, is what he is."

"Are you the pot or the kettle?"

"McEwan, the cynic."

McEwan shakes his head:

"That's not true! Not true at all, but I will agree that the juices have been dried out of me in this sun. I expect *nothing*. I've lived my life in guest houses. I replenish myself as best I can," he says, and takes a gulp, making googly eyes and then he looks over at Jamison: "And home is where the heart is, smart man."

After a while, the mood deflates a bit and Sunflower and Jamison get up and walk into the dark and Scrawny Arms leaves for greener pastures. McEwan waves a feeble goodbye to Dan and leaves him at the table and toddles lazy S shapes into the sand, down towards the sea. His arms paw a little stiffly in the air as he walks and the sand shifting under his feet is hard on his knees. He walks to the water's edge and he is all alone; everyone has retreated back and beyond the dark line of buildings and the geometric orange light of the open bar fronts. Music begins to pulse down the beach and hits the sea where it droops in the air over the water like an audible fog. It almost gives the impression that it echoes back from thirty feet or so out, and he stands there with his eyes closed, listening and smelling the air, and for a little while he senses a subtle ebb and flow effect happening, where the music

seems to change volume just slightly with the movement of the waves.

And the rush of a wave washes over his feet, pushing sand in between his toes and the nubbily rubber bottoms of his flip flops. He bends over to hook out the grit with a forefinger and the packet of pictures falls from his breast pocket and slaps against the water and seesaws there for a second before the foam line on the water's edge drags back and the envelope settles down on the wet sand. The wave has already come back again by the time he drifts down to pick it up and washes over his knuckles; and it's on the second try that he finally snatches the packet up, streaming water, and he tries to shake off the sea as if he's putting out a match, and it slips from his hand and hits the sand with a slap. He bends over, wobbles, pincers it in his fingers and brings it close to his face, peering at the sand crusted on it, flicks at it with a finger and then thinks *fuck it* and puts it back in his shirt pocket and makes his way home with a glittering head and hardly pays any attention to the firebugs twirling in the darkness out between the trees or the men jousting with girls on their shoulders or the wetness seeping through his shirt and cooling his nipple. He lurches into his room, pauses and shapes the dark room in his mind for a second and then slap slap slaps across the tiles, tugging the packet out of his pocket, he leans over his little bar fridge and squeezes the damp envelope down behind the warm coils at the back and then wipes the sand from his fingers against his shirt. When he pulls his shirt up and off he sees little green static stars that shoot from his head as the cotton drags over his thin white hair and he works his way down onto the unmade bed, ass first and then his arms and then his head and then legs up, and he drifts through a few gauzy impressions of the day, and they all feel like they have

the same general consistency as the heat that's settling down and tucking in around him: dogs and snakes and glowing women--and he doesn't expect any more night visions than the ones he's having now, because he can feel himself falling asleep and he can feel the beer and dope already in the process of squeezing his head into the little nook of complete darkness and sleep is already starting to hug all of the dreams out of his head stillborn--because that seems to be the way it goes--and then all of a sudden, before he knows it, he's gone.

The next afternoon, when he opens up the packet, he pulls out the warm, soggy lump of pictures; they are all stuck together in a mass and the surfaces peel off to blank paper when he tries to separate them and there's only the rippled picture of the shining girl left on the top of the pile, waving either hello or goodbye.

The Seven Princesses

Stars like the stars in the sky,
 sands like the sands by the sea.
 That which shines shines,
 that which is alone is alone.
 Until you can sing, 'I am
 the one that shines in the shining
 of that which shines," wait.
 Until your body is heavy night
 over the desert and the sand,
 and the wind blowing over the sand
 play, practice. And love
 your untruth until your untruth
 ceases to be untruth.

— Chong Hyon-Jong, *Are you Stars?*

1.

My search for the Seven Princesses began with a story.

I was talking with a Korean friend of mine, Hye Mi, another English teacher. We sat next to a window in the grey stairwell of our school and smoked cigarettes. While we were comparing our little temporary horrors, I mentioned a middle school student of mine, a teenage girl with little round glasses, who was always interrupting my class by getting out of her seat to pass notes over to the handsome boys across the room and whose only response to me, whenever I asked her to pay attention or, really, any time that I spoke to her at all, was to roll her eyes at me and huff, making the hair on her forehead jump, and then she would roll her eyes again at whoever was sitting next to her. The other, more self-conscious girls, sat quietly with both hands laid on their desk and waited to be acknowledged by her as a partner in crime. They would subtly mirror her contempt by putting a little

twist in the corner of their shy smiles, trying not to be too obvious with me there watching.

Hye Mi said: "Oh! Maybe she is a princess. Maybe she has six friends."

I asked her what she meant and, taking a delicate puff, she told me the story of the Seven Princesses.

"Sometimes, how do I say, the *rough* girls, they come together, you know? They are acting bad all the time and they are causing all the trouble for everyone and do not listen to their parents or their teachers or anyone. They do the bad things. They fight with *everyone*, you know? Except for each other. They stick together. But for some reason they are seven, always seven. I don't know why."

When I asked if she had any idea where that number may have come from, why that number and not another, she shrugged and then tossed her cigarette out of the window and leaned over to watch it plummet down the five flights to the ground, belatedly looking to see if it might fall into someone's hair.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe something to do with the Korea history or something like that. Something a loooooong long time ago."

For some reason, this idea set my head on fire. An angry mass of young women who were against everything but themselves and who, for some reason, adhered to some esoteric principle of organizing themselves that somehow occurred without their having contact with each other; a seemingly un-quantifiable effect of human fraternity. There was something about the strangeness of this, the mysterious pull of a curiosity sparked by something that I don't think would ever have crossed my mind to imagine. Mysterious groups of girls that I knew nothing

about other than that their combined number would be a multiple of seven.

I began to ask everyone about the Seven Princesses. Everyone who could speak my language: my students, other teachers, I asked anybody. Any Koreans that I met on the street or in restaurants, anyone who approached me in order that they might get a chance to practice their English, I now took these opportunities to learn a few things for myself.

The answers I received didn't give me much to go on and, I'm fairly positive, were offered mainly just so that I wouldn't be disappointed:

A studious young female student of mine said:

"They are girls who make teacher *very* angry, they do not do their homework I think."

A very pretty girl who had a small mirror attached to her book bag, that was almost always reflecting her face, turned away from it and said:

"They are the girls who punch. They fight. They ahhhhh...*beat up* the girls who are prettier than them."

Another said:

"They stand on the corner of the street and they bite on the blade of the knife."

This was the kind of thing I was looking for, however, these sort of details were few and far between. My personal favourite was the only answer which gave me any identifying feature that I could work with. A woman in a gim bap restaurant rolled her eyes into her head for a moment, her chopsticks poised as if she was going to pluck her answer out of the air and then she said:

“...sometimes, the bad girl, they get the perm.”

While these details made me think that there was at least a hope of there being something out there that was worth the effort of looking for, as I kept asking more and more people, I came to have the growing sense that this might be more difficult than I initially thought because, without a doubt, the most frequent answer I received to my questions, and probably most telling, was a curious tilt of the head followed with an apologetic “I don’t know.”

In spite of this, I wasn’t discouraged. I thought, *my friend can’t be wrong*, and I wished that I could ask her more about it, but she had since moved on to greener pastures and I had no way to question her again about her story.

2.

For a while, the question became how would I even be able to identify a member of a group of Seven Princesses. Other than a perm and a sullen expression, what was I looking for? I knew I wouldn’t be lucky enough to see them standing hipshot on a street corner, knee-socks defiantly rolled down to their ankles. I knew that it was too much to hope for that, even if I might happen to see a group of seven girls lividly leaning against the wall of a building, that at least one of them might have a knife between her teeth. So, instead I began to search other avenues.

I began collecting the advertising/business cards which the Coffee Girls would leave neatly arranged on the doorsteps of the love motels, soft-core nudes over-saturated with colour with telephone numbers and small icons of the credit cards which they would accept at the bottom: Visa, Mastercard, LG. I looked at

them all, looking at their faces, feeling that, even if I didn't know what I was looking for, I might see something in them that might give me something to go on. I wondered if it was possible that a Princess might transmogrify into a Coffee Girl like a butterfly.

One night, while I was walking in an unfamiliar corner of the city, I turned in to the parking lot of a motel, ducking under the heavy, multicoloured strips of plastic which hung down over the lot's entrance to hide the philandering cars--all of which were identical, all the same shape, neat rows of shiny, black Subarus. I walked up to the concrete steps and as I was bending over picking up the latest crop of cards, a pretty young woman opened the motel door and caught me in the act. Still bent at the waist I looked up at her. She was wearing a suit and a little wedge of a hat that made her look like an airline attendant, but the illusion was broken by the plush white boots that she wore, shaggy fake fur which made her look like a polar bear from the shins down. She was carrying a small plastic basket filled with a thermos and colourful little bottles. This, if she spoke English of course, could have been my big chance. I might have asked her if, in her younger days, she may have caused a lot of trouble and if she had been a part of one of these fraternities of seven, but as I straightened back up and she stepped down into the parking lot she gave me a coy, knowing smile and began ceremoniously laying out a new round of cards to replace the ones I'd taken, looking slyly over her shoulder and I just stood there, caught in a misunderstanding that I knew I wouldn't adequately be able to explain, and would probably only make worse with my stammering; I got shy, and before I knew it she had clicked away from me and clipped her basket to the back of

her moped, climbed on and then winked as she drove past, then she ducked under the plastic strips and wobbled back out into the smoggy night.

3.

Another time, on a night train back from Seoul, I thought I may have spotted one. I didn't have much to base this assumption on, but there was a certain intensity about her that I felt was familiar, like I was suddenly recognizing something I had never seen before. She sat by herself looking out of the window, wearing headphones and tearing up her train ticket into angry little pieces. I wondered how many friends she had.

She paid attention to no one. Not me, nor the woman sitting across the aisle from her, and not the businessmen in shiny grey suits who moved up and down the aisles with the lateral stagger of people walking on trains, on their way to the spaces between the compartments to smoke.

More than anything it was the look on her face, which I could see faintly reflected in the dark shine of the window, that caught my attention. It was the kind of look that I expected to see on the face of a Princess.

Over her head I watched what she was watching.

The complicated geometric shadows of the city. Neon crosses and glowing red swastikas hung in the darkness and moved with the movement of the train, twirling; as we passed them by they're foreshortened into single red lines and then as they fall behind they would gradually widen back into themselves.

Just over her shoulder, a huge building, far back towards the horizon, twinkled monochromatically. The hundreds of windows looked like hundreds of little chips of glass in a mosaic, and the lights that shone out of them were so uniform that it looked as if it was a wall of glass with a single huge light behind it. A couple of the windows flickered on and off so that it looked like it was behaving in the same manner as the sky above it, a solid darkness with no moon which was only broken by the few stars which were bright enough to shine through the light cast up by the city, and these glimmered with the same lazy jitter as the windows did.

Just before the train pulled in to the station, this possible princess stood up and picked up her purse and swung around, she dropped a handful of ticket in a flickering mess onto the carpet in the aisle. As she passed by I saw that on her t-shirt there was a large blue star.

4.

It was all of this that made me think of the sky, to pull my eyes out of my notebook and look upward, because the geography of space has always found ways to express itself down here among us all.

Unfortunately, it was Spring in the Land of the Morning Calm and, by the time I'd thought to do it, the Yellow Wind had already raised itself up from the Gobi desert and swept down over China like a manta ray; a heavy metal cloud that settled over the city so that it could blot out the sky and give me lung cancer. So I covered my mouth and looked back down, turning away from the yellow air and

down into textbooks, which are much easier to read than the sky is anyway; and it was here, for the first time, that I discovered the “Seven Sisters” of the Pleiades: bright pinpoints of light, the blue maidens of the sky, doves glowing and gliding above the neck of a bull.

The highly emotional daughters of Atlas and Pleione, a set of sisters with a penchant for getting into trouble, they certainly seemed to share some similarities with my elusive Princesses. The ancient Gods, like the teenage girls in my classes, were an obstinate and argumentative bunch, caught up in intrigues and politics that would be incomprehensible to a mortal like myself, at least until enough time passes and I could get a little bit of that understanding that comes with hindsight, where everything gets written down into notebooks and thereby transformed into terms that I can understand; and that’s what I did, scratching down what I could before the seasons or my classes changed and the patterns shifted to something new.

This possible association twinkled even more brightly when I learned how many stars in the sky are actually Korean children, who were often cast up into the firmament as a testament to their goodness and filial devotion. The Sisters even have their counterparts in the Seven Stars of the North. Seven good hearted brothers who were given their place in the sky for having placed stepping stones in a river so that their poor mother would not get wet and cold by having to wade through the water as she walked back home each night from the house of the widower who lived nearby, the lonely man who she helped to weave straw sandals. For their efforts and their concern, the brothers were raised up and helped to form the constellation that the West calls the Great Bear.

Of course, this didn't sound much like the kind of girls that I was looking for, but I thought that it still might provide a basic principle for me to work with. In the same way that the Seven Princesses are just one small set of teenage girls in a country that is full of them, the Seven Sisters are only seven of the hundreds upon hundreds of other stars which make up the Pleiades. They are just the most visible.

I thought that it was this similarity that might let me find them; I thought that these girls always did their best to stand apart from everyone around them: playing hooky or defiantly tearing up a train ticket that you are supposed to present to the purser as you get off the train or chewing tempered steel. These were the things which would make them visible, this tendency toward disorder would be the ordering principle which would allow me to find them and pick them out of the crowd because it's the stars which burn the hottest that burn the brightest; it's the ones which call the most attention to themselves that create the most recognizable constellations.

5.

Not long after, when I saw the sign for a club named *Star* from the window of a bus I pointed it out to my friend Da Young; she told me that she had never seen it before so it was probably new and that it was probably "a club for the man."

I asked Mary, a fellow teacher from Halifax, to come with me and, after some wheedling, convinced Da Young to come with us as our translator.

On the following Saturday night, we stepped out of the cab and into the chattering sounds and the tainted rain of Daegu city and walked across the parking

lot where the pavement was covered in silvery water mirrors which shone up at the sky and where I could see the reflection of the building, distorted slightly with small concentric ripples. We headed towards the door as quickly as we could because we had forgotten our umbrellas, but Da-Young was slowed by the height of her heels and the uneven pavement and so we ducked our heads and hurried together, Mary and I politely keeping pace with our tottering friend, as we moved towards the door where the *Star Hof* sign bled epileptic smears of hot blue light into the rain.

The inside of the club was made up of smooth mounds of caramel coloured upholstery, dark wood chairs and tables and soft lighting--everything looked glossy and every corner was softened into space-age curves. The place was very large and more or less empty. There was a moody looking young Korean man sitting on a stool near the door, wearing sharp, dark sunglasses and who surreptitiously picked his nose when he thought we weren't looking; and there was a Korean woman with severe eyebrows who looked to be in her fifties, her hair piled high on her head in a complicated beehive; she wore a sequined red dress that sparkled like rubies under the track lighting. She sat on a small riser against the wall, playing quiet, sprawling chords on an electric piano, and occasionally she would sing disembodied scraps of lyrics in a soft, smoky voice.

The hostess who took our drink order eyed us suspiciously, and I was uncertain as to whether or not it was because I was a Westerner or because I was with two women in what was most likely a gentleman's club. Within minutes a man in a sharply tailored suit approached our table and bowed. He had narrow, benevolent eyes that squinted out through his thick, square glasses. He spoke to Da

Young in Korean and she informed us that this was the owner of the Star Club. We stood and bowed and shook hands and he made a *may I* gesture with his hand at the empty seat at our table and sat down.

"Your club is very nice," I said. He turned his head slightly as if to hear me better, so I pointed my finger around the whole room. "Your Hof. Very beautiful!"

"Oh! Thank you very much."

We carried on with a stretch of stilted conversation. I was a little light-headed and the hostesses stood around with sullen expressions and I thought *what the hell* and asked the owner:

"Do you know anything about the Seven Princesses?" and then I turned to Da Young and asked her to translate for me.

She widened her eyes and, being a young woman in her twenties and the owner a well-dressed man in his forties, she smiled uncomfortably as she spoke and her head dipped rhythmically along with her syllables, and I could pick out the respectful *Ajahshis* that punctuated the beginning and end of each sentence.

The man's face grew pensive and I already knew the answer when I saw the familiar tilt of the head, and then the uncertain smile. He looked at me and asked:

"Who are Seven Princess?"

I didn't know what to say so I said:

"I don't know."

"Why you ask this?" The man's eyes blinked behind his glasses; a patient, cultivated smile on his face.

"I like the story."

“Ah. Excuse me--?”

“I would like to write a story about them.”

Da Young translated this and the owner still looked a little uncertain until she said another word or two and he began to nod his head dramatically.

“Oh! Okay Okay!” He smiled and his eyes narrowed behind the big television screens of his glasses and then the movement of his head switched to the perpendicular, shaking his head. “There is no story here.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh yes. No story here. No story.” He laughed and then excused himself and left.

I spent the rest of the night discouraged and I talked with Da Young and Mary, and drank sugary glasses of Cutty Sark whiskey and cola, and ripped up leathery strips of dried squid with my teeth and collected customized pens from all of the businessmen who visited our table.

They would leave us and head over to the far corner, and walk in behind a low wall topped with artificial flowers that cordoned off the moon-shaped V.I.P. section. I watched the hostesses over there as they plucked up some smiles. They leaned over the tables with crisp white shirts unbuttoned 2 or 3 buttons down, and eventually a hostess would take the hand of one of the men and they would rise and disappear into the space behind a door where colourful blobs of yellow and green and purple light bubbled queasily through frosted glass and, as the night went on, all of these V.I.P.s and the hostesses gradually disappeared into whatever was behind that door, but I never once saw anyone walk through it--there must be some

hidden passage, a V.I.P. entrance that I couldn't see. That is the kind of place I thought the Seven Princesses might live in, a confusing jumble of darkness and colourful light.

As we left we passed the frosted door and I peeked in through the spaces where the glass had been left clear to spell out *Star*, I could see nothing but darkness behind the flashing light and a magnetic message board just inside which read **Leg Show** and the lady in the red dress sparkled as she played us out the door with a rendition of "Rhinestone Cowboy."

6.

And then, one day, my friend Danielle smiled a sunny smile at me and said in a sing-song voice: "I found a princess for you!"

Danielle was a private student of mine, a teacher herself, who worked in an afternoon tutorial school for young women. I was trying to help her with some of the finer points of the language but she had a better grasp of grammar than I did and I had taken up large portions of the conversational portion of our lesson by asking her questions about the Seven Princesses. I asked her to keep her eyes open and now she claimed that one of her students fit the bill, a young girl named Keum Ju.

When I asked if she caused much trouble in her class, she widened her eyes, lifted her bird boned hands and started making exploding shapes coming from her ears, saying: "Steam here! Steam here!"

Danielle was very kind hearted and always tried to help me out, and told me that Keum Ju had consented to talk to me in exchange for not being given the boot

from the academy where she worked. Apparently she had been busted for throwing a steel ruler during a class and making a deep gash in the white board at the front of the room where Danielle had probably been squeaking out the conjugation of “throw” with her marker. Keum Ju did not want to be expelled because, while she didn’t care about learning English, expulsion would mean she would be separated from her friends. Danielle told her that if she would do her this favour and talk to me she would give her a second chance--and then, as she told me this, Danielle bugged her eyes at me and said “fourth chance!”

When I asked if she was one of a group of seven, she looked up at the ceiling tile, laid her hand over her mouth, thinking, and tapped her cheek with a fingertip 1-2-3-4-5-6- and then she smiled and said ‘yes.’

I planned to meet Danielle and Keum Ju at the park nearest to my school. I sat on one of the long line of benches, which were shaded by a long yellow wood trellis. I was excited that my search had finally come to an end.

While I waited the cicadas strung sizzling invisible power lines of sound between the trees, a call and response: an electric hum broken up with the sound of a cartoon spring bouncing. An old man slept on the bench next to me, using a plastic soft drink bottle for a pillow and it popped and snapped as he moved his head.

When they arrived, Danielle introduced us. Keum Ju would only look at me side-long, her pupils were suspicious little animals peeking out at me from the corners of her eyes. We sat on the bench and I regarded her like a rare bird. She was a little less threatening looking than I had expected, because she sat with her

hands folded on her skirt, although her school tie *was* askew. She looked down at her lap, so that all I could see was the incredibly straight bang of black hair that bisected her forehead and thin elliptical moons of pink eye shadow that crested on the horizons of gibbous shaped lids.

When I leaned over to get my notebook I caught Keum Ju out of the corner of my eye looking at Danielle and she drew a large, invisible nose in front of her face and then, when she saw that I had seen her, she put her hands back in her lap coyly, and her eyes widened into an innocent look: *I didn't do anything*.

I asked her some questions but she was self conscious and spoke in single syllables. I asked Danielle to tell her that anything she said would stay between the three of us and that she could tell me anything about herself that she liked. Danielle translated this and she started to talk and then Danielle told me that she hated school and that she wanted to be an airline stewardess. She said a few other little details and then, she started to talk and kept going. I was very surprised as she slowly gained momentum and, as she said more and more, I became frustrated, I couldn't understand, I wished I'd brought a tape recorder. Danielle sat and nodded and listened and listened and nodded while Keum Ju rattled on and then when she stopped talking Danielle kept nodding for a few seconds more, thinking again. She looked at me and said "ah....How do I say...? And then began to tell me what she'd said.

7.

Keum Ju's Story:

If it's possible to fit her into my constellation, then I would have to say that Keum Ju would probably be Merope, the sister who shines less brightly than the other six; still bright, but less ostentatious than her brethren, as volatile as a B-Type Sub-Giant. In Keum Ju's case, much like her celestial counterpart, it was her choice to be this way, in fact, she tried very hard to shine less brightly.

When she was born she was named to be a treasure, something to be coddled and cupped in the hands because it was precious, her father's little 'golden marble.' The problem for Keum Ju was that she couldn't escape the shine of her father's watchfulness; and, like a shiny marble, no matter which way she rolled, the spot of light which her father's eyes cast on her didn't seem to move, it was always there playing over the surface. I'm not sure if Keum Ju realized it consciously, but I believe that she had a sense that one of the ways to stop light from reflecting from something is to tarnish the surface, so it doesn't reflect light as clearly. So, she began boldly stealing plastic-wrapped triangles of gim and rice from the 7 Eleven, liberating Mickey Mouse pens from stationary stores up into the sleeve of her school uniform, swearing with English curse words, damaging white boards with steel rulers, making life difficult for irritating foreigners like myself and her Korean teachers alike.

I asked her if there *was* anything that she liked about school, but she shook her head; she didn't understand. Danielle asked her and Keum Ju said "sex appeal" and then the old man shifted in his sleep and the pop bottle under his head popped

loudly. Danielle looked back to me and said: "She say she like Shakespeare."

I asked her which play she liked and she said "Homlet," and then I said "Hamlet" and she screwed up her face and looked away in irritation; it was the wrong thing to say.

"And her six friends? Who are they?"

Danielle speaks and Keum Ju rolls her eyes and drones: Ae Yoon, Na-Young, Joo-Eun, Kyung-hwa, Chan Sook..." and then she stopped. Danielle looked at Keum Ju and her eyes flashed to my face for a second and said something to her quickly and Keum Ju shook her head and Danielle looked at me quickly, dismayed:

"Ohhhh. She has five friends only. Oh, *mian, sorry sorry...*"

I realized as I left the park that day and walked in among the concrete dominos of the apartment buildings and the thousands of peoples squeezed behind their little squares of glass, that I was going to abandon the idea of the Seven Princesses. The idea that this mythological group--these herds of angry girls--probably did not even exist was too much; the whole idea suddenly seemed less urgent, less *real*, and I thought that I probably would never bother to try to write a story about them. Even if I could keep drawing lines between all of these disparate things: cicadas or constellations, sisters or stars--all of these patterns were just a product of my mind and nothing else and, even if I kept looking, all of the little patterns and designs that I might see were false and, at best, were completely accidental.

Shades of West Orange

In many ways, these stories can be summed up with the name that ties this little collection together--a short phrase that can be a place or a fruit or a particular shade in a sunset that will change by the second and, as you watch it and as your brain tries to connect that colour to other things that share that tone, it has already changed into the colour of something else entirely. For that reason, it's difficult to approach the task of trying to render in more overt terms what you are trying to do in pieces that are, by their nature, meant to hit the reader more obliquely--not just showing instead of telling but actively trying to avoid straightforward connections between one thing and another. Not to mention the difficulty in trying to dress up my newborn with some of the bows and ribbons of more academic terms while constantly worrying that, in the process, I might accidentally strangle it with them.

When I reached the end of the first part of this process--the writing of the stories--the question became what to tell instead of show and, as you can see, this caused me a fair amount of anxiety. However, I then remembered the words "intentional fallacy" which helped some; and then a ghost with a heavy French accent reminded me that "[t]he birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author;" a statement which, in broad terms, I've always been more or less inclined to agree with, and so, as far as you're concerned, I'm already dead, and that has made this much easier (Barthes 148). I've already ridden my horse into the orange of my sunset, disappeared over the horizon and I am gone with a capital 'G.' I say all of this here not because I'm trying to be clever or because I'm trying to undermine anything I might say from here on, but rather, because it was in trying to

work my way around this fear, by approaching this anxiety with these concepts, that revealed a single aspect of the stories that I could focus on and thereby, hopefully, minimize the damage I might inflict on them. It was in thinking about these ideas that I realized that somewhere in the lower levels of these stories, deeper in some than in others, are questions of intention. In particular, the ways in which intentions colour an individual's perceptions, whether these intentions are our own, or what we may perceive as someone else's, good or otherwise. In broad terms, I'm talking about the way in which intentions, no matter whose they are, can affect the way we see what is around us and the way that this, in turn, affects what we create from these perceptions, whether that be a house or a home, a life or a story.

This concept of "intentionality" is a confusing one, particularly when viewed in terms of what we call "post-modernism." Anyone who is even vaguely aware of this term has probably heard about things like the "fragmentation" of the conceptual paradigms which we use to order the world, and of the ways in which this makes it impossible to divine individual intention (Butler 10). However, even if you ignore these definitions, it's likely that if you probe for the intention behind a particular cause or effect it will keep providing possible answers, and will keep producing more questions and factors to consider for as long as you want to look at it. When viewed in light of a post-modern trope as simplistic yet all-encompassing as "fragmentation," it is very easy to follow this trail so far, and in so many directions, that it eventually disappears down a rabbit hole which opens up into a vast grey area, and which, if you're like me, can seem a little bit sterile and maybe even a little bit frightening. That said, I try my best to see this multitude of

possibilities in their individual shades rather than bleared together into a monochromatic mess--a riot of colours that may be too plentiful and too complex to quantify but for this reason are very pretty to look at, and hopefully this tendency is reflected in these stories.

At least, that was my intention.

While interpretation must always be connected to individual points of view, when seen from the outside, the supposed “grey area” between a singular, idiosyncratic viewpoint and reality is a highly productive and wildly colourful place for fiction to happen, and it’s in these spaces where these stories open up. I wanted each story to appear as if it were completely independent from the rest but also, when taken together, I wanted the whole to be more than just a collection; I wanted something that could be read as a single work, and this didn’t turn out to be as taxing as I initially thought. As I began to write, and as any writer hopes, strange new threads began to show themselves, and these provided numerous possibilities for the stories that came later and, in turn, the latter stories provided a few more spars in the conceptual rigging when it came time to rewrite and revise the ones which came before them.

In “Before the Ambulance Arrives” the intentions of the characters are obscured somewhat because the source of what actually happens within the short span of time covered in the story is removed until the very end; the effect--Justin’s accident--precedes the cause. The idiosyncratic angles of the characters’ individual perspectives have an effect upon what seems to be happening. When Laura flies her kite she can see “the plastic trembling on the frame but it was far enough away

that she couldn't hear it" (12). The difference between what she can perceive versus what she cannot becomes even more complicated when it involves her connection to Mark. When she sees Mark sitting on the grass she simultaneously perceives and projects what he might be thinking. Even from far away, familiarity allows her to see finer details that might have no meaning to someone else, but her perceptions form a palimpsest: "The little line in his forehead was there, she could even see it now from 30 feet away and even when she looked up at the kite, that little wrinkle hung there in the sky like the glob of light that a camera flash leaves on your vision--but not really, she was just imagining it" (12). Imagination becomes an important part of this process. Her understanding of what is happening becomes a matter of the way in which she can fill in the blanks of the story while she is in the middle of it, and each element is only one facet of a network of overlapping stories: "He had burned dinner and he thought, when she didn't say anything, that she was angry somehow and he snapped at her" (12). Cause, effect, intention, perception, emotion, these are all elements of the stories within the story itself and these are the smaller narratives which exert a subtle but insistent pressure upon the main story--of the day after this squabble, when an accident happens which will render most of the character's other problems insignificant, at least for a little while, or maybe, in another way, will give rise to some new ones.

Then, looking at it from a wider perspective, there is that inevitable event which has always called the significance of everything into question, that we all deal with in different ways, and yet, makes us all the same--death (of course). This is another of the elements, albeit a more profound one, which creates uncertainty in

the characters' individual stories, in much the same way that the possibility of Justin's death looms over the story proper. However, the importance of death for each individual character is mitigated somewhat because it is a part of the future and therefore, inevitably can only be viewed as an abstraction.

In a certain light, the life of an individual can be viewed as the story of a particular mind reacting to what happens outside of it and incorporating these elements into its narrative and, like a story, a life is what happens between the points where it begins and where it ends--two points where perception and memory become very blurred. I will say that it isn't a coincidence that the word "mindless" appears several times throughout the collection. As Laura falls asleep--always a handy metaphor for death--she lies thinking and daydreaming and then "before she knows it, she's gone"--another phrase that appears more than once here--a tiny nagging reminder that there may be little warning before that big ultimate darkness comes along and blots out all of the idiosyncratic colours of an individual mind, grey or otherwise.

I'll admit that, as the first couple of stories began to hit the page, even I was surprised at how often the idea of mortality showed up as the big dark creepy elephant in the room. I wanted to avoid being too sombre with these stories--I would prefer to write about life rather than mope about its end--but you can't ignore death and so I wrote "Remains." With the word "mindless" still working its way around my brain, I wondered what kind of story you could tell if you removed both the minds and bodies of its characters. Consequently, this story is meant to be a sort of erector set for two human beings, but it's a set which has been much used

and is missing most of the important pieces and is almost useless.

The appearance of a ghost is usually an expression of a particular aspect of a personal history, the result of some crime or traumatic event which doesn't allow the spirit to rest; and the solution to resolving this imbalance is often predicated on the importance of objects--a hidden room, a murder weapon, some cherished personal memento (Miller 109). A concrete thing can become the symbolic representation of a person that is no longer physically present and, from the vantage point of the people being haunted, that "spirit" can only be seen and understood as an indistinct, translucent image and a story. It is in unravelling its story that reveals the truth or solves the mystery or resolves the question which the ghost represents and allows it to rest, making it so that it will no longer bother the living, and leave only memory behind. My ghost story dispenses with the ghosts and the story and the reader is only given what is left behind, whatever that may be.

The objects in the story could be seen as an expression of some intent on the parts of the people who bought, used or created them; the question as to whether or not this can actually mean anything to the living and what, if anything, might be said about the people who owned them, is left for the reader to decide. That said, the inability to find a coherent meaning in these things doesn't dispel the fact that there was an intent there at some point and that these remains point to *something*; the possibilities become a flickering afterimage of intent--of the way in which "ghosts love to underline things" (27). If you're lucky enough to still be alive and you look at all of these objects together, does anything appear in the space between them ("the tranquil synapses of a ghost") and are there any vestiges of something

human left there (25)? Even if the answer is 'no,' what is it that we might perceive in or project into these spaces? In order to not interfere with this process too much, I tried, with a few exceptions, to minimize any serious judgement or qualification on my part by removing my own 'voice' as much as possible, so that the reader can create their own stories or, at least, wonder about the lives of the characters, such as they are, and, I hope, ask questions about them. Is their story a happy or a sad one? I think there are a couple of possible answers in there, but they're best left unsaid.

I was also surprised by the way in which inserting the word "God" into a story immediately seems to give rise to unintentional allegory. Initially, some of these inevitable metaphors didn't cross my mind and, even when I tried to avoid them, I would reread what I had written and there would suddenly appear some possible interpretation that looked like it was trying to say something about deity/human relations. This tendency became an interesting chicken and egg question as to what I thought my own intentions for the story were and what ideas and voices might be subconsciously encroaching on it and, as well, how this would affect the way it might be perceived by the reader. Finally, I gave in and changed my original title and I placed that little word over it all, and left it to loom over the page and the whole story.

The story itself is an anecdote told by the nameless narrator, polished and structured through repeated retelling and, in the process, has been coloured by many different voices. A simple story spun from a memory--meant to amuse people at a party--gets mixed with personal details, a little bit of that accidental allegory I mentioned above and, at the same time, intentionally adopts some of those

allegorical possibilities as rhetorical devices. In certain moments some of these elements occur simultaneously:

I can remember the clarity of the acne scars on the surface of the moon, which was full and had an orange tint, like the colour of the fire which was often being jumped over by whippet-boned guys, they leapt through it with their long legs curled up like pincers, sneakers flashing out through the flames before they landed on the other side" (32).

There are reflections between what is happening on the ground and in the "heavens"--the colour of the fire shares the same tint as a harvest moon, a meteorological effect which has figured into numerous myths and cultural rhythms: as a marker of the passage of time or of the seasons, or as a symbolic, spiritual event. The fire itself casts many different shades of light on the Clearing, carrying with it very heavy symbolic connotations that could connect with either Christianity or paganism; it sits at the center of a bacchanalian gathering, licking at the feet of boys who, in this light, resemble animals ("whippet-boned") and who jump through the fire with enough repetition that it starts to resemble ritual. The choice of which of the two paradigms this most resembles probably depends on your perspective.

"West Orange" is a man's story that is almost at its end. Plucked from its original context, the story's epigraph, *ex oriente lux, ex occidente frux* or 'from the East light, from the West fruit,' could be read as a seemingly simple statement of cause and effect, a suggestion of the processes of organic growth, of the natural rhythm of days and seasons, historical echoes of the westward movement of

humanity around the globe (Thoreau 602). The story, in part, deals with things taken out of context. McEwan is an occidental who has retreated to the East, and who has chosen to live his life in guest houses, wading around in “a pool in a stream of temporary faces” (47). His story is one of someone avoiding context and of the ways in which the distance between where a person’s story begins and ends has shaped its trajectory. When his friends begin to talk about “happy endings,” McEwan “tries to think of a few moments like that that he may have had, but he feels that this is definitely the wrong road to be on,” and so, to dispel this fear he cracks a joke (58).

When he is asked about his original home, it never gets mentioned fully by name, yet the past always finds ways to assert itself. He is an American with a Scottish name and the “Mc” (or “son of”) stamps him with a history, whether he likes it or not. As I’m talking about his name here, this would probably be the point where I could mention that “McEwan” is thought to mean “born of yew”—a yew being a variety of tree which has many leaves but the males of that particular species do not bear fruit (Sims 102).

The story was meant to almost overflow with cause and effect, to establish rhythm, an ebb and flow that is constantly interrupted or accented by accidental patterns or, at least, patterns that are an expression of things that are so basic that they go unnoticed or are ignored--the sound of a shoe “slapping down the stone steps,” another unidentified sound acting under the same rules as rock when it suddenly comes into contact with water:

It is definitely a rare moment, rare only in that it's quiet, as pleasant as it is uncommon and in the couple of seconds he's got he enjoys the shush of water and nothing; but then it doesn't last: a woman's voice says something in high-pitched Tagalog and then there is a crack of something hitting something else that clatters off into the sea, the sound bounces itself on the water like a stone skipping over it and then it's gone (43).

There is a perceived lapse in cause and effect, but then language enters into this thoughtless moment and changes it, even though he doesn't understand what is being said; "nothing" rubs up against something ("the shush of the waves"), an unknown thing creates a familiar pattern, and the effect still occurs whether or not you know the cause. In all of this commotion McEwan remains largely unmoved. He prefers the quiet. Yet all of the crashing and banging of everything around him continues to happen, and this sometimes causes something else to happen, and McEwan is left sitting among the echoes.

When a roll of film blooms into a set of photos it seems to interrupt his inertia. The opportunity to see "his home through someone else's eyes" is appealing and even though he doesn't actually get caught in any of the photos, there is the possibility of a recognizable reflection that he can't seem to resist; and the "shining girl" starts to represent something for him that even he can't quite put his finger on and that I would prefer to leave unarticulated here.

As the story moves forward the pictures can't seem to help but take on more weight, literally and figuratively, as they do when he drunkenly drops the packet into the water:

"he finally snatches the packet up, streaming water, and he

tries to shake off the sea as if he's putting out a match, and it slips from his hand and hits the sand with a slap. He bends over, wobbles, pincers it in his fingers and brings it close to his face, peering at the sand crusted on it, flicks at it with a finger and then thinks *fuck it* and puts it back in his shirt pocket and makes his way home with a glittering head and hardly pays any attention to the firebugs twirling in the darkness out between the trees or the men jousting with girls on their shoulders or the wetness seeping through his shirt and cooling his nipple.(56).

Elements of nature, human and otherwise, his own basic physical sensations, everything gets lost in the haze and by the end of the story the packet of pictures, which were meant to provide him with a new view into his surroundings, begin to look even more familiar.

To some extent, "The Seven Princesses" is also about echoes and reflections and about how the position of the person who sees or hears them affects not only his ability to make sense of them but interferes with what he intends to do with them which, in this case, is to write a story. Much like the objects in "Remains," the narrator's story only appears in the lines which are drawn between disparate things, just as the forms we impose on constellations are merely invisible lines that create two dimensional images out of stars which may be light years apart from one another. The narrator's mythology draws a through line between many different voices and a variety of different texts, but there is always the threat that reality will encroach upon the fiction, interjecting other elements in between those spaces, breaking up the lines, and in doing so, breaking the story apart so that only the pieces are left behind.

This all starts to sound a little bit like it's veering toward that post-modern

idea of “fragmentation” that I mentioned earlier, or perhaps a better word to use would be “entropy;” but again, I’ll be bull-headed and say that my idea was to keep this story connected to terra firma, even if part of it deals with outer space, even if the lines that I use to connect the two are invisible. I say this because I think there can be as many things which connect people to other people, and to the world around them, as there are things that cause a separation between them. These can be large or small: as huge as a myth or as insignificant as hand gestures that mean the same thing in the Northern hemisphere as in the Southern one; as complex as all of the stars in the sky or as simple as a word like “O.K.” which more or less means the same thing in the East as it does in the West, however that came to be. It’s all a matter of perception. Different varieties of myth, no matter where they come from, like the ones which continually creep into the story, probably sound vaguely familiar even if you haven’t heard them before; and even though the narrator terminates his quest to find the Princesses, and gives up in disillusionment, there can still be a story about them even if they don’t exist, because at that same frustrated end-point the reader has just finished reading one. In this way, I differ from the narrator because, even if the lines that I see connecting all of these things are invisible, I will take Hyon-Jong’s advice--to “love/your untruth until your untruth/ceases to be untruth” (Chon 294).

More than anything, I hope that, in the handful of pages before this one, I haven’t done too much irreparable damage to that sense of ambiguity I was hinting at in my title. I will use these last few sentences to underline again the fact that I’ve attempted to discuss only one aspect of what I was trying to achieve in these stories;

but this is just my anxiety talking again and, if you believe Barthes, my saying this doesn't matter either, but I can't help it. Ghosts love to underline things.

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