

volume two
the slight bookcase: a novel

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ABSTRACT

The Slight Bookcase envisions African-Canadian writing metaphorically. The Latin word *metaphora* is translated as carrying over, and my project, a faux-spiritual autobiography, invokes this use of the word as a site upon which meaning is in the process of being transferred, or carried over, from one state to another. This process requires a close reading to be cognizant of how binaries such as black or white, self or other are situated in the text as a synecdoche – one is a part of the other, doubles are parts of a whole, and understanding occurs at the level of simultaneity. Jonah, the protagonist, is both WaSimbi and Jinjabi – two tribes involved in a civil war in the fictional country of Liwani - he is black and he struggles with untidy desire for a woman who is white, and he moves from Africa to live in different places in the U.S. The result is a text that does not represent, but rather explores multiple shades of meanings and paradoxes evident in this undulating linguistic topography. Boundaries aren't static. Instead, they are permeated by the encounter of the reader with the foreign, the uncanny, and the unfamiliar. As such, the work doesn't fit neatly within an idea of either protest or a national literature that makes arguments about the black communities place in the larger Canadian mosaic, or give voice to a

contemporary African-Canadian condition that is multi-cultural and at odds with the mainstream culture. It is written in the twenty-first century by a Kenyan-Canadian – another bi-nary – and incorporates as well as deviates from these models in an effort to fashion a *kunstlerroman* envisioned as the first part of a multi-volume work modeled in its scale on The Remembrance of Things Past by Marcel Proust, a French man writing at the beginning of the twentieth century. The doubling inherent in this connection evokes the evolution of a developing narrator who is in the process of learning to write his own story out of reminiscences of the past.

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PART I. LIGHT

PROLOGUE. KAIPEI

in february, it rains ever day and it lasts until the end of the holy season. the downpours happen suddenly, all at once, in fierce spurts that stop abruptly as if exhausted from the intensity of the effort. afterwards, dankness pants in steaming puffs along the cerulean edges that crowd the pacific isle's coves. while dampness clings to the coconut trees, the ginger bushes, and the low restraining walls of grey stone that line beaches of ash and eroded limestone.

at the centre of it all, peering out from a forest of eucalyptus trees, is an extinct volcano famous for a crater that will be visited on shrove tuesday by newlyweds, linda and ron chase; a couple who build a life together based on a calculation of compatibility made during a chance meeting in the sci fi section at a video store. serious in their intent, they've moved with dynamism towards grand plans to order the tiny part of a universe they agree is contracting rapidly into a big crunch, and after a noon wedding, they have embarked on a kaipean honeymoon charged to the limit on their credit cards. at a trough in the electromagnetic field, they both want children, and they'll continue to try as they travel backwards in standard time, land at the kaipei airport, and get whisked away, by a hotel's bus service, towards the promise of tropical sunlight that is eight and a half light minutes old. as they watch the back of the head of a wise cracking driver from an area of the island dominated by roaming pit bulls and cock fights, they speculate

about the probability of their trip being ruined by unpredictable weather forecasts, the rain, and while the bus turns onto the h-7, they hold hands and endure the screeching falsetto of car tires breaking in traffic on the wet web of intersecting highways. sound displaces by fractions of seconds, and soon they pass the kaipei correctional facility, a prison surrounded on all sides by barbed wire and watched over by guards in turrets with immense plexi-glass windows. and they agree that they don't see the same piece of empirical reality organizing itself in the pupils of their eyes and arranging itself in the hemispheres of their brains. so, ron chase looks out for a hint of the ocean he couldn't see from the airline that flew them high above cloud cover. and as they speed past a tent city near the football stadium, linda watches folk who sit on picnic tables beneath a dripping canopy of banyan trees, or else trundle off to nearby water fountains to inexplicably wash their socks and underwear with white bars of soap. and onward, these newlyweds who've travelled back in space-time make additional calculations. will their room come with an adequate view? will the nasty weather effect their scuba diving? did they remember to shut off the elements on the stove? and after they disembark beside potted tropical plants in the driveway of a hotel lobby and a former high valedictorian, wearing beige shorts, has carried their luggage to the front desk, they check in.

today there will be a brazen sunset to catch from the hub of the extinct volcano, and so ron and linda chase retire to their suite to unpack and shower and change into shorts. tomorrow morning, ron will order in breakfast on a tray

with a rose thoughtfully inserted besides the toast. tutored by cyberspace, they will spend their first waking hours dancing around the pressure to perform a lurid range of intimacies named after tossed salad, or tea bags, and then weather permitting, they'll be away on plans made in an earlier rotation of the solar calendar. linda will wrap herself in a beach towel, and they'll both head to the pool in robustly dark glasses. isaac asimov in hand, they'll soak in the hot jets of whirlpools before taking to hinealko beach where they'll be scalded by particles of light. as they walk palm-to-palm and talk about scuba diving, relatively speaking, time will already be moving too fast, and worry about an overextended budget will get more difficult to deny amidst their knowledge of mathematical formulas not yet corroborated by double blind studies. and as they'll note the hermits who lie on sand for days staring out to sea, maids, who disembark from buses emanating from the tangled foliage of the island's shadows, will put chocolate mints on their pillows - a sliver of another story told by a landscape mined for its potential to produce pineapples, sugar cane and coffee sold locally at twice the price it goes for abroad. and what will be visible to the newlyweds who will sally into hinealko beach park are barbeques with brown children running back and forth, tramping past coconut trees and scuttling across the scorching sand and into the cool, aqueous pacific. mamas and mamas-to-be will sit on mats listening to the one who plays the ukulele before the young papas and soon-to-be papas get reggae happening on the stereo, the full gamut of generations hamming it up over a rowdy game of volleyball in the

sand. there'll be teasing back and forth, and shared resentments over the time travelers who dump garbage everywhere before sitting on low walls looking out at barges on the water disfigured by the underbelly of sky sparking up in the muted colors of the holy season's sunset. and after being served seafood pasta by a californian who stayed on the island for its surfing, linda and ron chase will go dancing, not quite mixing with the assorted browns that have flecked the landscape lifting cargo, and working forklifts, and smiling at supermarket cash registers as they bear a curse that slits the fully throttled night.

it's between unpredictable downpours on the hem of the polopolo valley that jonah ayot can be found in his furnished studio apartment silently focusing on preparations he must make before setting out among rotting carcasses of star fruit with his three and a half page *apologia* for kerstin (written in a style that recollects soren kierkegaard). he sits at a honey pine desk thoughtfully munching on the last of a stack of pancakes, cooked for fat tuesday with an assortment of butters on black cast iron pans. then he goes over his list: wrist watch, keys, identification, cell phone, and a pen knife before he taps his back pocket, feeling for the envelope with his most recent explanation for behavior he must use lent to atone for. as he washes down lukewarm batter with milk, a tropical ceiling fan whirs above him while cool trade winds course over polished linoleum tile. he re-checks for the onset of rain by glancing through a glass four panel gliding patio door that leads onto a balcony that looks onto the

lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal (wherein resides the
lilikanahahenesakaluluhani bat fish).

done.

jonah drops his empty plate and cutlery into the kitchenette sink, washes them with purple dish soap, and dries them with a cloth. he won't waver in his resolve; not this time. so, off he limps, in a walking cast for a fractured bone in his foot, to the tiny bathroom in the apartment's rear where he brushes his teeth, and then crosses himself before saddling up and embarking on this latest trial, to stare down guilt that expands unabated in him like dark matter.

he's queasy from his feast, belching as he lets himself out his door on the sixth floor before taking the aspen homeowners association's web-cammed elevator to where kerstin works the late afternoon shift at café xanadu.

silently, he hop-steps down a short flight of stairs and around orange construction signs on a sidewalk under repair. to his left is an empty lot bought in the seventies by a group from japan with plans to add apartment buildings to holdings on neighboring islands, but now the land is clumps of riff-raffish grass and yellow posters hang from its fence of weather-beaten plywood.

he's not-quite ready to give up kerstin, but he's giving himself until midnight to wrestle with this lack of perfection, and to find solace in the noise that jams signals while he tries to sleep at night, pestering him to withdraw into sanctuaries of quiet reflection: libraries with oak paneling, texts that require study, and solitary retreats at sparsely inhabited beaches.

jonah's skin tingles beneath a thin, sticky layer of sweat clinging to him like vaseline as he waddles past to'o, the paralyzed five-year-old wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying where his parents leave him to air out each afternoon - on his side on top of a straw mat under an awning beside a bustling parking lot - waiting out this day before his brother, lyric, is released from the kaipei correctional facility.

to'o lies sidewayslongways near hot tarmac looking at life flash past at ground-level: lime crocks, socks worn with slippers, scarlet nail polish, and flabby footankles crushing cockroaches among breadcrumb-eating pigeons. he lies with his cheek implanted on a straw mat, and drools, and knows everything important there is to understand about the block, even if he can't see that there are those who sun on balconies like house cats that loll about on lawn chairs. instead, he can feel the percolation of a jack hammer carving a square in the concrete at the bottom of the street, his ear pressed to a plane that is an everpresent squirm of high rollers with their multiple hustles.

jonah moves on.

up ahead duck-huan, the grocer, carts boxes of sports drinks into his store on a trolley, and he does not smile while he disappears inside among an effluvia of diet pills, erection enhancement creams, hair dyes, shampoo that is the best the world has to offer, and egg-like ivory balls belching bubbles in the colored water of lava lamps.

jonah stops in for a pack of gum.

“unpredictable weather,” he says.

“but not so bad,” duck-huan replies. “my daughter say there’s snowstorm in minnesota, and she has no class at university today.”

“i hate snow,” jonah replies. “when i lived in pennsylvania it snowed so much one time it came up to my shoulders.”

“your shoulder?” he replies.

“crazy, huh.”

“yes, crazy.”

then jonah’s out the door with the *apologia* in his back pocket, and he hobbles along okukukua avenue past clumps of hibiscus, and grafitti tags on park benches. handbills are taped to signposts that advertize the sale of the goods belonging to another someone who has found it impossible to make a living on the island – schemes involved with posts on the internet having only yielded a smattering of supportive shout-outs from relatives about the fantabulousness of the endeavor. nothing more. and there are shops and restaurants and bars that will be replaced by other shops and restaurants and bars within two years by the latest influx of entrepreneurs who will buy up the latest round of dirt-cheap goodies advertized on the posters taped to lampposts. as he limps, jonah thinks of snow in curranvale city and of the rev who kicks off bed sheets in mullins hospital before pulling them back over a body recovering from a fall on ice, a lifetime of jolts, and unresolved considerations of an after-life. his mind addled by painkillers spiked with morphine, and a recurring dream in which mind and

matter are extensions of a mind that, after all these years, flawlessly conducts updates of his many failings.

in less than four minutes, jonah enters café xanadu, passes a woman with white hair and blackened teeth nursing a coffee at a table before he engages the effete, aproned man behind the counter.

“is kerstin in?” he asks.

“no, darling.”

“doesn’t she have a shift right about now?”

“not on this planet.”

“sorry?”

“she was let go.”

“oh.”

“if you see her,” he says. “tell her, my condolences. the card is in the mail.”

outside tourists are wrapped in towels, and jonah passes a gift shop where ron and linda chase browse. ron pretending to admire a coral key chain while he silently makes calculations about a scuba diving trip that linda isn’t privy to. he’s a little out of sorts, unable to do much more than think of how he has watched the events of the last year happen to him. since popping the question, he’s begun to notice marked differences between him and the woman he imagined as a life-partner. despite his belief in the uncertainty of measurements in space-time, he’s irked that she’s never punctual, and that she takes much too long to make a decision; both of these conditions on display while linda lingers much too long,

in his objective estimation, among the souvenirs she'll send to in-laws who don't seem to like him. and while she feels thankful for finding a mate who is like an electron orbiting her nucleus as she picks her way through trinkets on shelves, jonah ayot is decisive in heading towards kerstin's nearby apartment building. he labors on his broken foot, stopping to lean on parking meters until the pain subsides. after finally doubling back on okukukua, he pauses to catch his breath by staring at an abandoned shopping cart lodged in the murky shallows of the canal, its wheels spinning and its metal glittering in brown water and drowsy sunlight. further along the sidewalk in front of a building with the pink facade and across from the greater kaipei's canoe club boathouse, *sein gummibärchen*, chloe ostheim-bohrmann, madly paces and says fuck you very much to the day she was born.

CHAPTER I. CANAL

yup, *that* chloe, the one who saved his ass from a beating at the liwani airport as he left the country in 02. a chiffon-skirted chloe ostheim-bohrmann who now goes by kerstin ostheim-bohrmann, the ex-wife of tobias bohrmann of bohrmann's organic toothpaste, minus her apartment keys, and of late stalking the shoulder of the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal while an anorexic-looking greyhound sits beside her on haunches watching with his head cocked to one side.

true to form, her hands inexplicably go up to arrange hair bound by a tortoise-shell clip at the back of her head, and jonah hesitates ...

eight years ago, the snow is piled five feet high and white soapstone lamplight bedecks the campus. it glances indifferently from icicles hanging in untidy rows from storm drains outside dingham u.'s student union building. distant suns may no longer exist, and i feel like an imploding star, running out of gas, collapsing into its center, emitting less and less light as dj sonar spins old skool discs.

i finish a beer. then hit the outer edge of a crammed dance floor.

way too overdressed in *baba's* tie and suit jacket, i work a taut rhythm section. the air stretches with dry ice and blue and musty fumes, and then i'm down on

my back, spinning, flipping up to my feet, and there ... over by the jukebox,
kerstin gesticulates at the center of a talkative circle.

i'm quick to hurry over.

"whut'up?" i bellow in her face.

"yo. yo," she replies, rummaging her fingers through a bob of curly blonde
hair streaked on one side with purple dye.

"i knew i'd run into you again," i say.

"*ich auch.*"

"what?" i shout into her ear.

"*ich auch.*"

"no. what does that mean?"

"me too."

traces of neon light disappear in the dark roots of her otherwise glimmering
mane, and i notice her leather boots are scuffed with yellow paint. she smells like
pot, and oh dear, i really do feel overdressed as she introduces me to other artists
from the east side; blaaanka daaarling is an installation installer, and eion is a
hologram fiddle-arounder leaning on a cane with a handle of well-beaten silver.

they're loud and cynical and crass and funny and unanimous in their non-
belief of their anti-beliefs that artists are both born and made among the prols
who work the docks. *liberté, égalité, solidarité.* and let the workers of the world
unite because i stupidly confess to living in north oldeham with the rev, and
because i do not hate the religious, and because i make use of a remote to open

the garage.

“it must be weird to be both ‘black and the man,’” kerstin says, her fingers plucking away in air quotes as she navigates for the words to convey the nuances in this thought. and i’m only half listening as i try to memorize her friends’ names that stick out like deviated septums: eion (as in eee-hon), and blaaanka daaarling (said with irony). oh boy, and soon we’re joined by demarion armstrong, dub poet, wearing skin-tight black leather pants and carrying a briefcase with badges for causes sewn into its canvas siding.

“this party’s dead,” he announces.

“the fat lady’s no longer singing,” eee-hon pipes in.

“elvis has left the building,” blaaanka daaarling says.

they all look to kerstin.

“let’s go to ptolemy’s.” she punches my shoulder. “wanna come?”

“suresure,” i reply.

ptolemy’s café is an after-hours joint on filmore avenue, and i’m only too pleased to tumble out with them into the last vestiges of a snarling cold front, our breath puffs of powder as we stalk walkways littered with salt.

kerstin and i dawdle behind the others, watching while they howl drunken gibberish at the parapets and gables that surrender their facades to a steady swirl of the last of winter’s biting wind.

we talk graphic novels.

“i love asterix the most,” i say.

“you’re shitting me?”

“for reals,” i reply. “you’ve got to love that dog which bawled every time someone chopped down a tree.”

“dogmatix.”

“ja.”

gummibärchen is bundled in layers of thick woolen sweaters, and soon she tells amusing tales about grade school at banana hill, pennsylvania, with mrs schwartz, and drawing class, and growing up speaking german with her bespectacled *oma*, who didn’t throw away old clothes so she could mend them with cross stitching, and her *opa* who loved a chocolate candy called *negerkuss*.

without warning, the others halt in a nook hidden by a garbage bin and pass around herbs that make the late-night crawlers stagger anonymously into canals. toot, toot go car horns. and afterwards, kerstin and i lag behind while her friends smash discarded bottles against a wall drowning in frost. then blaaanka daaarling hoots and hollers about an approaching patrol car, and laughing we totter along with the others into an alley.

they run, and i follow wishing i could be as cavalier.

we turn a corner, duck into ptolmey’s café and beneath saturnine art, donuts are glazed, coffee is topped up for free, and kerstin sits on my lap, the hub, always at the center of a conversation where everything is an argument. and i flounder on the outskirts of her well-hewn circle, quietly sipping from a bounty of caffeine to keep myself awake, stubbing cigarettes into saucers that swim with

our caffeinated dregs. good lord, they're loud as they circumnavigate the meaning of holocausts while the sober, whom kerstin good-naturedly detests, trickle out of ptolemy's to go home to hibernate.

dull grays illuminate the windowpanes, and it's well after six when kerstin and i stand beside a winking orange light, kissing, our lips an easy mangle of well-fitting shapes. then i sneak back through the awakening city and finally climb into my bedroom window at colby manor.

i drop past the curtain and onto the floor.

"disappointed in you, isn't the word." it's the rev in baggy red pjays sitting at the end of my bed. then he gives me an abbreviated version of his "this is a warning shot fired to rattle rather than wound" speech before accusing me of smelling of marijuana, which i deny.

after he leaves, i curl under covers, snug and warm among stories of kerstin as a tomboy who fixed car engines in uncle ebenezer's barn while a non-hypogenic black cat criss-crossed in swathes of dusty sunlight.

kerstin wants to keep us casual, no strings attached, no weird hassles. so when she's prone to pick me up and drop me as she needs, i see it as a symbol of an inability to fully trust anyone. and when she has moments where she seems to need me, i believe we're on the verge of an unprecedented closeness. therefore, i put up with the days when she doesn't call me back, and i don't question excuses she makes about flu-like symptoms, or of marathon work sessions that last

through the night. instead, i try to impress her with gifts of asterix comic books she doesn't own, i'm agreeable with her anti-views to a sickening degree, and i write her thoughtful notes to show her she is loveable, to show her there is love in the world, to show her that I'm the one who will always be available whenever the sadness holds too fast.

but that isn't all. the rev has a james-brown-black-is-beautiful thing going on. back when he was a student at howard, he sported a puffy afro complete with a pick. he marched with stokely carmichael, and was ambivalent about turning the other cheek as preached by dr king. and if he is to be believed, the afro-american women he dated had naturals and were proud swahili-speaking, dashiki-wearing queens. they quoted maya angelou and supported their men in the struggle. so, kerstin would be a problem for the rev.

since kerstin and i are strictly casual, i keep our non-relationship on the down low. hush hush. my dirty little secret.

high on *ganja*, we swivel in a closet on top of a stack of winter boots, her mouth in my mouth, our flickering tongues plastic knives melting in a butane flame. a club banger bakes on the stereo, she bites my inner lip, and i bleed wedged between laces and leather and blunt metal, and movement, and wolf grey eyes, and a pink ring the size of a quarter around her nipple, and moles shaped like orion on her left hip, and i do not consider where my arm is in relation to where it ought to go. her denuded thighs open as i enter, and we're slow at first until we fuck: breaking like rapids, or banjos speeding through

bluegrass.

afterwards, she is an embryo curled into my chest, and falls asleep in a trade wind rustling among curtains that sweep ledges in the dark.

as i sit against a closet wall with my arms around her, the world is full of discordant ambulance bells dingdonging. i nuzzle in hair that is a messy fro, and i think of how i'd go to the market in the middle of the night to fetch her white chocolates if she wished.

in the morning, she feeds me scrambled eggs.

"what do you see yourself doing in five years?" i ask her.

"is that a serious question?"

"uhuh."

"i'ma be a world-class pole-vaulter," she says. "what about you?"

"i'ma be a top-notch jockey."

"aren't you too big for that?"

"not if i'ma be an anorexic," i reply. "i hear the pounds shed pretty quick."

then i lie supine on her mattress while she paints me forgetting the way back to my other life. we smoke hash before she walks around a blank canvas laid out on the floor until an idea occurs. then she dips one of an assortment of thick brushes into cans of paint before leaning over and smushing it onto white space. she stops, whirls from one spot to another in order to turn up nikka costa on the stereo, has another hit of the pipe, yelps, smears more paint from brush to canvas, and says fucking a.

in the coming days, she backs up my gutters, my ventricles, and puddles in my chambers as we take out-of-the-way backstreets to score high-grade dope. then we play pool with the gang at the rialto on drake street, or take in dj cut up at the beat factory. and blasted out of our minds, we retire to her bedroom to try sexy positions lifted from our idle chatter.

... ... jesus and mary jones, babe, she's the wobble in my knees, the one who makes me want to make promises that i choose to keep, and the one for whom i'd take sabbaticals to study dribulets of sweat sliding her spine as i take her from behind, my hands on those spry hips. and it is here i'm besotten with her wetness, her ridiculous wetness, and i'm a bewitched funky drummer tapping away at a hi hat. tap tap. my heart a clunky ball, a clutzy boy rattled by her goddamn shake and bakes as my mouth presses hard against straits between her shoulder blades.

afterwards, she's an impression i carry for days, water carted from the river to the village, and i'm full of an irresponsible wish to carry her books, and to buy her a necklace that would dangle from her neck, flashing with the light of the new moon ... sapphires,

sulphur.

jonah coaxes out the reason for kerstin's curses - her key is on the kitchen table beside a pot of steeping tea. he considers options; he launches into a laundry list of tactical maneuvers better suited to a lieutenant mapping out a plan to round

up a den of dope dealers. she can take the northern perimeter looking out for tenants leaving the building while he storms the main bastions. "all set?" her nose wrinkles, and her left cheek quivers from an effort to still the lifting range of dunes rippling across the flat pasture of her brow.

the dog, bensonhurst, tugs on the end of a leash kerstin clings to in softening light, the stench of the canal suffuses the air with a hint of an open sewer, a fly drops from on high to land uncontested on kerstin's chin, and schools of tilapia negotiate the slimy bottom of the canal's waters.

"let's try that again," she says.

"what?"

"come here," she replies. "we can say hello better than that."

in her arms, there's a familiar wispiess. brittle. barely there like the streaky clouds in paintings she once showed him bundled in the corner of her loft. but he's no longer going to be overwhelmed by wisps, and flickering light, and the expanse of giddy feeling that helped him to forget gramps' hapless last stand at hoppa. not this time. instead, he reminds himself that he moves among disciplined habits that enable accomplishment, and he gingerly disentangles from her to stand back muttering about another priority at the sunderland's at five.

"i'm expected to relieve the ultra-bustly mrs of her teenage son, with cerebral palsy," he says. "she's got people coming over to help organize a fund-raising benefit with silver forks and plate."

“silver forks and plate?” she replies. “what century do you live in? the eighteen hundreds?”

jonah ignores the ribbing. instead, he’s all business, his shoulders hiked in the upright position (no drooping), and his legs planted slightly apart with his weight dispensed inequitably upon the earth (the cast on his foot bearing the brunt of the pressure). he flips open his cell, gets the digits of her super, and proceeds to give the fella a call that amounts to an ultimatum about returning to the pink palace *post haste* from a gathering to celebrate his daughter’s sixteenth.

“it’s been an awful, awful day ...” as kerstin sprints through an anecdote about her rejection for a part in a film to play a person of interest to the f.b.i. in an unsolved series of daring bank heists, bensonhurst’s leash gets tangled around her ankles. “*manno, hund!*” she yells. “*was soll denn der scheiss ...*”

jonah waits out the worst of it. “good Lord! this is a lot like your crazy-ass cab scene in *im chor der engel stehn*.” a film based on a line from schiller’s poem, ode to joy. “except it’s a whole lot shorter.”

“you didn’t like the scene?” she replies. “everyone loves that scene.”

“like? no. no thanks.” the famous cab scene is the central event that lends irony to the use of schiller’s title, and it netted kerstin a palme d’or nomination for her portrayal of klara, the eurotrash high-society gal who is a club ho. if he remembers correctly, klara has a hissy fit in one of those old, clunky yellow taxis as she realizes that her life is built on a thin tissue of other people’s shifting opinions. “awful.” kerstin cracks a smile. “it went on for thirty minutes?”

"it was five," she says.

"it felt like thirty."

"that wasn't my idea." she has regained an evenness of temper. "emerick voss, " the director, "was a jackass, always going for a real-time, documentary feel. he ruined a decent script."

"i suppose there is a sacred triunity between producer, writer/director, and actor. a social contract, to borrow badly from rousseau ..." her greyhound begins to gnaw at the cast on his foot. "... i like to think ... here, imagine a compost tumbler full of organic materials ..." he shoves the pup away as playfully as he can manage. "it cannot function optimally without" kerstin is glimpses of rectus muscle, and striated contractions at her neck as she laughs. "... exactly, a holy tri-union not to be trifled with."

"could you be just a little more confusing?" she asks.

he changes the subject. "hey, i'm moving out of my apartment."

"today?" she asks.

"i'm still looking."

"so you're not moving, not for real."

"no, it's for real," he says. "just not right away. there's much too much crap going on in my building."

"you mean, like people keep breaking in to steal your shit."

"no. like ... stuff."

she punches jonah in the shoulder before putting a hand on his lower arm, and thrilled by the entertainments, the dog jumps his bum leg. "bensonhurst!" and kerstin's chiffon skirt flutters in the breeze as she tugs sharply on the leash. "nein!" the long-snouted challenger drops to the sidewalk before leaping back up again. "good God, must you be such an attention whore?" his claws scratch a trail along jonah's lower abdomen and upper thigh, and he maintains his balance by putting too much pressure on his broken foot. "bensonhurst! down!" she grabs the dog by the scruff of his neck, forcing him to lie on the ground while he snaps his jaws at her. "go. go, jonah. he's antsy, so i'll walk him up and down the block until the cavalry arrives. go. you'll be late for work. i'm fine. really."

he makes a spontaneous decision *not* to give kerstin the envelope with the *apologia* for his outrageously blue e-mail, the one that marks him with the spontaneous musings that are an oozing pimple on the butt of interracial romance. "are you sure?"

"go!" plans are left open for cappuccinos and biscotti on a terrace along hinealko beach. and jonah leaves them battling for alpha status on the bank of the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal.

he's oddly surprised by how anti-climactic fit is for him to finally feel nothing about the more recent sit-downs kerstin failed to show up for, *and* the calls she never bothered to return, *and* the text messages in multiple forums she couldn't make the time to respond to, *or* the fact that she once ditched him for demarion armstrong, dub poet.

CHAPTER II. CLIFF

5:13. the sunderland's home is much like any other rapidly constructed home with pretensions to be a country estate. it has hedges, and sprinklers that go on regularly at four in the morning, and a pathway that leads up to a brass knocker the shape of a gargoyle.

jonah's thirteen minutes late.

"i was about to send out for a search party," eve sunderland says, ushering him into the front door.

"the bus wasn't on time," he replies.

"you should have called."

the front hall is free of clutter. a vacuumed beige carpet is spread like morning glories beneath ivory walls. the art is of mallard ducks and stills of green apples in brown bowls. through a doorframe is a kitchen with glinty, sterile surfaces, and a sparkling coffee maker with what appears to be a g.p.s. tracking system affixed to its shiny face. all of the wiped surfaces lend the place a tasteful gentility.

somewhere in mrs sunderland's veins resides blue blood, the offshoot of a long-forgotten royal lineage from a dusty west african village – ibo perhaps. there's something of the lady of the manor about her as she stands on the bottom of her carpeted staircase, calls upward for rick, and then excuses herself before

disappearing into the living room to continue her meeting with a coterie of church members.

as jonah stoops to remove his shoes, a thump of feet erupts at the top of a staircase, and before he can get his balance, the seventeen year old has barreled down to give him a hug.

“steady there, soldier.” jonah gently disentangle himself from rick’s embrace, takes his hand, and lead him to a seat in his dad’s study at the end of the hallway. “so, what do you want to do today?” he asks.

jonah places onto rick’s lap a white board with cut-outs of a variety of venues - arthur ashe park, the laredo art museum, other assorted goodies one can take in for free. then he puts his charge’s right hand on the board, and waits for him to move it towards one of the options (an activity rick’s dad devised and abandoned over the years while trying various methods to open the lines of communication).

“pick one.” rick giggles, pushing the board away. “okay, no worries.” he rocks back and forth, banging his back hard against the chair. “how about watching waves? we haven’t done that in a while.” rick leaps up, and rushes out the door.

jonah’s slow, and can only limp after him as rick disappears into women’s voices in the living room.

once jonah rounds the corner, he finds rick standing in front of a coffee table arranged for late-afternoon tea. the curious teen waits before a group of three huddled on the couch, still as a statue, ogling, his arms folded around his upper

body.

mrs sunderland calmly addresses the wide, wide smiles of mrs sienna moorland and mrs paige cargan. “you’ve certainly come a long way since you moved back here from that poorly run facility, my dear,” she says. “a long, long way.” the two women are glossy red lips, and flesh-colored foundation.

“rick!” jonah whispers. “we’re interrupting.”

“the latest medication hasn’t helped get your sleep under control, has it my angel?” she continues. “but at least you don’t have as many seizures.”

jonah hobbles over to rick and clasps firmly onto his arm. “come on, soldier.” he gently tugs, but rick won’t budge.

“dr salsman thinks you belong at waybridge care.” mrs sunderland’s modulated voice exerts its dominion over this weird tableau. “but you belong at home, don’t you my dear?”

rick watches them without blinking.

finally, mrs sienna moorland interjects. “i think i speak for paige when i say how grateful we are for this opportunity to work on rick’s behalf. his courage is truly ...”

“inspiring,” mrs page cargan interjects.

“i don’t remember who said it first,” mrs sienna moorland continues. “but it’s so true that one never knows who one’s teacher is.” she stands, extending a hand. “you are my teacher, rick.” her shin bumps against the coffee table, and teacups wobble before righting themselves.

mrs sunderland is quick to dab a serviette into small puddles of spilled tea. "you're doing much, much better at home, aren't you my dear?" she continues without breaking stride. "what will you be getting up to today?"

"we're going to drive around arthur ashe park," jonah lies.

"good," she says. "as long as you stay in the car."

"of course," he replies.

this time jonah's forceful in gripping mrs sienna moorland's teacher firmly by a forearm, and directing him out of the room. once in the hallway, jonah points to a closet wherein footwear resides. rick grumbles while helping himself to scuffed running shoes, sitting on a bottom stair, slipping into his footwear, and tying up his laces. then jonah points to the front door and waits for him to twist open a lock.

once outdoors, rick runs into the driveway to the family station wagon and pulls repeatedly on the door handle. "be patient, dude." jonah hobbles to rick's side, unlocks it, and steps back while the teen makes himself comfortable in the passenger seat. "you're going to have to do up your seat belt." rick giggles, and starts fiddling with dials on the radio. "nah, soldier. your belt?" rick ignores him, so jonah takes his hand and place it on the belt buckle. rick shakes loose to play with the volume dial, and jonah has to work to hold a hand to the seat belt as they go through the motions necessary to get rick to do it up on his own.

by the time jonah's rounded the car and settled into the driver's seat, rick rocks back and forth, back and forth eagerly anticipating an adventure at the

ocean, maybe? it's impossible to tell what actually goes on with him.

the car toggles left, then loops right as they ride the long tarmac spine of a road that runs up a gradual summit adjacent to the pacific. rick's window is open just enough for him to lean into a breeze tickling the brim of his red beach cap. what does he see? gauzy sky meets a distant horizon punctured by cruise ships. closer still, frothy waves carry surfers as well as windsurfers with sails flapping while they await the next wave of water that turns from turquoise to dull green.

rick's humming quickens as they enter the first of many homes with rolling hedges, and purple bougainvilleas' and roiling pink and yellow flowers. locals for hire take weed whackers to the overgrowth at the borderlines of high-end driveways. homeowners get in and out of high-end cars among statues of lions, fountains with boyish michelangelo rip-offs spitting water, and empty tennis courts bouncing with bright light. eventually, the station wagon passes under monkey pods into dark shade, and spotty pearls of sun peak through cracks in the foliage. up ahead, a cyclist in spandex, crowned with a black helmet, peddles past a jogger in tennis whites - a short frilly skirt, a flash of yellow undies, and a visor. after a stop sign, the sunderland's car is slowed by a convertible full of those taking in a breeze that kicks with moisture, softening the firmament with the tinge of blue delphiniums.

rick rocks back and forth when he sees thrushes and honeycreepers flicker into view in swarms that shatter apart among branches.

“we’re almost there,” jonah says.

they turn into a parking lot along the edge of a cliff, the radio buzzing with jingles as they idle into a vacant spot.

rick is quick to undo his seat belt, and after jonah has opened his door, his charge is goofy, gamboling in his red cap while jonah firmly holds his hand. they follow a black rail that leads to a sandy trail sharply descending between tall, yellow grass. and jonah holds on tight, afraid that rick’ll bolt off the beaten path and roll down the craggy rock face. jonah’s foot feels as if a bone has dislodged from a socket and presses against a nerve in his arch. so, he’s extra cautious while they pick their way down the slope before they reach an opening in yammering grass that becomes a cove filled with the squawk of the shore-bound.

rick rushes forward to stand near a bubbling, dying wave. then he jumps away humming before examining his footprints left in the wet sand. he seems puzzled by his imprints that disappear in the coming and going of the tide.

“yo, soldier!” jonah stands behind him. “don’t get your shoes wet.”

startled by a spear fisher in black wetsuit emerging from deeper water, rick’s off again, chasing a scrum of cawing sea gulls.

jonah goes after him and rounds a bluff claimed by green umbrellas and even greener lounge chairs.

what does rick make of women with dyed hair facedown with strapless, oily backs, and men wearing thongs with their shiny butt cheeks thrust into the dying sunlight? he stares at paisley bikinis and children tossing sand skyward with red

plastic shovels. does he notice the skin blisters, the floral designs of the huge towels that are like coats of arms, bottled water, styrofoam coolers, snorkels and fins, inflated rubber dinghies and life preservers, red plastic buckets connected to children building sand castles, and a sign, many signs, warning about an infestation of jelly fish?

it's a big disappointment to rick when they return to the car.

what takes place next is nobody's fault.

see, jonah doesn't notice rick dropped his red cap outside the car until they are both comfortably in our seats. there are other things to think about - the arrangement of knees so they don't jam against the glove compartment, the snugness of his seat belt, the adjustment of his headrest.

it 's only supposed to take a moment to fetch the cap.

jonah leaves the car running, and when he circle back with rick's cap in hand, he's totally unprepared for the sickening click of automatically locking doors.

he should have calculated for the possibility rick'd lock himself in.

his brain lurches. the car is running, they are perched on the edge of a cliff.

jonah doesn't have many options. he can call the sunderlands, but the mrs and her company are probably rounding the corner on a motion to serve chicken with red wine at their function. the mr is an option. but he's at work. the po-lice. no freaking way. not if jonah plans to get out of this without being charged with ... neglect. and to be fair, he's determined not to confirm suspicions that his

brain hasn't been deloused for evidence of vermin that still feasts on old ways:
offering a blood sacrifice to shrines of stone, eating the uncooked hearts of farm
animals, and dancing around bonfires to provoke the rains.

so, he stands on his bum leg by rick's window uncertain what to do.

CHAPTER III. LILONEUM

11.47 pm. *frische blumen in die krüge*, and as jonah lies on the floor, night occurs at a different register for the aging. it comes and goes, went and came, the train from itouri city to hoppa upchucking diesel through a bleach savannah loping with impala, anthills. a siren unsettles him, the linoleum is difficult against his back. there's static, crackling waves, and a blizzard of noise as an old timer's embouchure cramps in a pucker full of pocket trumpet.

tonight he suffers from a desire to see kerstin reappear in the morning on the corner of ikaika and mainahaina ave. rest is elusive, and he assembles impressions of days that float on top of the striding, oblique piano circulating liquid in his cochlea. among hesitations in the music is a recurring image of kerstin's dirty-blond hair pinned behind her ears, her eyes oval with the gawking, many veined, mummumbling sea.

and when the old timer solos over the tip tap of a hi hat, jonah notices a new moon accessorizes the frame of the patio door. rotund. engorged with light. and once again he belongs to a homeland of lime quarries, the lisping unDead, and a childhood where his feet are troubled by pebbled driveways and thorns from the jacaranda bush.

in those days, i gather the things i love around me. mama and baba. the new

moon. bedtime prayers to wish them all well. a garden of pale-yellow gardenias swarming with pale-blue butterflies. and when it rains, it pours, so i huddle beside mama in the room with the slight bookcase picking my way through words in baba's books. big words in big books. biographies, mouthfuls i can't say without muscles acting like contrarian jackasses in my neck. biographies, a word that means tales of those who are dead, God bless them. and mama is patient with her corrections, until she is suddenly curt with me while she buzzes in a cotton dress between big words and ironing and prepping meals and making lists of more to do before baba gets home from the bank.

baba knows money, and how to make it triple. and mama's burdened by his fat-cat lifestyle. and when he pulls into the house smelling of boozy fun, they argue.

"wouldn't it be nice to go for a walk in gitmanda park," mama says. "jonah's been coughing more than usual and he could use the fresh air."

baba is hunched at shoulders, and crosses his arms even tighter.

"it shouldn't take too long," mama continues.

"it's supposed to rain," he replies.

"is it a problem for you to make sure your sick son gets a little fresh air?"
mama asks.

"come off it, gladys, i'm just making an observation about the weather."

mama bites her lower lip, stares left and then right, and finally puts her hand on my head as if to protect me.

"we're just wasimbi horse manure to you, aren't we?" she says.

"i don't want to do this anymore," he replies.

mama hyperventilates. "you made vows before God."

"people change," he says.

"till death do us part," she replies. "remember?"

that is when baba finally rolls into motion, goes to the bedroom, and come back waving the revolver that was stored under the bed.

mama pulls me close as i blink up at him. the snout of the barrel pointed at her head, his finger curled around the trigger, his mouth pursed like when he concentrates at the bank while counting piles of money later bundled with elastic bands.

"till death us do part," he says. "that can be arranged."

i lean against the slight bookcase waiting for the big shot to stop being a big shot, and i wait for mama not to be crazycrazy, trying not to wheeze because of an allergy to pollen.

i stare at them and quietly mend them with virtue through temperance and fortitude and prudence and courage. but before long i cannot stare enough to keep mama from crazycrazy, or to make the big shot come home on time as promised. so, i regroup with the miniature army of plastic soldiers that keti and i set up on opposite sides of the living room – the room with the scarlet curtains we lit on fire while smoking rolled-up newspapers - and then we go to war with

marbles rolled at plastic armies over territories i imagine as mama and baba.

plummeting rain sloshes about in the gutters of itouri city, and i believe i can bicycle-kick sunshine into the back of a mosquito net. and on the day i stop believing in mama and baba and give up wishing on the new moon, he returns smelling of breweries, and smoke, and fun. when he stumbles to the couch and turns on the television, mama lets rip a garbled scream that sets off a solar eclipse: clouds twirl, the moon bites chunks out of the sun, and it grows dark while she locks herself in the bathroom, turns on the taps, and bawls like a wounded wildebeest.

i lean into the window beside the slight bookcase, and watch the world mama turns into a black moon frayed with light. and soon baba bumbles to the car from one hand on a wall to another, and pisses liters onto the front tire, splashing gravel.

as day turns into night and back into day, baba goes away again for a long, long time, and i lose my way to the boy who can fall asleep as soon as mama tucks him away at night. and in the coming days, i listen to angry saxophones on baba's record player. and i watch baba's film projector, and on a monday mama vomits yellow gruel after we watch a reel of a monk beating himself with sticks, atoning for his flesh.

for an unTime, i'm inside big words, and every time i hear mama walking about the house like the witchdoctor in unTime, i'm afraid she'll splash her cheeks and legs with yellow paint and then dance around a fire bawling like a

winded beast. crazycrazycrazy. rainbows in triplicate appear, and i think about disappearing like baba to a place of big shots that smells of fun he suddenly reappears from.

on the day the body of a rising wasimbi politician is discovered off a dusty road in the saroto forest, i find out about baba's other family. it happens quite by accident. baba and i are grocery shopping, and i get distracted by a picture on the front page of the liwani standard showing the body of xxx. his body is swollen and peppered with bullet holes. his white shirt is untucked and one of his shoes is missing.

i can't stop staring.

eventually, i notice baba isn't anywhere to be seen. so, i check the aisles.

over beside the cans of soup, a woman with a baby in one arm and a young girl in another is clutching onto baba's arm.

"the wasimbi are killing the jinjabu wherever they see them," she says. "your children are afraid."

i feel wrong, step backwards, and knock over a pile of canned tomatoes.

in the morning baba takes me aside, gives me his wrist watch with the big silver strap and clip-on-clasp and diamonds.

"always remember names, son," he says. "if you remember a person's name he will be a friend for life." he slides the watch over my wrist, but the strap is much too big. so, it slips down to my elbow while i watch him walk out the front door to join his jinjabu family.

therefore, it's just me and mama when the phone lines and electricity are cut. and while we wait for the civil war to show up on our door step, mama knits me a mustard sweater, and then she takes to sitting on her bed with a guitar.

"oh, God is good," she sings. "oh, God is good. oh, God is good to me."

afterwards, she's soft faced and chirpy and she strokes the back of my head while we find something to read from the slight bookcase. then we curl next to each other on the couch. and i won't move. not even if i have an itch on my shin because i want her to be comfortable, and i want the comfort to last. and when she says, ouch because my shoulder is sticking her rib cage, i become a jumble and i don't know if i'm just a pain she puts up with.

i spend my other time catching birds. i tie a long piece of string to a stick that props a box open, and inside the trap i spread out pieces of bread. then i sit in my bedroom window watching the yellow weavers creep towards their doom. the more cautious ones pop in and out with a slice, the bolder ones get cosy as i tug on the rope and topple the lid of the box on them. afterwards, i transfer the birds to an overcrowded cage, and watch them fly into the bars until their beaks bleed, and they congregate next to the water and the piles of bread and wait to die.

when baba comes back home, his arms are full of gifts. he calls me sport, and shakes my hand, nice and finger-fracturingly firm.

"did you take care of your mother?" he asks.

"yup," i reply.

he punches me lightly on the fleshy part of my shoulder. "good, good," he

says. "the worst of the coup is over."

he leaves me unpacking a jeep with a remote control from a box, and disappears into the bedroom with the gun under the bed. after fifteen minutes i hear them laughing, and then there is playful shrieking. as the strap of dad's watch cuts into my wrist, i listen to mama's moans. they're indistinguishable from the squawk of the birds in my overcrowded cage.

by the time the sky has settled into a monotony of blue, i'm living with gramps in hoppa – after i break my voice and after mama and baba and keti have gone to join the unDead who rummage through the saroto forest during the festival of the harvest.

time is difficult to quantify, the years are filled with study, and after i've graduated from liwani university i hike to a small village in the plans to go through the sham of asking precious matabele's *mama* permission to take her daughter to a dance in goma.

precious's living quarters?

a nowheresomewhere liling with rust, dust, and shacks, shacks, dust and shacks and bony strays; thin dogs, emaciated cattle, kids that are ribcages. her mama's place, a sheet between two halves of a room shared with ten others. a small charcoal stove, two plates, plastic spoons, one huge pan for cooking all the food, chickens, and a transistor radio tuned to the bbc. and her mama and i sit on cardboard boxes stolen from a junkyard. while precious serves tea with slices of

white bread slathered in margarine, her mama holds two children in her lap and shouts out orders to the others who run in and out of the door. no shoes. just tattered shorts.

in a dark suit and tie, i answer questions while precious waits outside.

"who is your family?" i'm asked.

"my father is kolosha and my mother is ayot, ma'am."

she ponders the unholy alliance of a wasimbi with a jinjabi. "and your father has passed into the black sun?"

"yes," i reply.

"your people ignore the counsel of conchellema, don't they?"

"my grandfather has his own way," i say.

she shakes her head.

"he's a knowledgeable man," i quickly add.

she ignores my remark. "what is your future?"

i tell her of my plans to go to america to get a graduate degree, and i talk about returning to liwani to marry her daughter and to be the headmaster of a first-rate secondary school i'll build in the area.

mrs matabele barks at one of the children to take the babies out of her arms, and then leans forward in her chair to think on how my plans fit into her own.

"we have not forgotten the story of how the greater light trapped your grandmother's memory in a gourd." she flicks a fly off her face. "no matter what spells the reverend suffers from, you are still a true born."

precious is called in, and we're officially given permission to go to the dance in goma.

within the half hour we pile into the dented truck belonging to daniel gitimanda's uncle and joyously fall in among the bonfire people, her thuggy pals: hannah nitmayo, george kupeli, and tina botono.

forty minutes later we rattle over potholes in a road used by the builders of the feltway damn, and pass the burial grounds where big money has gnawed away at skeletons with cranes and fork lifts. we turn off besides a clearing with a view of the valley that drips with baobab trees, and roving vultures, and rumors of discarded bodies. then we walk through dense bush into an abandoned lime quarry. somewhere hyenas cackle. monkeys jibberjabber in trees. and out comes a cd player humming with guitar licks and saxophone riffs heavy on the high life. posthumous tupac. then we fan out into the surrounding woods to gather branches.

"what's that, old boy?" hannah nitmayo says.

"in a bit of a fix, what," tina botono replies.

"anyone for a spot of tea?"

"jolly good."

"oh i say, did you bring the marmalade?" hannah mitayo asks.

"rather, old fruit," tina replies. "but i'll need to fetch it from the boot of the car."

"chop, chop, old chap," both precious and i blurt in unison, and then burst out

laughing.

conversation is loose, not about anything of note, as we drink warm brew and then disappear among the trees to fool around in one another's clothes.

during my final year in liwani, i find a new pastime devouring songs downloaded from the internet. over and over again, i listen to ice t, i'm your pusher/pusher man. then hide away in my bedroom writing a collection of paragraphs with long stretches of middles: no beginnings or ends. and i listen to the harrumph of trumpet in tight horn sections until i can't feel the thing in me that made me puzzle with sentences in the first place. hours of it. and soon gramps knocks on my door, and enters without an invite to say i must eat before he sits down glancing around for signs of a secret life i've begun on the side.

"what sacrilege are you in the midst of committing?" at times, he talks like a king james bible.

"i'm inventing a gimmick that will delete the internet."

"delete the internet?" he asks. "wouldn't that put a lot of people out?"

"duuuh, gramps."

"duuuh?"

"that's the point, isn't it?"

"here's an idea," he says. "why not invent a gadget that makes you less cheeky?" worry rears up in the crinkled shadows around baggy owl eyes. "yes, i'd even help you with something like that."

“you can raise donations at the church.”

“it’s the sort of thing the town could get behind.”

“bring us together around a common cause. “

“but perhaps we should break bread first.” he stands with another quick glance around the room. “that kind of work needs a full stomach.”

i follow him to the dinner table.

gramps has one basic rule. i must never, ever goof off. it’s an expression he picked up at one of his conferences abroad. stop goofing off, he says whenever he notices i’m not tearing from one task to the next. do not goof off. don’t sleep past 7.30 in the morning. look like you’re being useful. and chop, chop, jonah. chop, chop. don’t goof off.

he worries that i’m too much like mama. crazycrazy. a weevil aimlessly blowing among the traces of baba’s carelessness.

while we’re eating the telephone rings, and one of his friends in christ, reverend tusker, calls from the states to say he’s jetting in for a visit in two weeks. afterwards gramps goes on about how the lord is good, and what a miracle it is that his african-american friend will be coming to hoppa. except he says it as if God sits up in heaven coming up with little set-ups to personally make gramps’ life better.

“doesn’t God have like world peace to focus on,” i say.

“that’s a statement, isn’t it?”

“nope, a question.”

he hunkers down as if to tackle a burly fly-half bearing down the left flank.

"it's important to give God the praise for the good as well as the bad."

"in your dreams, *babu*," i reply.

"yes, i have dreamed about this, son."

"no. i don't mean that literally. it's an expression that means it ain't never gonna happen."

"God speaks to me in my dreams."

"no. no. i know he does, but that isn't what i mean."

"then you should say in your fantasies, *babu*. that makes more sense. "

i re-focus on my plans for the internet.

after we finish eating boiled potatoes and cabbage, he tells me to get to the dishes chop, chop and not goof off because the day is young and there's tending to be done in God's beauteous garden. then he trundles off to the chapel.

that's gramps: so full of faith. like the time a little before the new year, soldiers muscle their way onto the grounds, and make us lie face first in the dirt with guns pointed into the small of our backs. they cuss and steal chickens from the coop and stomp all over our vegetable garden, and for a parting shot, they knock down part of a fence. afterwards, gramps thanks God for the soldiers, and says how he, gramps, has mad love for them, and how the lord should forgive them because they know not what they do. and when i grumble that he can't mean it, he goes on about how the entire incident is God's will, and he's merely a vassal or a vessel, whatever. so, i tell precious about it and she's mad as hell and says

she'll take care of it since she has thuggy pals who settle arguments by rubbing each other out. and for the rest of my time in hoppa, we never have any problems with the soldiers (something gramps gives God all the credit for along with the glory be's).

hoppa.

hoppa is a nook both inside and outside time. depending on whom you ask, it was settled by shirembe, the first-born son of the greater light. as i understand it, before the settlement the greater light would meet the lesser light twice daily, at dawn and dusk. but their *tête à têtes* are all too achingly brief. so, they try through sheer force of will to extend the fleeting moment when light and dark meet to exchange their watch over unTime. no good. instead, they're unable to hold fast to one another as Time tears them apart. thus begin days of yearning marked by a sulkiness that sees the start of the droughts and the tumult of high waves that crush the shores the mutala people call home.

the plants and animals of the soroto forest call a meeting, and it is decided to send the eagle as an emissary to the comets to plead for mercy from these relatives of the greater light.

the comets confer with one another over what to do about their kin, and then they send enopo, the crooked tailed one, to plead with the clouds for their assistance. in exchange for their cooperation, the clouds are given the power to make lightning out of thunder, and a deal is struck in which the lesser light is allowed to canoodle for three days and nights, at the beginning of the blue moon,

in the folds of their white gowns. success. the eclipse appears. and shirembe, the morning star, is born at the foot of the hill beside the saroto forest.

and so begins the great trek on the day the people lose their way to unTime.

shirembe moistens his brown skin with sim sim oil, smears his neck with the sticky juice of the gum trees, and he carries the spear of the people into the forest where he fetches the colobus monkey hide. then after consulting with the cowrie shells, he searches in the yellow plains among purple catacombs and red anthills for the climber plant. along the way, shirembe, the morning star, passes the patch of spiked thorn bushes and descends into the desert pan before entering the everglade of purple flowers where he starts the settlement at hoppa.

we, the descendents of shirembe, live beneath the black sun in a village that is a red brick chapel and a convenience store run by tobias bempwetu, the one that serves as a bank, a post office, a public telephone and an internet service.

walking west along the dusty road, one comes upon conchellema, the witchdoctor, sitting on a stool in front of her hut. and today is much like other days as she calls me over to give the latest update about a misfortune that has its source in an abomination against the ancestors.

i'm terrified of her.

"did you hear gitamanda joined the unDead?" she asks.

"no, mrs conchellema."

"his car overturned on the road to gomo," she says. "he pulled out the boma root i put on the grave of his uncle and told all the people gathered that

conchellema and the Lively Tempered One is just superstition."

"i have to go, mrs conchellema."

"this is what happens when the big man does not know the way back to the black sun."

"yes, mrs conchellema."

she reaches for her gourd and shakes the pebbles that live in it. "there were two of his relatives in the car with him and no one else even had a scratch."

"gotcha."

"are you a big man?"

"that would be my grandfather," i say.

she laughs, holding the gourd to an ear. "you go now."

and i'm out of there like snap.

okay, here's what outsiders should know. i'm skeptical about ... well, just about everything. however, i'm all belief when it comes to the unexplained happenings that take place deep in the countryside. there are pink stars and sinewy, stringy lightning that leaves the night haunted by shadows from the saroto forest that look eerily like the unDead. conchellema, the high priestess, talks of black suns that devour time, slices cuts of meat from the hind leg of goats, smears them onto the bellies of those who are ill, and the believers sit up the next morning ready for a gallop through the surrounding plains. no ashen discoloration of skin. no traces of the unDead's stink on them.

as i take the unpaved road leading to the chapel, i pass mary and sarah

dongoya who wear cotton dresses that are long enough to cover their knees. next to them stride peter dongowe and paul jibitanu, the religious men who pursue them wearing charcoal trousers, black ties, and white short-sleeved shirts. they all carry black leather bibles that go with them everywhere, even to the toilet i hear.

“God bless,” they say.

“live long and prosper,” i reply.

they return to chat about a scripture that speaks to them of how to keep their future, theoretical marriages sound, and i walk on between the waving stalks of sugar cane of mr ramala’s multi-acred farm.

after a little over half a mile, i push open *babu’s* front gate, and make my way down a driveway discernible only by tire tracks in the grass. then i retire to my room to download the smashing pumpkins from the internet, plot the deletion of cyberspace, and slowly devolve into a person precious matabele describes as “the clown prince of darkness.”

clown prince?

okay, there’s a scripture gramps framed on the wall in the dining room about princes and principalities. somethingsomething. and one that precious likes to re-interpret as “hand-to-hand combat in which darkness and light swallow towns like hoppa whole.” she always says things like that, a bit sad but thuggishly fly. she’s keenly aware of the ongoing battle between gramps and conchellema over the souls of hoppa, and often talks of how they’re both ghouls, pretty much, who

conjure up spells for the safekeeping of the living that buy into the idea of a great beyond – gramps offers the body and blood of the Christ while mrs conchellema boils goat’s blood. and on new year’s eve soon after the soldiers take our chickens, she talks me out of spending the night with the bonfire people and for kicks into attending a youth bible study in the chapel led by the visiting reverend tusker.

gramps is thrilled at my sudden interest in matters ecumenical. “chop, chop.” and he doesn’t want me showing up late. “to the victor go the spoils.”

“you need to stop saying that, gramps.”

“and you need to stop goofing off.”

he’s hopeless.

before the service, precious takes me on the weed express and gets us stoned while i provide the matching bright yellow fila tracksuits. then we sit smack dab at the front where the rev, james lewisham tusker, can’t help but stare at our ridiculous clothing.

he points to the window, vaguely identifying suckers out yonder cut off from grace and revelers who ought to be doing what he has us doing, enduring slow death by unsexy scripture readings. “real happiness is earned, not taken,” he sums up, pretty much.

in the spirit of all things clownish, i convince precious to come with me to talk to him afterwards. gramps and reverend tusker are good friends from the lean years, so i feel a bit guilty launching into bullcrap about whether to wait for

marriage before doing the horizontal mumbo jumbo.

“jonah and i are very much in love,” precious adds.

“very much,” i say.

“he isn’t pressuring me.”

“nothing like that.”

she reaches for my hand, clasping tightly to my fingers. “i’m just not sure i have the will power to preserve my ... my ... my ...”

“do you know much about *massa damanata* and augustine’s doctrine of concupiscence?” the rev makes use of a word i like that means the weakening of one’s will through horniness. then he segues into a tangent on the alienated in the gulags of siberia, the crappy state of the shantytowns near gomo, and the miracle that is pods of larvae. he mentions freud and the super ego as it compares to the super egotisms one finds among the hippity-hoppers he says we emulate, and he talks of bingo ‘jackpot’ jefferson, a former wide receiving sensation lately injured, whom he has taken into his employ. while he talks, i practically piss myself trying not to laugh because precious and i have plans later to fuck our way back to righteousness to ring in the new year; i’ll get naughty in her mouth and then all over her stomach.

my point is this, precious likes the clown prince, and this seems to be what earns me a ticket to front-row viewing of the sides of her that no one else knows much about. her mama’s home. her thuggy pals. her fear of mrs conchellema’s black rhinoceros horn. and after the session with the rev is done, we hide out

under moonlight in a hollowed-out patch across babu's fence in mr ramala's sugar cane field. it's dead quiet, and we sit back-to-back puffing on a smoke. yes, one smoke that we pass back and forth to each other like a couple of fancy lovers in one of those goddard films we watched in a cinema in goma.

"merci," i say.

"de rien," she replies.

then she tells me how last week she jacked a car in gomo, and how hilarious it all was before giving me a heads up over how she'll be disappearing for a few days to indulge a hustle her thug life posse has going that involves the collection of outstanding loans.

"i don't want to know anything about that," i say.

"gimme the butt."

"s'il vous plait?"

"bless up, jonah."

we lean back-to-back, and close our eyes. hyenas cackle in the ether, and we do not count on the certainty of days ahead.

precious matabele belongs to another hoppa. one made up of those who go to bars, and do not go to church or follow the teachings of conchellema. this tells the converted on both sides everything they need to know about her. it tells them she fornicates, and that she'll die of aids, and/or of a late-night stabbing in an alleyway. she's doomed, and therefore much better avoided. however, as far as i can tell she's one of the few who have wisely decided estrangement by

concupiscence is better than the alternative, either going to the can with a bible or else asking mrs conchellema what the gourd suggests one must do that week.

“fuck it all,” she says, handing me the last pull on the butt.

“amen to that.”

another thing, precious is also one of the few who encourages me to get out of liwani. sure, we’re into each other, but we’re individuals first. no questions. do what the fuck, she says. and then she goes off on how liwanians can’t claim to have invented anything. no telephones, or steamships, no games like tennis. the only thing we’ll ever get credit for is inventing new ways to exterminate one another.

“you’re smart to get out,” she says.

“i’ll be back to marry you,” i reply, meaning it.

“fuck that,” she says. “you say that because leaving is sad. but once you’re far from here, you won’t understand why you ever felt that way.”

“not true.”

she turns around, pulls me down to the ground with her, and maneuvers me until my head is on her belly. then she gently cups the back of my neck with a hand. “and if you ever think of reasons why i might hate you for not coming back to this hell hole.” she holds me tight. “fuck that. when you go, there’s no looking back. go. get on with your life, and i’ll get on with mine.”

i would object, but i know she’s right. in the end, i’ll get a degree in a classroom and she’ll vanish early like the venerated list of late thugs who

command her loyalty.

curranvale city.

i pay attention to policies of hygiene, plot meals in the future tense, and think that the stray's most assured feature is to suspect every encounter could potentially provide a new best friend. and that's how i happen upon my disgustingly freudian crush on the choirgirl from the rev's church.

i'd been on and off with kerstin (more off than on) because she didn't believe in commitment. so, clementine 'da stylus' pinkston begins to appeal to me in the ways she's strangely burdened by loyalty like precious, like mama. and it isn't lost on me that she's the color of wine-dark sea (a point the rev often mentions without prompting). kerstin is from a tribe that talks about feelings and the memories that triggered them and the people who after all these years still pay for the minor transgressions they committed eons ago and the many ways this makes a serious relationship impossible – at least, this is what i tell myself as clementine and i take a carriage ride which eddies on a cobblestone road against an onrush of snow flurries while descending into a dock beside a frigid, filthy river.

"how are you doing?" she asks.

"you mean, like whether i'm homesick?"

she hesitates. "i guess."

"oh, you want to know if i'm an emotional wreck because i'm an orphan."

"no, no."

"it's okay," i say.

"i don't think you're an emotional wreck," she speaks fast. "i just ... it must be difficult with all the adjustments to a new country and living with the rev and everything."

"i'm writing a novel," i say.

"and things in liwani are so unsettled right now," she says.

"it's all about that stuff."

"and i know your grandfather is still there."

"i'm writing about that too."

"well, i'm saving up to go on next summer's mission the rev has organized at the church to volunteer at your grandfather's clinic." and as she talks i'm grateful that she's troubled by stories she's heard about liwani with unhappy endings: random killings, droughts that gobble up the food supply. and as we continue to talk, plump snow idles above us before listlessly touching down on white embankments.

afterwards, we retire to the 9th-street cinema where i chew bubble gum in a balcony, and i don't know schemes to plant a warm peck on her frozen mouth. see, i don't yet know the sweet-sentimental talk of lovers, or how to be suitably romantic as i reach past buttered popcorn glancing with techno-colored light. from what i get, clementine likes gestures of love that are wrapped boxes of chocolates, and this throws me since i've been tutored on love beside bonfires. so, i'm clueless when it comes to the codes permitting me to take my sad choirgirl's

fidgiting fingers that hover beside the armrest, clasp them tight, and sneak off in the dark to devour aches and spells and charms in open parkland.

in the days to come, she's my first snow angel, and polyester mitts, and down-filled jackets as our longjohns chafe on walks among those who shovel the suburbs. and during sunday communion at st peter's episcopalian, i seek relief from concupiscent awkwardness. i cross myself, consume the holy host, and when i return to a hymnal in my pew, i find myself unable to avoid clementine's chirruped chirps among the white-robed of the choir. i stand before her and burn like charcoal, white with heat, exposed to air currents that stoke, enflame. and when we chat over post-service refreshments and she hands me an apple strudel in a plastic container, i flare and blaze and don't know how to translate the *ju ju* voodoo of romantic ardor.

"strooodle," i say.

"yup."

"sounds a lot like poodle, doesn't it?"

"did you enjoy the sermon?" she asks.

"enjoy it?" i reply. "the rev cooked like propane."

"like grilled hot cakes."

there's a silence, which i'm not okay with.

"strooodle," i repeat.

"yes, it sounds like poodle."

"sure does."

after we part for the week, i save electricity by turning off the trail of lights the rev leaves on behind him, i take out black garbage bags to the bottom of his shoveled driveway, i cook porridge and rice, i shop with recyclable bags for alaskan salmon, leafy kelp, russet potatoes, mozzarella from new zealand, plastic liters of milk, faux ground beef, and bottle after bottle of fresh spring water. and across a great expanse at supermarkets, i watch swingers who don't hesitate to clutch one another by the ass, or to paint one another's earlobes with spit - much like i used to do with precious.

on returning home, i lie in bed behind a locked door, pondering a notion that with some folk there are a finite number of topics i can talk about. and despite the obvious advantages that come with choco skin - love of hip hop, and a collective reference point in the cosby show - clem and i can't speak a lick to each other.

at supper, i listen to the rev explain how not to become a hoodlum like overpaid hoodlum athletes while he pushes a subtext in which i must marry clementine.

"being black is a responsibility like giving birth." he doesn't pause between mouthfuls of mashed potato. "you have no choice but to get a job to feed your child, even if it's at mcdonald's flipping burgers, and even if you hate the work, and it only pays minimum wage."

"you mean having a child, like a kid?" i ask, puzzled.

"yes. like a kid. a *toto*," he says.

“that’s intense,” i reply. yes, intense, beautiful, sick. i use these words now and it makes the rev salty.

“intense!” he becomes a *maudillero* who colors the *novilleros* with sticks as he launches into a diatribe about diction and grammar and how people don’t know the difference between lay and lie, and in the process he sticks me with needles as if beckoned on by the low roar of a festive crowd showering him with yellow flower petals. “what about the ones who use me in a sentence that begins me and him? only the donkey would name itself first.”

i feel like a mafioso goon has stuck a plastic bag over my head and i’m suffocating. arrgh, arrgh. except it all takes place in my brain. like i’m watching it in a play.

okay, i want to be fair here. it would be a mistake to give the impression that this is the sum of our relationship. if it wasn’t for him, i’d still be back in hoppa plotting the deletion of the internet. he got me interested in the writing program at d.u. and he lets me live at his place rent-free. sure he gets heated over the current state of black culture or pillory any public event that makes black folk look ignorant, but he’s still the only person i know who has consistently been loyal to gramps.

our weeks together follow a consistent pattern. on mondays, the rev sips on ginger tea among a sprawl of papers and books spread across the kitchen table. he’s at work, and i’ve learned this isn’t the time to approach him with domestic issues. i understand he’s prone to snap. so, i will only ask him about his sermons.

not the actual sermons, just rough ideas he's thinking that morning. like maybe last night he watched a tv show on celebrity drug addicts and it sets off a chain of ideas about good samaritans, and conjugal visits, and beatlemania, and einstein boiling his watch instead of eggs because he was such an absent-minded genius. then he makes the connections for me, and as he talks and talks, he pulls the different ideas together for what actually ends up being a relatively kick-ass sermon. jung on the silver chalice and alchemy. or my favorite, the connection between the freudian words *unheimlich* and *heimlich* which according to the rev's interpretation "is the unfamiliar rooted in the familiar as secrets hidden from the self."

it takes me a moment to unpack the idea from its wrapping of unfamiliar terms.

"there is what is familiar, like home, and this is a concept that evokes a sense of security, but nestled in our little nirvana is the hidden, the unfamiliar." of course, i think he's talking about my own secrets: kerstin and the way we've started hook up at her studio, my ambivalence about clementine, all that i didn't tell mama about baba. "the *heim* (or, home in german) and the unfamiliar are connected, and by this i mean that which is uncanny or repressed is a part of the familiar or the home." he folds his fingers between one another. "the meaning of the word *heimlich* converges with *unheimlich*. so, human beings experience the latter as uncanny and unfamiliar and project it negatively onto others while thinking of what they take to be of the home. you see what i'm getting at?"

i do see, and this makes me anxious about how i'm affected by my own secrets. so on tuesdays and thursdays, i'm keen to take a bus to campus where i explore this conundrum in writing workshops with professor iton, the taste of choirgirl's strudel in my palette, and the scent of kerstin's pure poison by dior still in my nose hair.

i'm with clementine now, i tell myself, in a drafty room where i learn that it takes work to discover the many disguises used to conceal secrets (or, as professor iton puts it, once you've hit rock bottom, you realize there's more bottom to go). and i realize that it means hours upon hours pushing sentences on the subject before they bloom on the page, and after the workshop has dismantled the word choices used to describe each other's festering secrets, there's still more work to be done.

after class i enjoy the company of hardcore-lit enthusiasts: the bay area's eliza may, and the big apple's quint c.

a sample conversation at ptolemy's cafe:

"consciousness is carried in the wombs of women," eliza may says. "and sperm is the trigger to release it into its human form."

"what if someone is barren?" quint c protests. "does that mean consciousnesses in their wombs?" he frowns, puzzled. "or should that be consciousnessi?"

"just plain consciousness in the nominative" i say. "even though that's a little weird since the verb is in the passive tense."

"huh." quint c. says.

"an amendment then," eliza may replies. "all women carry around dormant consciousness in their uteri, and it's activation is like the big bang, going from a moment of contraction to expansion, and finally through some kind of cooling process in which consciousness takes material form."

"that sounds a bit kooky," quint c says. "shit. i'm blanking on how to spell kooky. it can't begin with a c, can it? cooky, doesn't sound right."

"it's kooky with a k," i say.

eliza may pounds her spoon like a gavel on the tabletop. "if i may please have the indulgence of the court," she says. "it will be found that the evidence in my case is above reproach."

"we'll allow it," quint c says.

"but you're on a short rope here," i say.

she removes a faux-leopard-skin hat she wears everywhere, and brushes its fuzzy fur with careful sweeps of her black hand. "the egyptians have a symbol on the pyramids known as the flower of life. the petals are shaped like the vagina or the womb." quint c and i giggle because we are nerds. "this geometrical form is the *vesica pisces*. and it's also the shape of the third eye that contains wisdom. so the ancients were already clued into the idea of consciousness finding a home in the womb."

excited, i launch into an explanation of the rev on *heim* and *unheimlich*. "it makes a lot of sense to talk of the unconscious and the conscious as it relates to

the uteri," i conclude.

"are the vagina and the womb similarly shaped though?" quint c asks. "if not, consciousness would have to be carried in the vagina, and the acceptance of the penis would be the condition that makes possible the ... penetration of the unconscious."

"fo sho," eliza may says.

"really?" i ask.

"why not?" she replies.

god, she's cool.

afterwards, i hole up in the oak carrols of d.u.'s library to study structural principals in amorous fictions – couples fall for one another at first sight, and then they share a kiss among stench free everglades before being forced to separate from each other by those who misunderstand them. they pine, and die sad deaths, and when the choirgirl is emboldened by the budding shoots of springtime, i convince her, with this borrowed tongue, to escape with me beneath the blue moon, and to hide in brush from cops who carry flashlights.

finally, we make it to the chosen spot, and on a bed of nettles, i puzzle with an ungainly chore of buttons, clasps, and zippers. she squirms as i administer tongue to an eyelid, coating it with saliva like swingers in the produce section. metal on her wristwatch cuts into my upper thigh. when i drag her hand to my fly, she is rough, and too fast, and she moves my hand around to help me pinpoint the location of her clitoris. and by the time the footsteps of a dog walker

approach, we are frission in windpipes, gargling, self-conscious.

"it's almost one," she says. "i've got my curfew."

"that wasn't very good, was it?" i reply.

"no. it was nice. real nice."

"if getting a molar pulled is nice."

"you didn't like it?" she asks.

"no. no. i loved it. i'm just talking about the distraction of all the people traffic we had to deal with."

and on that false note, it is left as she retreats into the choir pews to cant
spiritus sancti, miserare mihi.

drifting and apart, asleep then awake, i find myself in a copy of martin buber's
ich und du, and in kerstin ostheim, the splenetic painter who specializes in
disappearing for a time without so much as a boo.

kerstin and i decide to be a legit couple: no head games, keeping it real,
monogamy, and checking in with each other to make collective plans as to how
our time is spent. we've matured during our time apart, and while the rev's out
of town doing God's work, we sit in his spacious bathtub brimming with a sudsy
soup of tepid water.

i shampoo her tangled hair, teasing apart knots, as she sprinkles her
occasional speech with words in her native tongue. "i like this *badezimmer*," she
says of the state-of-the-art bathroom with dimmers for the lights. "*es ist klasse*."
then she randomly leaps into a discourse on how most of the folk she meets tend

to see her as a german automaton driving without a speed limit along the *autobahn*, even though she only spent the first three years of her life in west berlin during a short-lived experiment her father tried with living there. “i don’t remember a thing about that time,” she says. “*nichts*. nothing. but it doesn’t stop people from imagining i get everywhere on time, like trains or nazis.”

“it probably doesn’t help that you’re thinking of giving up your american passport for a german one.”

“*richtig*. whenever i mention how unsettled i am stateside, they get solemn because it proves to them that my *oma* and *opa* wrote hateful graffiti on garment stores of german jews, and that my *opa* belonged to the s.s., and that he sang songs about the homeland in bars after putting jewish folk on a train headed for auschwitz.” i knead her skull with my fingertips. “it’s got so that i’m always on the verge of launching into long condemnations of the third reich, or else making stupid clarifications about how eva braun didn’t wear *lederhosen*.”

we don’t talk for a good while, the drip of the tap the only intrusion.

“what about you?” she asks.

“oh, no one gives me any trouble about being german,” i reply.

“*dummkopf*.” she laughs.

“as you know, your people colonized mine.”

“oh, god.” she slaps a hand to her forehead.

“i belong to people who are considered either cute or brutal. it’s one or the other. nothing in between. our kids with bright teeth run after strangers who

descend among them flashing chump change." she leans her head into my neck. "we're clothes racks for donated white undies and receptacles for donated foodstuffs." she's warm like mama's fresh bread. "someone is always jumping in to give us a hand and teach us how to make a bed with hospital corners, or how not to get aids. then they spruce us up, and help us come to know the lord." i loop my arms around her flat belly. "they come to save our undervalued working women from men who drink all day. and to finance the bad ones, the rotten apples who have despicably well-fed children educated abroad."

"mmm," she mumbles.

"it used to upset me," i say. "and it was all i thought about. but, i realized it meant i was spending months thinking about people who were off living their own lives. y'know. going to work. clocking paper. making babies. and there i was sitting around, life passing me by, as i thought about how those people needed to change."

we get silent for a long while, taking in these stories we're trying out as ways to accurately describe ourselves before we switch positions in the tub.

"you should know i get bored easily," she says lathering my back.

"who doesn't?"

"you get bored too?"

"sure, i'm bored already."

i'm convinced what she says doesn't apply to me, not this time, because this feels like a bottomless reservoir of more of me fitting with her. *ich und du*. layers.

head to gut. laughter to pain. and i'm an electromagnetic current scattered like ironing filings hither and thither in a frenetic orbit that revolves around her.

i lie back against her as she soaps my belly.

"this is dangerous territory for me," she says.

"me too."

"whenever i feel someone is mine, i vanish."

"tell me about it."

dangerous territory? maybe that's what happened with clementine, i think.

and i try to put kerstin's last disappearing act behind me. easy to do because i'm silly putty around her.

"*küss mich*," she says.

i obediently turn, kissing her swell of lips. anxiety arises in me like dough, my hand cupping the dampened regions of her heat, and my fingers finding the hangs and caverns of *mein* sudsy seraph.

her hand encircles the dirty secrets in my hardened cock as i pinch hard at the *rosa* of her nipple. then we are twisted pretzels ravenously frigging each other in the tub, a wind rustling through a neon-lit city flickering like yellow clown fish swiveling between coral.

within the month she takes me to banana hill to meet her *papi* - most likely due to my prodding on the importance of making amends with one's parents while they're still alive.

as far as i'm concerned, the trip is a ball. her *papi* is out when we get into town

on a friday evening, and so we buy a 2/4 of heineken, and get together with some of her old running buddies at a bonfire next to railrod tracks.

i sit with her and her friends rolling weed besides a bonfire near a railroad track. i meet boys who drive trucks and girls who are waitresses and one fella who digs graves at a local cemetery and another who delivers bottled water from a warehouse in which others among them work. fly mc's rap on a c.d. player – snoop dogg and busta rhymes mostly – and no one talks anything i know much about. there are lakes at which to get hammered on long summer weekends and motorboats and bowling leagues and rumors of getting fired because fat cats are making a killing off their labor. and there is what happened to frau ke kaufmann and how she is pregnant with ulrich fenstermacher's child. without a warning, dag-christian gets up to play chicken with a passing train, and emmerich and detlef get in a scuffle over the wisdom of the trade of a wide receiver with the philadelphia eagles. soon people pair off and disappear among nearby foliage to fingerfuck. and kerstin and i remain on a log beside the fire, smoking a spliff.

"you see orion?" i point to a trio of stars that make up the hunter's belt.

"it's the only one i can make out," she replies.

"i can't tell which stars are supposed to be his dogs."

"there." she points. "see?"

"no."

"*nein?*"

"*nein.*"

after we have gazed into the sky for a good while, she stamps out a butt, takes me by the hand, and i follow her into the bush. she pulls me down into the long grass, her hand working fingers on skin beneath my shirt. "*ich liebe dich unendlich,*" she says as i flip up her vintage dress, finding the jut of her hip.

we tremble together among the stars, and among people whose behavior the community defines as strange, a word that means it's open season as far as showing how conditional love is and how community means to join those who agree on what is correct behavior. it's much like my life in hoppa, and the many ways i used to live with that small group of bonfire-making malcontents who are as doomed as these ones at banana hill, and the only way out for all of us is to embark on the task of making at least six racially homogenous kids, and to take that job alongside *peres et meres* and *babas* and *mamas* and *mutter und väter* in an egg-stamping factory owned by big business, oil money. and so we are fueled by premonitions of those who might get it in their minds to blow our malcontented heads off with a shot gun, each of us, from emmerich to precious matabele, playing a high stakes game of chicken, watching to see who'll be the first to off themselves and become the legend who was too sensitive to cope with feeling stuck. unstuck.

when kerstin and i get back to the house around ten o' clock, *papi* is in the living room watching the evening news. he clicks off the television and stands to shake my hand.

"it's good to meet you, mr ostheim," i point to his collection of günter grass

and hermann hesse on the bookshelf. "that's a fine collection of novels you've got there."

"jonah, is it? he replies. "would you mind if i have a word with my daughter in private?"

"of, course," i reply. "you've probably got a lot to talk about."

i make myself comfortable browsing his bookshelves while they disappear into his study. but before i've had a chance to leaf through the tin drum, i hear a door slam and kerstin reappears out of breath.

"we're leaving," she says.

"sure, bay," i reply, standing.

she doesn't talk as we walk to a main road in order to hail a cab to take us to the bus terminal.

"that couldn't have gone well," i say.

"mmmm," she replies, smoking.

"i didn't even get a chance to get a look at his copy of the tin drum."

"günther grass is a dick," she replies.

"what happened back there?" i ask.

"more bullshit," she says.

"that's not very specific."

"scheisse," she says. "i don't want to talk about it."

we walk on in silence, and not the good kind. i'm bugged by the way she shuts me out, but i don't press further. and in letting the subject drop, we step

away from each other and teeter on an ledge that leaves us vulnerable to an indifference to cruelty.

in subsequent days, we become the everything-is-fine couple, and when we speak it isn't really about what either one of us wants to say. i don't mention the rev and she doesn't mention her *papi* as we burrow into a cunning, calculating silence, and fill it with our own ideas about what's happening. shrinking away from one another's touch, our kisses are sour pecks and our conversations light with hostile banter.

this isn't working for me.

after another one of the rev's sermons on original sin, i decide all will be resolved if i take care of my end and come clean to kerstin.

we meet in the evening at ptolemy's café, and i begin by offering her a box of assorted swiss chocolates. after pecking me on the mouth, she bites small chunks into a random selection to find the ones filled with nougat.

"know what i want?" she asks.

"peace on earth?"

"close," she says. "i want to spend at least five days aimlessly wandering through barcelona."

"cool, i'd love to come along, get a pile of brochures and go take a look at gaudi's cathedral." i say.

"yuck," she says. "brochures! ugh! and no maps either."

"what do you mean no maps, bay?" i reply.

then kerstin explains a continent she's had occasion to re-visit as a teenager, and how the cities are small enough that if you wander around awhile you inevitably end up at gaudi's cathedral. and she adds more about how you can take off by car from paris in the morning, have a tasty lunch in vienna, and be in time to catch the first set of a jazz band in bucharest that evening.

"so, a bus tour is out of the question then."

"are you serious?" she asks.

"suresure," i reply. "we could check into a hotel with running water, no hostels thanksomuch. help ourselves to brochures at the front desk. read up on the best bus tours on offer at a reasonable rate, and then kick back near the back of a bus with a couple from omaha."

"*nein, nein, nein,*" she replies. "that's too touristy. i like to walk and haggle with street vendors and when my feet get tired take a load off in a café and then talk to local people in the language about their thoughts on the unification of europe."

"hold up," i say. "does that mean if we're in amsterdam that you'd be open to wandering in a free, open, unplanned way into the red light district? and if there were for instance some lovely local lasses standing in a window in lingerie, would you be into stopping in for a bit of a striptease, and a hit of hashish?"

"sure," she says. "as long as we don't use a map."

she seems to be in a good mood, so i get quickly to my confession.

"i know i've been ... strange lately," i say. "but there is something you should

know.”

her brow hardens. “you’re seeing clementine.”

“no! nothing like that,” i reply. “i’ve been trying to figure out how to tell you that the rev knows nothing about our relationship.” i explain about how the rev went to howard and dated sisters with naturals. i talk about coming into a huge inheritance from investments baba had made in computer software, and how babu didn’t exactly approve of precious matabele’s influence on me, and how he wants me to show signs of maturity by settling with a church going sister before i see any of the money. i talk too fast, and miss blow-softening details i’d rehearsed earlier.

“are you going to tell him about us now?” she asks.

“it’s too soon,” i reply.

“so you just want me to get in on the secret?” she pushes away the box of swiss chocolates. “i deserve better.”

“i need more time,” i reply.

she leans back in her chair, arms crossed.

she doesn’t say it, but there are plenty of other men who would jump at the chance to be with her. demarion armstrong, dub maestro, for one.

and this is where it ends. inertia, non-movement as we retreat to subjects we won’t argue about while background music sounds like variations of a plunger in a toilet.

kerstin doesn’t vanish until a month later.

on a hot, humid afternoon, two days after i've been informed that gramps is dead, kerstin and i are down at the ralstone county gorge soaking in brown waters. we end up talking about the realistic possibility of a trip to liwani together in the near future. her grandparents had farmland near goma the family still owns, i have places near where keti was killed that i want to show her. in the middle of it all i stupidly mention clementine's interest in coming along to work at the clinic.

"you want us to go with your ex?" she asks.

"she's a good person."

"don't you think that's a little insensitive?"

"let me check my dictionary and get back to you on whether calling her good is insensitive."

she gets quiet for a long time. "so when are you telling the rev about me?" she asks.

"soon."

"and what does that say about me and you in the meantime?"

"you and me," i reply. "only the donkey would name himself first."

"jonah!"

"we're having an interracial sex romp," i joke. "white on black on white."

"i'm not white," she whispers. "i'm more pink."

"which changes things considerably," i say. "chocolate shouldn't mix with strawberry. vanilla's the better complement. "

she's stung. "you have this way of not quite saying what you mean. always. you need to come out with it. stop putzing around. what exactly are you saying about me?"

"c'mon, bay," i say. "i'm just playing."

"well. it really isn't funny."

"it's a little funny."

"you're pathological," she says.

i flush with impatience. "pathological. that's kind of racist." i'm reaching. "why not just call me a crazy black man?"

"that's not what i mean and you know it." she says. "you're just so evasive. even now, i'm trying to talk about us, and you're turning into al sharpton."

"me! you're the one who lives in your private world of thoughts that you never get around to telling me about." i know i'm behaving badly, but i can't help myself. "i still have no idea what went down between you and your dad during our visit. you never answer your cell when i call at night. you spend an awful lot of your spare time with demarion armstrong. and for all i know you're pining after him right now."

distrust hangs in the air between us like a burlap fog.

"what's going on with your choir girl?" she asks. "just say it already."

"don't be such a ... " i can't think of the word. succubus. no. harpy? "shrew."

"did you just call me a nag?"

"sorry." harridan. "wrong word. don't be such a harridan, bay."

she mutters unrepeatable crudities involving me and an esther dorfman's cows, and then she gathers up the satchel with *my* stash, and storms away leaving dust to lift and unsettle the texture of the stiff air.

du und ich. and so the person she warned me about finally appears. first, she's sorry on her return because she knows i'm grieving, but she's vanished by the weekend. then she reappears for a spell before disappearing into a smattering of cagey phone calls. and after she has shown me a crimson painting she has done of young love, she slithers towards another subject, and another, and then over to demarion armstrong, dub poet (just as i suspected would happen).

for an unTime, my stomach crawls with puff adders. anacondas curl in my intestine, my gut. and i shake out nickels, dime bags, plastic baggies, weed. then decked in tweed i bounce from right to west, from ravelly-sleeved cardigans to button-up vests, taking pulls from *pombe* sluiced calabashes, listening to branches scraped by wind against panes, the agony hotknifed between my third and fourth rib. and this is not a place i wanted to return to, sleeping less, more or less, and dreaming more than less of gramps and keti and and open gardens and mama and baba and milkweed skies and precious matabele, God bless her.

i redeem myself in a semester full of questions about marriage, and repair more or less in the choirgirl's society. this time around she sings *spero in te*, looking pretty in handmaiden's garb with bra straps hanging invitingly off her shoulder. this time, she dresses me in bracelets she makes me out of knotted floss, and we walk on icy pavement past caged cash registers in nor' eastern

ghettos, and we stop to talk to those who are worked over by the burden of relations that are wards of the state. then she lays her head on my thighs in the rev's company, and she tries to be cheerful and proactive for the both of us.

"why don't you come to liwani with the church this summer?" she asks.

"you mean with you."

"yes, with me."

"i can't." i miss kerstin. "i'll be taking a couple of courses at d.u."

"you could put that off until the fall semester," the rev chimes in from a kitchen table strewn with a new batch of notes.

"maybe," i reply.

"so, you'll do it," clementine says.

"suresure," i reply, half-heartedly.

and i go with clementine to feed the homeless loaves of bread with soup, and i listen to stories of money lenders who have become paupers, those who flamed out over addictions to game boys, sicknesses that took families under. and it isn't me. or, at least, it makes me frustrated about how far it's taking me away from what i really want. feeling like myself. kerstin. so i try my hand at a book i don't know how to write, and i churn like butter in a stippled urn and i don't stop until i lie down beside babycakes, the erotic dancer who is brown and who breaks toys and who discards new boots whenever newer ones come to the market.

in another lifetime, i deposit myself among estrangements, and take hiroko 'babycakes' ishigowa's measure beyond the velvet rope where there's dj cut up,

and patron, and a whole lotta lavish flutter. she's a stripper in bell-bottoms that sit on an angle, angles, stirring in dry ice, her brown rump-rump shaking, our booties banging in neon limes (as if it were pure like the first day of school, my scarlet cap squiff, my socks in a scrunched bunch).

afterwards, we fuck in the back seat of her corolla, and on the hardwood floor of her one bedroom, and then fall asleep after fucking again on top of a collection of glossy french vogues on her couch.

in the morning, she can't wait to see me out the door.

"that was dope," i say, sliding into my jeans.

she lifts a finger, and takes as well as returns a text on her cell. "why don't you come by sometime and catch one of my sets at the club?" she says before she listens to another message, smiling.

"for reals," i say.

she makes another call, and waves goodbye.

as i leave she laughs much too loudly and talks to someone she calls hon about "so looking forward to a lunch meet."

and so i am a client and a fan who fills hiroko's garter belt with money i borrow from quint c, pal of mine. and after i've spent enough to pay down her car loan, we make it again among boxes of liquor in back rooms and on the cluttered surfaces of dinner tables.

she bites and is loud, just like in porn flicks. she talks dirty and moves my hands to the places she wants handled roughly. i'm asked to spank her and to

pull her hair.

i don't quite know what to make of it.

she's not what she does for a living, i say to myself. she's a business woman with a web site, and a blog, and a web cam, and she fields offers to star in adult movies that go straight to dvd. she's someone's daughter, i tell myself as i meet her precocious sister, ingrid – the one who reads the lit canon for fun. and moved by these complexities, i announce that i love her.

"you're cute," she says.

"i mean it."

"that's so sweet, hon."

and with that she mocks frankness that should never have come out to play.

wiggles funky,

then perishes against the kohl-dark outlay of the horizon,
a murder of crows cluttering the cumulus.

so i chase down my days with perforated bags dunked in tap water to yield raspberry teas, meds for those with schizophrenia, booze. all with a wish to paint the hustler's toe nails coral pink, whorls of debris stacking against windowsills (even though this elixir costs me an ulcer, gall stones, as she continually takes three steps back, six backward).

she will come around.

she will. (and i know this like i know the tender spots in gums eroded by stringy morsels of beef difficult to unstick from molars). i

continue to follow her to the strip clubs in which she plies her wares, and i make believe she's the price i must pay to rid myself of regrets. and on the day babycakes escapes to a quicker city that doesn't yet know her many antics, there are rusty tins, empty bins, collected each and every garbage day, wednesday.

like tonight,

and tonight jonah's a bedouin among rasping oil fields, paring down memories as much as he can manage. held together with gravity and sellotape, he's the monk in baba's film reel. he applies liniments to ointments, mastering another routine that will encourage sleep: at two thirty, he listens between the rustle of cymbals, at three he takes a mosquito apart by hind limbs, and at four thirty he chews the petals of purple carnations until ragas announce the slate gray dawn.

and in the morning, he will pray for the rev's health among stained glass windows and hanging chandeliers, and then study jacob wrestling an angel on a bench in a tiny park, little children running away from a light drizzle of rain in an open courtyard. and by the time dawn strafes the west, he will have spent another night listening to runs of congas smeared across shirts from an african bazaar bleating in sounds too much for the human ear.

spiritus sancti, miserare mihi.

PART II. PARTICLE

CHAPTER IV. ORION

colleagues of the academy, specialists in jungian psychoanalysis, a quick word before proceeding to the once upon a time of our narrative.

of late, unruly imaginings have had their way with yours truly, jonah ayot, funky fresh gentleman of some leisure.

true story, last night i dreamed of the exposed part of kerstin's belly, the one between the hem of her low-cut t-shirt and her gargantuan belt buckle. it was vanilla like soymilk, and pristine like an ivory cleaned for sale on the black market. there were three freckles in a vertical line above her left hip that looked like orion's belt, and get this, we skinny-dipped in a spangled night above hinekailao beach among crashing surf, her *flaxen* hair tugged back over her ears. as we swam among dolphins, she transformed into a mizzen, a *white* mast. and badgered by trade winds that rock and bop the water, we were swept out to sea.

when i awoke, i was enmeshed in pressures that pushed against my third rib. and i gathered myself by stepping out onto the balcony to look down at the canal, a steady whisper of rowing oars dipping and ripping like sculling claws at the surface of *black* water.

that was last night. not months ago, but yesterday.

i disclose this information early in the telling with a full awareness of its consequences. so, to those who are all fur coat and no knickers, i respectfully say,

this is where we part ways. see, even if i happen to be one of those among my dark-skinned kin given accolades for exhibiting a certain skill – such as hitting three consecutive octaves of high c's that bowdlerize full arenas with their singular razzle - those with inner knowledge of racial subconscious workings will still skulk in my pubic regions, among the razor acne and pubuckle, until an authoritative diagnosis of these sordid imaginings can be made. interracial coupling will be decried with snark. some insisting that it's all about spicing up the salt with pepper (while “joyfully rubbing and frotting bacon 'gainst one another”). a different subset dismissing it all as “derivative and quite cliché.” in the final analysis, there'll be no end to the hostility and smut unearthed while contemplating the titty fucking, three ways, and other miscellaneous doings of the miscegenist set.

so, to all these freak flag flaggers, *adieu*. nothing in these pages aligns with any of those specious interests (apart from an upcoming telling of the unseemly incident with a unicycle, a shoe horn, and the family from tacoma). i plan to report what happens, only what happens, and the simple truth is that kerstin still shifts me by iotas, milli-inched neuron by milli-inched neuron as i can't stop imagining the choco of my fingers rustling through dappled tufts of european hair on that vanilla belly.

today, i'm craving cigarettes but feel like a cripple. lame. unable to get my body to do better. with this broken bone i'm slow enough for people on the street

to catch up to, pass, and push into a ditch if so inclined, from time to time, as i grasp for the support of newspaper stands. and this dang boot cast isn't helping. it pinches and i have to sit down ten minutes for every one hundred meters i manage. i'm one of those hopping pigeons with the claws of one of its feet hacked off by some sicko, and finally a reluctant member of a nation that sits in handicapable seating in the front of the bus.

it's difficult to summon up the will to move, but my desire for nicotine has me hobbling to duck-huan's grocery for smokes.

"marlboro regs," he says.

"two packs or one."

"one," i reply. "that way i can pretend it's my last one."

duck-huan finishes writing numbers on a spreadsheet before we make our transaction. in the background is a muted korean soap opera on a twenty-inch television screen, and a bowl of noodles steaming beside an open bible.

i nod towards his holy book. "don't let your wife read the songs of solomon."

"why not?"

"it's a bit smutty."

"smutty?"

"the language is sexual."

he smiles. "that doesn't sound like such a bad thing for me."

"nice," i reply.

"did you hear about the couple from kansas?" he asks.

“nah.”

“they get married, and then she dies when they try scuba diving.”

“jeezuz!”

“sad.”

“very sad.”

on returning to the building, lyric, the freshly sprung jail, his girl, miriama, and two young’uns from his crew wait at the front door for someone to come along and let them inside. miriama stands on a nearby ledge wearing a white mink coat, her dangling earrings smoking with ice. she chews gum and bops to hardcore hip-hop jonah i’ve never heard before that blasts from a deck at her feet. nasty, nasty stuff that would better be left to the dexterous pen of writers like the marquis de sade to describe.

“po po made my boys move their tents out of tiki tiki beach park, professor,” lyric announces. “so can you let them into the front door? one of my associates on the third floor has left his door unlocked for us.”

i’m an asshole who’ll enforce any policy if it makes sense. and rule #3 in the aspen homeowners bylaws states that no strangers are permitted into the building. no exceptions. not even if the pope himself descended from his bulletproof motorcade and wanted in so as to perform a blessing in the lobby, no dice. and a camera at the front door is set up to record the activities of any poor sap that breaks the rule, a hefty \$200 fine meted out by members of the building’s association.

"can't do it, playboy," i reply.

"come on."

i give him the pope speech.

"whaaa?" he replies.

"do you have 200 bucks?" i ask.

"200 what?"

"gimme 200 bucks to cover the fine i'll be hit with, and i'll let you in as well as any associates you'd like to tag along."

"you 're charging me 200 bucks to get my boys into the building?"

"no. i'm saying that i'll be charged 200 if i let you in. so, if you give it to me up front, i'm your man."

"what are you? judas iscariot?" lyric says.

"jigga what?"

"you're asking 30 pieces of silver to screw my crew."

as super-loud hip hop chronicles disembowelment with pool cues and coke bottles in assorted orifices, i try to re-explain myself without another confusing reference to the pope. but lyric launches into a rant about how kanye west is the black christ, and how it's true because it's in rolling stone, and that a real brother wouldn't sell out by taking orders from white men who stole the best fishing spots on the island.

his boys jump in, jawing at me.

"how much do they pay you to be an asshole?" casper, the one in a detroit

tiger's cap, asks.

"step up, nigga." it's buzzah, the muscle. "it's time for a beat down."

i try a different route. "i'm not disrespecting y'all. i'm just telling it like it is."

casper bumps me in the chest, buzzah crowds me left with a finger to my temple, and lyric stands on the ledge next to miriama, exchanging pulls from a blunt.

"yo, man," lyric pulls a key out of his pocket. "we're just playin." he leaps down, opens the door himself, and busts a gut laughing. as his crew walks inside, they slap one another on their backs, and yap to each other.

"loooser," they say in unison, except miriama who just seems bored as she blows bubbles with gum.

man, i hate this freaking building.

at the onset of stubbled evening light, we rejoin yours truly - loser - in a state recognizable to those with insider knowledge of the miscegenist's inner sanctum. i don't want to think about the lunatics at the front door. so, i'm to be found captive to unconscious stirrings of priapic horniness as i bait traps. behind the locked doors of my love nest, i ponder my get together with kerstin in a few, and calculate preferable conditions in which to lean my illiotibial band against that of my fair damsel, and consider how i'll linger there for as long as hurricanes lash against corrugated tin roofs in the carib islands. hidden in my lair, i plot the ways and means to extend time spent with her, gazing into the tender muddle that

feeds her dank eyes, tender like a blooming lotus in a goddess's belly button.

degoutant, really, *mbia*, *eklig*, and wrong-footed in any language of choice.

fate feeds the side street with the excrescence of shiny motor vehicles as i genuflect before a shrine of lit patchouli incense. visions of my lily lady skip about in my lateral lobes, my guts lubricated by an americano with room. i adjust my codpiece, counts the many ways i will desecrate her (and by desecrate i mean to pleasure), and then i pop *white* calcium magnesium in a thumbnail-sized vitamin pill before doing a weight workout at global fitness, squats mostly, and some ankle exercises.

did i mention that i teach religious studies at the u of kaipei? well, i do. the job with rick is an under-the-table thing to make extra money. and so i have a stack of papers to grade for tomorrow's class before going out tonight.

i tend to procrastinate with every possible distraction before i'm settled enough to tackle what the students have made of my lectures. in this case, unraveling creative interpretations of anselm's legal argument for humanity's redemption as a debt (owed and paid in infinite proxy by Christ).

don't misunderstand. i'm no slouch. in fact, i try to live along the lines of practicing the habits i want to grow into. not in a religious sense, but i'm not opposed to aspiring to a holy life. no, that's too grand. it's more that i try to be ...
... i take my job seriously. i mean, i'll never be spotted saying, i can't believe i get paid to do this like, say, kerstin, who clocks major bank for short stretches of

coddled effort on a movie set. but i care about my students and i want to see them go on to become productive members of the state capitalist apparatus doing work they can't quite believe they get paid for. it's ... a higher calling.

in any event, there's a phone message to reply to: loretta tucci has been in touch to tell me the rev has developed pneumonia.

"we're hoping for the best, but preparing for the worst," she says.

"i'll book a flight as soon as i can find someone to cover my classes," i reply.

she objects. "that isn't necessary."

"you'd tell me if you thought i should be there, right?"

she yawns. "don't even think it," she says. "your work is important. focus on that for now, and we'll wait for God's will to be done."

i wonder whether loretta is punishing me for leaving curranvale city by rejecting my help.

but that doesn't make much sense, does it?

i make a list of the more important points i'll bring up with kerstin this afternoon. this time i will bring up the contents of my *apologia* as there's accounting to be done on her part for a recent ditching of yours truly, funky fresh gentleman, whilst we were in the midst of our rather racy e-mail exchange. no nude pics. but lots of earnest texting that might possibly ruin her career if select portions are leaked in the blogosphere by an anonymous source. not a threat, by the way. just a reminder that i'm discreet, and it would be in her best interest to erase all traces of my dirty little sextext.

after jotting down notes on cue cards, i reorient myself among over-the-top headlines online. to be frank, the only real enjoyment left to me until i see kerstin is the entertainment page with its latest on the misfortunes of the *wunderkinder*. i'm not disappointed. one of their tribe has been caught on video tape, after a late night of drunken carousing - using inappropriate language to describe those among us who enjoy the alternative lifestyle (an attraction of whose name it is hazardous to speak). it turns out that today's victim of a sizable income has a problem with painkillers as a result of a broken wrist that occurred several years ago, *and* i learn he was exposed to a childhood that involved a number of indisputable moments of neglect by parents who may as well have been marauding wolves, *and* our victim proved ill-equipped to handle luxurious living as he kept the company of folk who encouraged a sex life full of group encounters. now there will be a leadership role, speaking for others who have not yet found the courage to give voice to similar torments, and there will be counseling offered to those who need to be cured of unflattering airs to begin in the morning with high-profile tell-alls on the three big networks.

to grade or not to grade, that is the question. whether 'tis nobler in the mind to grade papers, or in not grading, to endure the slings and arrows of outraged students. to make a phone call: perchance to enjoy myself a little longer, aye there's the rub.

i phone eliza may to enquire about her honeymoon with quint c at their rented cottage, the mediterranean.

she answers on the first ring.

"how's married life, babe?" i ask.

"everything has changed," she replies. "quint insists on me doing all the ironing"

"it's *my* not *me*," i say. "quint insists on *my* doing the ironing."

"uh-oh, you're being a grammar nerd." she sounds concerned i may have gone nuts again. "are you okay?"

"it's all good."

"really?"

"really."

eliza may re-directs the conversation through q, who is in the vicinity. "he's not telling us something."

q shouts in the background. "tell him ..." there's a shuffle of papers. "no, give me the phone. jonah. what'sup?"

"ain't no thing but a chicken wing."

"out with it."

"i'm getting together with kerstin this afternoon."

q redirects to eliza may. "he's back with vanilla."

"not back with her," i say. "we're having drinks."

eliza may gets back on the line. "our official policy is that you're not to rush into anything."

"no worries, old chap," i say.

“jolly good show,” she replies.

banning hanky panky with the unstable ex is good, solid advice from good, solid people. see, pals of mine are making respectable headway as writers. q followed the success of his collection, gangrene & other stories, with a novel, goon city, published by the well-regarded folk at rochester press. the novel took three years from idea to print, and it was written, eliza may in tow, at various south-american locales; humble mountain villages, humongous haciendas, tacky and unsafe hotel rooms, bars serving tequila. and according to the author, finishing touches were decided upon at the seaside villa of brazilian salsa king cum playboy escalanto dos santos. a dedication also mentions the substantive input of the caracha five, a salsa band with three top-ten hits on the brazilian billboard charts. followers of quint’s first story collection are pleased to see him continue to write stories plumbing the rare disease trope. in goon city, spasmodic torticollis leads to lots of uncontrollable neck twisting at the big-life occasions: births, weddings, and funerals. reviews in the mainstream media have been enthusiastic, and there’s buzz on the blogosphere about dickensianly popular readings by the author.

as for eliza may, she hasn’t started on anything new since the reverend’s apprentice. she has been taking editing jobs on manuscripts emanating from the experimental arm of rochester press, and this appears to give her life a focus. therefore, they both appear to have cobbled together a successful lifestyle that makes the haters broil with disparaging asides about them. not me, though. at

least not anymore. marriage suits them. and more recently, eliza may has been talking about children, and quint seems perfectly comfortable having emotions that are in direct alignment with the ones she decides to explore.

“how is sardinia?” i ask.

“white beaches. tiny people. coarse accents. high society clubs. boat trips with fishermen.”

“sounds *favoloso*.”

“you think?”

“yup,” i say.

“okay, *ciao* then,” she says.

“fo sho.”

after i brush and floss, i think of the fatal e-mail to kerstin that called attention to specific parts of the human anatomy in racialized terms. a black c**k in the vicinity of a white a*s was mentioned. and while no racist epithets were used, there was dirty talk that would upset even those with no connections to any polite circles.

good, lord!

i’m interrupted by a loud altercation outside, and i head out onto the balcony to see what’s going on. below me, lyric and his girl, miriama, argue beside the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal.

“liar,” she shouts.

it’s impossible from my vantage point to hear what lyric says in response.

she lunges at him, and then they wrestle on the grassy bank until he has her firmly in his grasp.

a police siren can be heard in the distance.

lyric lets go of miriama who walks twenty meters away and sits down weeping. lyric walks over to her and puts an arm around her shoulders. at first she pulls away. but he pulls her close again. this time she leans her head into his neck, and together they stare at tilapia swim in the murky water.

okay, i ride the elevator with its busy, bustling webcam towards the humiliation awaiting me at my meeting with kerstin.

once in the lobby, i bumble into a dust up between stan folds, the super, and keoki, from apartment 301.

"i'm going to tell the police," keoki says. "they are outside, and i have pictures in my bag of your girls with customers."

"you have one week," stan replies. "you have exactly one week to get out before i change the lock on your door."

"stan. i know your girls use two apartments on my floor."

"seven days, keoki."

"it's not safe for my family, and so far i say nothing. but if you do not let me stay, i'm going outside to the police. i will tell everything."

i limp past. then i'm out of doors and hitch-gallop in my boot cast.

i see the perpetually awake to'o with an ear to the ground like an unsettled

sky gathering storms.

i hitch-gallop across the street and am soon among breadcrumb-filching pigeons that mill around the buddha from apartment 208: the sage sits cross-legged on the edge of the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal talking shop with the bird kingdom.

i take in dollops of a memory of a memory as kerstin sits across from me on the terrace of café dino's, a cleft in the impressions that court me, meat reality.

we chat among a population of green umbrellas as pigeon droppings die on cement table tops; their ashy crap-lets suspended in an afternoon elongated by humidity, beads of salt water, and polynesian winds that expire at a crack beside her elbow.

let's get up to speed.

she's without a doubt an unmistakable hop, skip, and jump in my abdomen, maybe my spleen (it's difficult to place). in her early thirties now, her orange dress is done up with buttons at the base of her throat, her knee-high boots of perforated leather worn more for sexymotherfuckerness than comfort.

"my marriage is toast." one hand is on the back of her neck, and her head tilts left. "i could keep coming up with explanations for it, but they're oversimplifications. in the end, i'm stuck with the unsatisfying conclusion that it all came down to work. tobias treated my acting as if it was a glorified hobby. and he was skittish about me hanging around production crews where, to his

mind, everyone fucks everyone else." a shadow dribbles down her chin. "so, i can't help thinking how i kept trying to fit into his idea of what our relationship should be. and the more i traveled for work, the less i seemed able to find my way back to what he wanted it to be."

"that sucks." jeezus! could i come up with anything less adequate?

"when i got back from berlin last month, i began to hear rumors that he was screwing one of his clients." miss kaipei, a twenty-some thrill seeker with an interest in broadcasting. "and when i asked him about it, he accused *me* of an affair with emerick voss."

"ridiculous." voss is the director of *im chor der engel stehn* whom she'd recently collaborated with on a romantic comedy shot in berlin. "you don't even like his films."

"it won't be long before i find our friends uniformly allied against me around a concocted story that i'm a cucquean."

"a cuckold."

"sorry?"

i get wonkish. "it's a cuckold. not a cucquean. the latter is a woman whose husband commits adultery."

"would you stop talking?"

"sorry, go on."

"actually, i shouldn't," she replies. "it's much too exhausting to talk about as well as to listen to."

i want to get the focus back on us. "you look terrific, by the way."

she sighs. "*danke*, baby. i'm in a better place than i've been in a long while."

she really does look awesome. her lithesomeness probably a result of an exercise regimen no doubt accompanied by the intervention of purgative diets – ex lax, caffeine, and the occasional forefinger applied gently to the uvula. while she talks health, i note that odd face is still sloe eyes, there's a dimple on the outskirts of a pink, meaty pucker of a mouth, and her complexion is shiny, smooth and plash with oils from the dead sea. yes, she's still given to intensity of feeling, and an admitted tendency to bully her cast mates into line with broad swathes of fudged logic, and according to her own testimony, "i quit smoking packaged tar, acerbic hits of arsenic, adrenalin." she gets up, and re-arranges herself to sit down again with one leg folded under her on the chair. "so, i've spent the better part of the *morgen* munching on gum and sucking on nicotine mints to help me with this damn patch." she pulls up a sleeve, and shows me her alabaster flesh. "sometimes it's as if i can feel my glands suckling, hard. and it's enough to get me really fucking moody."

"did you say really horny?"

"*ne*."

"it sounded like you said, it made you feel really fucking horny."

"*ne*. moody," she says. "mooo-dy."

"do you feel horny right now?"

she ignores me. "the crazy back and forth with the nicotine has me feeling so

fucking *moody* that i did a terrible thing this *morgen*. i forced *mein spatz*, bensonhurst, under a cold shower to stop him from barking.”

i feel the cardboard edges of the cue cards in my pocket and want to get to my main reason for meeting - to plea temporary insanity for what i wrote, and to tell her that i'd been on a sleeping pill that makes a person act in ways they don't recollect in the morning. the prescription warns, by inference, of senators who drive their cars into trees and upstanding members of society who can be found at night streaking buck-naked through suburban hoods. but to be honest, despite what she says about being in a better place, kerstin seems elsewhere, adrift. she doesn't elaborate on tormenting her poor pup in the shower. she talks about plans that i've heard for years to move to berlin as well as to get a german passport. then she tells a story about an infestation of ants in her apartment, and as she makes her random leaps she looks like a ruffled detainee gabbing on this terrace among the men and women who study her in conversations picking up in her wake, slipstreams in which she tosses her head back, laughing much too enthusiastically among hotels and apartment buildings. she leans forward to touch my forearm. an accident? and the mood changes, her mood, as she much too tinnily defends a position taken in relation to a matter of principle she's attached to for now and as long as it puts an end to thoughts about the quotidian. then she absent-mindedly checks again for lumps in lymph nodes, and loudly worries about the return of a pain in the vicinity of her uterus.

“i've become my aunt sabine who started obsessing about her health at my

age," she says. "at thirty, she got herself a membership at the gym and began torturing her body into something that resembled a version of itself at twenty." kerstin sits on both her hands. "and the funny thing is she didn't even like being twenty."

as soon as she catches a glimpse of how she must sound, she employs a light touch, a rejoinder that keeps me at a distance with a sharpness of tone that gets the conversation back onto her quest for a german passport now that her arteries are clear, cleansed for now because she has given up nicotine. she stifles a yawn. then is quick to locate words that are a further exhibition of poise - dissimulate, capacious. and she sounds smart and at ease as she talks much too much about a recent dispute with a waiter over "a charge for trout when i ordered the pink salmon." and i grin-smile back as she stifles another yawn before answering her cell.

the conversation is full of "is that a threat?" and "do what you've got to do."

after she has hung up, she smiles. "i guess i'll let you go then," she says.

i flinch. *she* will let *me* go when it is *she* who wants to leave.

"is everything okay?" i ask.

she nods and mentions an appointment to go to in a few. i apologize for holding her up, and hate myself for waiting too long to mention my dirty correspondence as she lifts her eyes to meet mine, then quickly drops them like a dainty dish of fluff, falling, flailing.

"go, go." i say. "it's been cool."

“bis später,” she replies.

as kerstin escapes by way of the southwest exit, i’m left shuffling the cue cards i’ve finally taken out of my pocket, and i’m turns of mood like fingers recklessly charging the frets of an acoustic guitar.

at aspen homeowners association, keoki accelerates through a description of his latest troubles while we ride the elevator. “stan is going to kick me into the streets, professor,” he says. “if he does me like this, i’ll tell the police about everything going on here.” his face is unshaven and his cheeks gaunt. “you see the envelopes the hookers push under his office door. this is money they give him to do business in the building. stan doesn’t think i know this.”

“how much notice did he give you?”

“one week.”

“you need to get a lawyer,” i say.

“it costs, professor.”

the elevator opens on the fifth. “legal aid is free, my friend.”

keoki holds the door ajar, and repeats a story about how lyric and his boys sell meth from a package they get from stan.

it’s all too out there for me. stan can be a stickler about keeping the lobby clean and making sure no one overloads the washing machines, but he’s no king pin, and he’s much too careful to get anywhere near something like that.

“you really need to get a lawyer,” i reply.

the truth is i like keoki, but the dude is an odd one. he grew up in kaipei, but did various stints with the army all over the globe. there's been intermarriage in the family tree between filipinos, african-americans, and puerto ricans.

depending on the day you catch him, he may tell stories about fighting in the early days of the second iraq war. endless stretches of 120 degree heat. foot patrols in gutted streets, and he has been in more fire fights than he could count in which comrades were wounded so severely their current address is walter reed (where they've been fitted with prosthetic limbs).

"i got to go," i say to him. "but i'll let you know about free legal aid."

before he releases the door, mrs wainwright, the seventy-year-old from 508, calls out for keoki to hold the elevator for her.

today, as always, she has drawn her eyebrows on with an eye pencil, and she wears another in her collection of green cotton dresses. she's never in a good mood. so, i'm glad it's keoki who is trapped for an eternity in the elevator with her.

better him than me, i think.

as soon as i get into the apartment, i discard keys onto an oak dresser, loosen my belt, take off my boot cast and collect myself on the mattress with my aching limb propped on a pillow.

the fact is, i got too cute with kerstin when she was in berlin. i should have kept it high brow: arcana about the strength of the euro, her various hijinks on

the movie set, whether dogs have the capacity to forgive. normal stuff. but, i couldn't help but try to see where else i could take it, and i launched into a masterpiece of speedy foot shuffles, and was caught flat-footed by her latest disappearing act.

lesson re-learned: i need to stop putting myself in the middle of things that clip me upside the chin and leave me staring up at the whirring apartment's fan, bucket loads of shit sluicing about in my chest.

as i listen to the blades merge with an uproar of sirens clamoring like a dull eruption of alarm clocks, i recollect a grab bag of strip clubs, and balderdash, and the liquor i've given up because of the entanglements it's driven me to. and all of it fits a story i tell myself that explains how i once aimed to be a writer, and how the desire for that life is now gone.

more sirens puree the night.

there's a drizzle of bland hunger as i bottom out in front of the computer while chewing on a ballpoint pen jacked between my lips.

i'm losing touch with my priorities: consistent study, writing a spiritual memoir, teaching young'uns to develop better work ethics, and eating a balanced diet fuelled by regular hits of bottled spring water. oh, and i haven't been consistent in doing the required exercises to rehab my broken foot. so, i input a revised schedule for the next two weeks into my computer.

... a knock on the door.

open sesame, and kerstin stands in the hallway wearing sexymotherfucker

boots.

there's been a fire at the pink palace. can she stay till morning? she asks. sorry, so sorry for this. she has nowhere else to go.

"god, yes," i say. "come in, come in."

in bounds her beastly pup, goes straight over to the middle of the bed, plunks down and perches like a sphinx.

as she trembles, i offer fortifying guava juice with johimbe bark and she digs into her side pocket for a cigarette, her eyes wide and wild while she staves off a life that is compromised by a fire that gives her reasons to indulge bad habits without end.

folks, i don't believe in a *deus ex machina*, or a God named fortune. but i do believe in the moment kerstin slides next to me beneath the covers of the comforter, bensonhurst curled at our feet.

the night is dominated by foot steps, and kerstin talks of how she came to like the idea of leeches that rise in bottles to warn of coming storms, and on the day hurricane esmerelda blew gales of moist wind onto the mountainside home she shared with tobias, it knocked down their fence, and banged on their bedroom window.

so, in the crook of her hurried, harried society, i sift through a flurry of talk like an archaeologist dusting down a bed. i listen closely as she trembles and tells me once again of her *oma* and *opa's* car accident on the day of the solar eclipse.

“they were on their way to celebrate *oma*’s birthday at the social club near goma,” kerstin says. “on the drive south from their farm, *opa* hit a tree. the impact threw *oma* against the windshield. *opa* had to pull her from the steaming wreckage to the side of the road, and they waited for help for several hours while she slipped in and out of consciousness.” kerstin lies on the bed next to bensonhurst, chain smoking, billows of white shrouding her head. “later on, *oma* said she remembered that she saw dead people she knew while moving through *lichtlicht*. there were no faces and no bodies, just a sense of their presence.” kerstin strokes bensonhurst’s chin. “for the rest of her life, she repeatedly dreamed of returning to *lichtlicht*.”

more sirens.

“i think of that moment every time i start to wonder if *this* is all there is to life, a mundane existence broken up by one disappointment after another,” she says.

i think of baba and mama, of babycakes, of the rev. “there’s so little the mind is capable of rationally understanding,” i say. “so there’s got to be more beyond what we can grasp.”

“*lichtlicht*.”

“to say the least,” i reply.

kerstin is the knuckles on her right hand bulging with teensy hills like those stacked along the shoreline. the night winks with orange stoplights, the window clacks at joints, and the wind feels its way murmurously through palm trees, slowly picking up velocity as it lollygags towards a breach in the outer envelope

of my atmosphere.

a parallel universe.

unTime.

CHAPTER V. GUNSFELDSTEIN SYNDROME

for academic purposes, i will forego the usual flim flummery and attend to the material point.

there is a theory that explains “the nature of recurrent reluctance” floated by sixteenth-century scholar johannes gunsfeldstein (the prussian scholar who, at age twenty-eight, took a “mulatto lover” in the second year of his marriage, and kept her in various states of undress for the remaining thirty-three of his productive life). although much of the focus on him revolves around eccentricities that include a steady diet of boiled asparagus and a tendency to mix his alcoholic beverages with a variety of plant extracts, the past decade has seen a resurgence of his gunsfeldstein syndrome.

according to documents housed in the archives of dingham university (unavailable to the general public), the subject afflicted by gunsfeldstein syndrome is crippled by anxiety over whether “he moves between the two separate, unyet connected, worlds of fact and fiction, altogether calamitous for its ramifications in the world of fact.” there’s some evidence to suggest that anke bloch contributed ideas to the scholar’s well-regarded paper on the topic by way of analytical debates over his inability to leave his wife. therefore, in line with the bloch-gunsfeldstein team, questions to be asked by one subject to these destructive anxieties should include whether he or she “has difficulty with

frequent urination?" if on rising in the morning he or she presents "with an unseemly discharge of spittle?" and whether sub-seventy-degree weather induces "a tingling sensation in the vicinity of the perinium?" from what i'm given to understand, the power to exercise agency among this afflicted demographic dims precipitously at age twenty-eight - sets of seven are a crucial element in the bloch-gunsfeldstein system, every fourth set bringing on dark cracks in one's golden aureole - as "one loses the ability to differentiate between the imaginary and the real." thus, even though the gunsfeldstein sufferer is freakishly adept at playing the harpsichord, or some equivalent, this facility "comes with a hamlet-like dithering when action is required."

how is the gunsfeldstein syndrome related to my own dilemma?

funny thing, there has been a major fall-out over the locked-car incident. my honesty with the sunderlands about the half hour in which rick sat locked in the running station wagon, perched on the edge of a cliff, wasn't appreciated. nor was the fact that i'd let him run free on the beach. so, i got canned by the family and let go by hollister and associates, the care giving agency that hired me for the job. no more paycheques to fill out my overhead costs, and no immediate money options on the horizon.

from my end, i thought the important lesson to take from the incident was how i was able to communicate with rick, much like a world-class mime, using hand gestures to such an extent that he finally unlocked the door himself. in effect, it was no different than helen keller making the connection between water

as word and water as physical substance (or so i argued). go figure. instead of calling the mayor to recommend i be given a key to the city, i was hauled into the study by the parental unit for a debriefing without a lawyer present. in one instant, i was asked if i wanted a sandwich, and what kind, and if i would like the mr to go down the block to fetch me a fresco. in the next, i was yelled at, called a liar, and threatened with legal action that would include substantial prison time. at the time i still thought the job was salvageable, so i said little in response. there would be no heroics, the funky fresh gentleman would not speak truth to power. but once i realized my days with rick were numbered, i got pissy and spoke rather hurtfully about their “stupid pipe dream” to take care of all of rick’s needs at home instead of with support at a facility. no one speaks to me this way, mrs sunderland said. mr sunderland left the room to fetch a golf club from his bedroom closet. get out, he said on his return. mrs sunderland encouraged him to hit me in the kneecap. i kid you not. the only reason i made it out of there without being pummeled was that i left on my own volition, shouting to the neighbors about how i wouldn’t be caught dead showing my face at the sunderlands ever again.

as i looked back for the last time, i could see rick watching me through a slit in his bedroom curtains.

to be honest, that’s when i regretted losing my temper. his parents were overwhelmed by the task they’d set for themselves, to give their son a decent experience of life during the years they still had health, resources, and the

wherewithal to influence this outcome. they were invested, til death do them part. and i was just another one of half a dozen hotshots who'd been brought in to do a job. in we'd come with our ideas to hasten the miracle that would get rick using sign language, or to have him chowing down on popcorn in a movie theater on a saturday night, like other people. and after we had got the mr and mrs excited about the possibilities, we moved on.

ultimately, it would always be the three of them, bound together by an affliction they'd made a public declaration to defeat with faithfulness and sacrifice.

and how does this apply to the syndrome?

well. apart from the obvious physical symptoms, i've begun to be aware of a distinction between how i see myself as an action man, and my "hamlet-like dithering" in facing the fact that i don't really know what i most want to do.

9:42 p.m. since the fire, i've attended to miscellaneous matters on kerstin's behalf - insurance agents to be contacted, replacements of hip-hugging clothing to procure at the salvation army, dry dog food and chicken feet along with bowls emblazoned with cutesy disney characters to unearth, limping back and forth to venerable institutions delving in doings pursuant to replacing identification, short dog walks to drain bensonhurst of an endless reservoir of energy, buying groceries with which to finally stock the fridge, and creating space in cupboards as well as drawers to clear and line with newspaper. all of it fit in around a three-day teaching week. but this all seems like i'm avoiding something.

so, i excuse myself to go walking in a downpour of rain.

water surges down the sloped road and seeps through my boot cast, and into my sock, and i'm a boy again among puddles with his favorite gum boots on, and a wish to have my own girl whom i can bring small gifts of toffees wrapped in multi-colored foil. and as the gulleys roar with the clatter of twigs, and the rain soaks through my woolen sweater onto my skin, i think of kerstin's messy nest of hair in the *morgen*, and the smear of sleep wedged in her eye as she reaches for caffeine's pick-me-up. and i swear, she's a *côte d'ivoire*, and stretches of it, and when the folk with umbrellas rush indoors, and others stand at their apartment windows watching the deluge of rain, i realize i'm not keen on being alone.

but ... the timing is off for this announcement since my house guest cum former love is now haplessly involved in a difficult marital spat, *and* she's dependent on me because she clearly belongs, once again, to the homeless. there's nowhere else for her to go, and taking advantage of all this would be rather bush league.

as i dry off in the bathroom with a towel, i can hear kerstin dealing with a move by tobias to protect himself by denying kerstin access to their joint bank account in order to get her to drop her contestation of the prenup.

this is the third of a series of phone conversations that have turned into another nasty shouting match. the last one coming to a tearful end with *gummibärchen* threatening a rather public revelation of the organic toothpaste

tycoon's untoward habits in the boudoir: primarily the need he had for his wife to wear a black strap-on because of an obsession he had with her love for black cock.

"if he makes you wear the strap-on, how is that not his obsession?" i asked later.

kerstin shrugged. "he got angry at me when i tried to talk through the logic of it with him."

"i mean, you're wearing it and he's ..."

"i know," she replied.

"sick fuck."

"tell me about it."

alas, it has also swiftly become clear that kerstin's flat broke, and her stories about film offers were greatly exaggerated. (she's sorry for that, she's working at feeling less shame over what seems to be the end of an acting career brought on by turning thirty.)

all told, she has picked a pack of pickled peppers and it's difficult to know how many pickled peppers in a pack of peppers she has picked.

after she hangs up, kerstin lies on the mattress curled around a sleeping bensonhurst.

"my money situation isn't that great," i sit down beside her. "but if you're able to withstand a tight budget, you can stay with me for as long as you need." then i lay out several pre-conditions. first, she can't bring any booze or drugs into the

apartment, and second, as far as arrangements in our *boudoir*, she is more than welcome to share my bed as long as she doesn't attempt any of the nudist hocus pocus exhibited in spades by her european precursors, johannes gunsfeldstein and anke bloch (or, by extension tobias bohrmann with his predilection for black strap ons).

"and please, no walking around in your birthday suit," i say.

"i have to think about that last one," she replies.

"listen, i personally don't have a problem with it," i reply. "it's more that this isn't that sort of building."

"but i'll be inside your apartment."

"in case you hadn't noticed, i have no curtains, and people on the street can get a pretty good look at what goes on inside my sliding panel doors."

"so?"

"this isn't one of your german beaches," i say. "here we adhere to strict ethical policies around keeping our private parts ... private."

she grumbles about a repressed north american culture, and goes off on a tirade about maintaining the right to go topless on tiki tiki beach if so desired.

she's hopeless.

"anyway," she says. "i should be the one who is worried about *your* ethics."

"why?"

"i'm not the one who fantasizes in his e-mails about getting freaky with white women."

"about that ..."

"ja."

"i wasn't talking about a general desire for white women," i try to explain.

"ja."

"it was like, y'know when you're thinking out loud. it was like that. just ideas. and i was trying to suggest that generally speaking it's absurd to ignore the differences that are a part of ... okay, take eros as 'an endless striving'to quote derrida. is there something wrong with acknowledging racial markers as part of that volatile mix? not as the whole of desire, but as a part of it. are we supposed to walk around as if lobotomized, and pretend that generally speaking we're above being attracted to ... i mean, if we're the same color we can talk about digging that about each other and it's celebrated as self-love. but when it comes to difference in skin color, it means the opposite. "

she raises an eyebrow, and i feel like tobias must have, trying to explain his use of the black strap-on.

11.26 p.m. the past week has been full, so i play catch up at home by multitasking. simultaneously, my foot is packed in ice in a bucket while i eat from a plate of exotic fruit, stolen out of a neighbor's yard, that kerstin has chopped for my benefit. as i gobble a slice of mango, i look at classified ads online while helping my former flame illegally download some of german superstars, freundeskreis's international contribution to hippity hop.

it's been a little difficult staying focused today because kerstin has decided to recruit me in her latest inquiry into the tragic drowning of linda chase while scuba diving on her honeymoon.

"ron murdered her," she says.

"that doesn't make sense."

"why? because they were on their honeymoon?"

"yes."

she reads from an article in the kaipei standard she'd printed earlier. "at approximately 10:33 am pst, scuba diving novice, linda chase, was last seen dropping into the pacific waters on the web cameras aboard the steelbreeze. she was quickly followed by ron chase, licensed diver with eighteen years of experience. twenty-minutes later, ron flopped back on board the boat, and called for help. divers with the steelbreeze company were dispatched into the water, and took ten minutes to emerge with linda's body.

according to a report on tmz, ron made phone two calls from his hotel on returning to his room at approximately 6:14 pm pst. none of them were to his in-laws. the first was to one of linda's bridesmaids, and the other was to an escort service. in neither call did he mention the drowning of his wife. that evening, he received a female visitor to his room, and her visit was captured on cameras in the hotel's hallway."

"he might have been in shock," i say.

"he did it," she says.

to avoid being swept up in kerstin's crusade to establish motive, i get back on track by checking my e-mail.

i'm surprised to see one from clementine – the first since her miscarriage - and even more so to see jpeg's of her time on the slopes of mount bisikasi with the government-funded agency, climbers for christ. it's an adjustment getting used to the idea of her lugging around a blackberry as she treks through liwani with her hubby, jude anderson. sending tweets and instant photographs from the african hinterland doesn't seem appropriate somehow. call me a middle-aged coot if you will, but i still fondly remember the days when one disappeared off the grid for days leaving loved ones to worry until a phone call could finally be made from the one telephone within a two-hundred-mile radius.

for reasons better explained by a therapist, i'm fixated on looking for the climbers for christ's more embarrassing pics. therefore, i scour each photograph for evidence of unchristlike behavior – putting the self ahead of a fellow climber, gyrating during boogie downs with more than the allowable pelvic torsions. however, clementine and her cohorts seem to be as goodly as advertised. sing songs take place with open bibles at campfires, and non-sexual touching is had on appropriate bodily regions.

"it's all quite disgusting, really," i say to kerstin.

"finally some outrage." she refers to the diving tragedy.

"yes, that too," i reply. "but i'm talking about these jpegs of the climbers for christ?"

“would you much prefer to see them gagging for air while staring up at a dodgy rock face, contemplating a potential avalanche.”

“yes.”

“the climbers for christ?”

“and it wouldn’t hurt to get at least one pic of clem calling back to base camp on her hand radio. y’know, to say indeed she must cut off and eat the jooode’s left hand due to a shortage of chocolate bars.”

she sighs.

before i get too ahead of myself (i write these words after the events described herein), let’s set the scene.

11.34 p.m. mid-eighties, no wind, the apartment overlooks the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal. the stereo plays something wide in sound and large too, that permeates like perfume. on the bed, bensonhurst dozes beside kerstin ostheim-bohrmann who sits propped up on pillows against the wall. she has set aside the article and is elsewhere, looking at a copy of the reverend’s apprentice. a speed-reader, she scans half a page at a go. a snap shot. a licked finger. a turned page. and again, her head moves slightly up, then down. blink, blink. another lick of the finger. another turned page.

it’s as if i’m staring at a moving picture, and the first thing one notices is the *sujet de directoire* is wearing a pair of granny panties and a primrose bra with frills. her pastel skin is densely freckled at sinewy arms, all over legs, on hands, and speckled in an upside down triangle at her flushed neckline. then as the

obtrusive eye traverses the celluloid, there's evidence of sharp collarbones, and frosty hair contrasted by a shade of discoloring around the eyes, as if slightly bruised. and her lips are a glossy zinfandel red, and this sets off an associative trek through a profusion of pink at knuckles, and kneecaps, and her heels, and the soles of her bare feet. finally, one's attention is drawn to short fuzz at her armpits, and to a shabby desire to sit with her and wrestle for bottomless quiet. she's glazed icing on a slice of birthday cake, and burning candles, and a field of purple lupines, and butterflies, drunk on purpure, banging into hoary fur on leaves. and even then, it doesn't seem right to put it into words, as if the attempt to name invades, ruptures, and leaves only the severed head analyzing, after the fact, in a yammery bar.

what do i feel?

schmetterling has always been one to flutter among the lupines, intent on avoiding the lepidopterist with a net ready to snugly snap down over her flittering wings. and to come clean, i want to ... not enmesh her in the twine of my net ... but move closer, close enough to daub at the pink and the freckles, and to peak beneath her frilly bra and run my hands over her rib cage that emerges palpably from her egg-white skin, and to see if she will move towards me, her fingers like butterfly feet touching down among sorrel and duskiness and me.

did i mention there are lilies on every flat surface in the apartment?

kerstin can't seem to pass a private garden without pillaging it of a patiently cultivated contender for a flower prize, the poignancy of these flowers, in bloom

one day and wilting the next, a constant reminder of the pressure she feels to wring the bejeepers out of each and every passing moment. it's a way of engaging the world she still clings onto despite evidence that there's always a tomorrow, one that doesn't have to be faced with remorseful hangovers, with unshedable glut and paunch.

the phone rings and it's a telemarketer who deigns to call while the writer is at work.

"no, sir. no thanks," i say.

"is there anyone in the household who may be interested in a setee from gingham's? we offer a free coffee table and a book with majestic photographs of the dakotan badlands worth a one-time low ball total of one hundred and eighty-three dollars *after* taxes."

"i said, thank you no, sir."

"if you order now we can throw in the cost for mailing, but no later than the sixth of this month as this is a one-time deal."

"free mailing?"

"yes, and if you provide us with your e-mail, we can send updates on all our latest offers. here at gingham's the comfort of the customer goes well beyond our fine home furnishings. we do the work, you enjoy the fruits of the labor."

"and you mentioned a coffee table. what grain of wood does that come in?"

kerstin rises from the mattress where she takes mental snapshots of the pages of eliza may's novel (a different authorial perspective i've got no quibbles with),

playfully taps me with her palm to my forehead, and hangs up.

"you don't have the cash," she says.

she's right.

"take a look at this." i click onto a pic of clementine. "lots of being unwashed, standing around in hideous boots, and studying her bible with a grimy red ascot encircling her neck."

"is this what you call working?" she asks.

"that ascot was responsible for whatever broke out between her and the jooode."

"you think?"

"she told me as much," i reply. "she wore the ascot the same night in which she permitted him to enjoy her womanly virtues."

"he has some kind of vulnerablity to an insightful accessory?"

"yes, ma'am."

"*dummerchen*," she clucks, and goes back to her reading.

okay, i'm losing focus.

leaders, teachers, workshop facilitators, listen and learn.

"writers must know their audience," i was told at a three-day writing workshop given by melissa weatherby, the twenty-three-year-old with a two-book deal at garfield and cummings press. yes, that melissa weatherby, the one whose brand adds author to a career that has spanned reality-show star, mogul of the designing of a couture line of non-binding babysitter clothing, tri-athlete,

and inspirational speaker. what did she say? oh, yes, if you teach a village to fish and then give the fish to the villagers, something or something or other occurs. so fish where you know there is a catch to be had is all.

so, as i write an installment of what i envision as a spiritual memoir to be made available some time next year for a small, or generous, donation through a paypal account at www.jonahayot.com, i think of melissa weatherby, and i imagine myself as a brand, with gravitas, delivering this particular rumination to a room full of urban youth.

straight talk, soldiers in the game and your suburban satellites.

according to the current sociological chatter, it's generally found that at the age appropriate for taking a spouse, persons tend to choose a mate from within the tribe. therefore, despite a tendency for dude to claim "all's good" in our open society with its medicinal pot smoking and inter-racial doing it, our experience tells us different. no, sir. the general rule, as so applied, is that married inter-racial couples are less in number than one might suppose. the norm isn't for a brutha to walk into a club thinking, where the white women at so i can put a ring on her finger? as soon as it's crunch time, folks is out to give the grandparents a bundle of racially copasetic joy. at this point, it becomes about taste buds. a shared interest in the consuming of cous cous or knishes. being able to relate to having potato salad on a sunday afternoon, or on mutual hankerings after jerk chicken at lunch.

as such, the state of our little nation – that is between kerstin and i - is no

different than the state of the nation at large. while i may have given the impression that there is real potential for us to live out our days of unfettered doing it, this is merely a symptom of a tendency to get ahead of myself. in all honesty, the unfortunate interracial sex porn e-mail i sent her left me on uncertain ground. now i stand on the outside reading her as surly one minute and maybe not the next. and in those moments it's as if there is a rope between us that plays and tugs before pulling us back here, right here, some place i cannot name with any accuracy. and i sigh like a valve leaking steam as i watch her traipse through the apartment showing a porcelain belly that is a flat plain which ends in a hinted vista of bush, a venus mound of it with pink banks that contain wetlands i wish to taste until she quivers in my mouth.

however, *mes amis*, jonah ayot will not be defined by these thoughts - after all they are just thoughts - and he will not be seen among these pages adoringly schlepping around town loaded down with the many ways his behavior must be made to fully align with the feelings of a racially different helpmeet.

no, thank you.

oh, wait. kerstin has something to ask me (prompted by a quiet ten minutes with the novel).

"why do you think someone would go to all that trouble to kill the person they've just married in front of close family and friends? you know, like pretty much after the ceremony."

"i have no idea."

"you must have suspicions."

"nope."

"why not just break it off?"

"i feel uncomfortable speculating."

"that's what i don't get. just say, sorry folks i can't go through with this. don't kill the woman. "

then she randomly jumps from one cluster of ideas to the next. trying to find a fit for what she feels until she can lapse back into quietude. it's like ironing out wrinkles in cotton, and she wants me to know that the whole thing was probably about money, and life is *scheisse*, and that the only meaningful path is to dedicate the rest of one's days to doing good in the world. in fact, she wants my opinion about a plan to divert the Nile river from the southern into the northern Sudan, thereby turning the desert into arable land. and soon she is talking about Tobias's deep pockets and her parents "of modest income" and how she hates money "unless it's a tool" to get the only thing she needs, "the financing to divert the Nile river from the southern into the northern Sudan."

"how lucky you were to have grown up with parents who had a modest income," i reply.

"lucky? how?"

"i was born after the salad days. the ones defined by the loss of our family huts on Mr Owio's landholdings during the pestilence of 73, the one that radically affected the family's prospects in the manufacturing of canvas tents on order from

as far as lagos." i clear my throat. "so, i've never had the luxury to hate money the way you do."

kerstin giggles. "*du spassvogel*." then she lapses back into speed-reading.

what else is there to say about kerstin?

she likes to sleep with sheets, no blankets.

she takes half an hour to wake up in the morning, covers her head with sheets, lies on her stomach, and grumbles.

she eats chocolate, drinks coffee made in an espresso maker, and rolls her cigarettes..

she cries when she doesn't have the words to say what she feels.

other people's company easily wears her down.

she looks like a different person in her photographs at eighteen than she does at nineteen. in the former she is still a girl with a bowl cut. in the latter, she has discovered boys and her cheeks have begun to hollow out.

she likes it when i tell her nonsensical stories when she wakes up in the morning.

she sits in her nook on hinealko beach with bensonhurst.

she eats breakfast for dinner.

she tells tales of a time she would wake up in the middle of the night and toss and turn until she'd find me again in a dream.

and since she was a little girl, she always wanted to be a character in a book because lives in novels seemed so much more full and meaningful than her own

experiences. and so she tried to turn her life into some sort of story, to make it bigger than what it was, but of late she finds she no longer feels that way.

however, despite all of this, we're destined not to be lovers. see, a couple of night's ago, kerstin and i talked about one of the last times we saw each other. but strange as this sounds, she has no memory of any of what went down, and to be perfectly frank, i can't quite make sense of how a time i recollect in full detail, she can find no traces of in her mind.

what does it mean?

you be the judge.

this is what i remember.

once upon a while ago on a humid september noon, kerstin and i are down at the gorge taking a soak in those silky, brown waters. we've been having trouble, or at least she's become increasingly unreliable as she keeps making and breaking plans. it gets so bad that i follow her one night, and watch her disappear into a reggae club to catch a set by the internationally renowned reggae meisters, burning spear. at around four o'clock in the morning, she staggers out the door in the arms of demarion armstrong, dub poet. when i confront them in the parking lot, kerstin manages to confuse me with a long speech about how disappointed she is that i feel the need to stalk her. they're "just collaborating" on a painting that will be used as a backdrop for his one-man show.

"we're housemates," she says. "nothing more."

that seemingly decided, demarion offers me a spliff. and then recites one of his crowd pleasers about true lovers free-wheeling it *sans* undies in a traveling van for the remainder of their days. kerstin flushes, and clutches onto his upper arm, her dexterous painter's fingers plumping up a bicep the size of a grapefruit. not wanting to douse their creative groove, i'm soon helping them into a cab, giving them extra cash in case they need energy bars for their late-night work session, and wishing them well as they all but mount each other in the back seat. (i embellish not at all.)

it's the first time i suspect she has a thing for black guys, and i'm sickened.

anyway, the disastrous trip to the gorge takes place around the time gramps is murdered and not long after the reggae incident. it's one of our better days since i've been sufficiently intimidated into not asking uncomfortable questions about her housemate, and she's feeling sad about my loss. we're stoned and grabby as we splash about in the water. and just as a nightingale puts the finishing touches on the moment with a lonesome song, clementine's name comes up. i can't recall who says it first. probably kerstin. and then she goes off on a rant about how she, kerstin, wants me to tell the rev she's my girlfriend. i'm cool. blaaa blaaa. don't sweat it, baby. we'll get through it. but she's not having it. so, soon she's on about how clementine still has a thing for me, and how i encourage it by having her over at the rev's house.

any objective person would see she's projecting onto me her own twisted happenings with demarion armstrong, dub master, and i'm having to defend a

perfectly innocent relationship with clementine. so, i crack a stupid joke about
 “how i’m not the one who has a thing for those choco sweets ... *negerküsse*.”

not my best moment, i admit.

her bottom lip starts to quiver. she mutters unrepeatable crudities involving
 esther dorfman’s cows and me. “hypocrite,” she says. “you use the rev as an
 excuse. the truth is you’re getting your jollies with white women, but will only
 marry a black one.”

jeezus and mary jones, what’s demarion telling her. “aren’t we all hypocrites
 to some degree?” i reply.

“*arschloch!*” she mentions the cows again, gathers up the picnic basket with
 my stash of herb, and storms off leaving me to watch a trail of dust lift behind
 her.

okay. sure, i had a thing for clem in my first year at d.u. after kerstin and i did
 our no-strings-attached thing that resulted in her going splitsville. (clem and i
 started with a box of white chocolates left in her locker after reverend
 schicklgruber’s guest sermon on abstinence.) but, it wasn’t racially motivated. in
 fact, i pride myself on the fact that i’d pretty much do anyone who would have
 me, regardless. i mean, if someone’s in a wheelchair, i’d have to think it through
 a bit more. the hows? the accessibility to wheelchair ramps. but skin color ...

but, what does kerstin remember? not esther dorfman’s cows. not my
 ridiculous joke about her being a choco kiss lover. *nada*.

“it’s time,” kerstin announces, interrupting my remembrance of racial things

past.

“already?”

“chad says i’m supposed to disinfect it every six hours.”

kerstin has a fresh tattoo of a comet on her lower back carved left of the ass crack by chad camabede, conspiracy theorist. his belief system comprised of cabals and secret meetings of rich folk who have mass murders of the poor on the mind as well as shadowy connections to the vatican.

as bensonhurst stands to shake fur and goes to roll around on the kitchen floor among bread crumbs, i take a moment to re-acquaint my fingers with the wispieness of kerstin’s hips. then *herr doktor* performs a most necessary expedition around the afflicted area, the thumb pressing flesh for signs of tenderness.

i step back for the long view. “i’m going to have to lower the waistband of the granny panties.”

“granny panties!”

“as a precautionary measure.”

“precautionary, huh?”

i nod.

“well, if it’s absolutely necessary ...” she flirts, her voice dropping an octave.

i don’t quite know what to make of her come-hither tone.

heavy is the head that sporteth the crown as i watch her slide an elastic waistband to a level appropriate for the world-class masseuse. good grief, i forgot about the constellation of freckles that cluster at the base of her spine.

"i don't know why i didn't talk you out of this." she's a sharp intake of breath, and a flinch in the shoulders when i lift one edge of the bandage to view an oozy, sticky mess. "someone ought to go over and kick the charlatan's ass." i dab the scab with a cotton ball dipped in rubbing alcohol before redressing the wound.

"you're sounding protective," she purrs, pretty much.

"sorry."

"no. it's nice."

truth be told, in these moments when i'm of use to her, i find myself calculating the extent and reach of another difficult feeling. i wouldn't be ready for it even if she did want to take a crack at another relationship with me. she's married, sorry *was* married. therefore, she seems more practiced at the necessary habits involved in sharing a life. i mean, as the days pile up, she decorates the apartment with bird feathers, dried butterfly wings, lilacs, and post-it notes on the fridge with reminders of phosphate-free dish soaps to purchase. she moves the mattress so that when the morning light casts itself aslant through the panel doors, it hits the pillow as if God smiles down upon us. scratched pans have been banished for their high levels of toxicity, aluminum content and other death-invoking phenomena. she wants to replace sheets with those with a higher thread count. rags that have served jonah ayot, funky fresh gentleman, admirably since the beginning of the second iraq war are discarded. in come laundry detergents without agent orange, and manufactured out of the tears of daffodils. down come posters of penelope cruz, and up go dalis in frames

(pending the acquisition of originals by the great one, misunderstood by yours truly to be perverted as well as jejune). and she notices dust. dust. and so she deep cleans the bathroom and the kitchen with the scent of limes and puts left overs into the fridge, unlike when i left them out overnight like i did when i was a ball of tumbleweed. lonesome.

i'm out on the congo river, in a manner of speaking, and turned into "a parody in breeches." or, maybe this is too strong. but it's as if there's a winding river, and i'm the shore line, undomesticated, full of bop, and there she is, the kerstin ostheim, a steamer chugging into my tangle, hacking at the wilds, clearing a beaten path as she traverses towards the tootsie roll at my darkened center. and after i've finished prodding at her wound, she changes shape and bounds off towards the closet, only to return holding up a tartan skirt against her waist.

"honest opinion. what do you think?"

"i have to see it on," i reply.

"just tell me."

"how can i tell you what i think if you won't wear it?"

she slips it on before launching into an irish step dance. and i'm the ringmaster with the cat o'nine tails, watching for pleasing postures as she prances around an imaginary may pole.

"nice," i say.

nice? as if i'm throwing her treats, thinking of tricks she will have learned

since the last time i was her taskmaster. wondering what new tricks i would like to teach as she lies on the mattress in her tartan skirt, a frothy crown on steaming milk.

“i’m too hot.” she snaps a periwinkle waistband.

i take a hit of textured air, gather myself, and then babble. “it’s probably time bensonhurst went for a walk.” i head for the leash hanging from a hook on the back of the door. “yes, yes, he needs to take a walk.”

“now?”

“better to do it before we get too settled.”

“bis später, mein schöner mann.”

as i leave, i’m aflutter on shalt nots as i take the pup for a spin around the block. a capuchin doing a good turn, asking penance at the foot of an altar with the taste of a silver chalice on my lips. i shalt not covet the *prinzessin* who has been entrusted into my care, and i shalt find solace in the cut and jib of a leash playing leather hard against my palm.

once back into the elevator, i’m accosted by mrs wainwright.

“does stan know you’re encouraging keoki to get legal counsel?”

why is she stalking the building so late at night? “encouraging? no. i gave him the number of a crack attorney. so, encouraging is too weak a word.”

“it’s hardly responsible of you.”

bensonhurst playfully lunges forward, and jumps up on her leg. i wait a beat while mrs wainwright punches buttons in the elevator, the skin of my face

tightens hard right, and then i tug on his leash. as soon as the door opens on the third floor, mrs wainwright bolts out ahead of us.

the building is something of a tourist hotspot for all manners of sordid adult pleasures. tonight "stan's girls" provide the pop as roxy, lyric's busty side dish, rushes into the elevator. she wears purple spandex leggings that accentuate the absurdity of her high-pitched shrieks. hot in pursuit is a flabby japanese gentleman who yells about his wallet being stolen. right quick, other "stan's girls" pile into the elevator, still doing up their flys and blouseless. they claw at the asshole who now has roxy pressed against the wall, one fist raised.

it's a free all. shoes are removed from the blouseless, the flabby gentleman is pummeled until he collapses to the floor, and i'm late to join a barking bensonhurst in piling on while roxy's client yelps for the cops.

five minutes later, a crowd has gathered. five smartly dressed officers do plenty of standing around looking officious in blue. officer akana and officer peko do the talking. the former is a woman in her late twenties with the shiniest black shoes, and she calmly referees a loud dispute between the gent and roxy about unpaid monies for adult entertainments provided on the open market.

"she promised to help me sleep well tonight," he says.

"he didn't pay me," roxy says.

"did you promise to help him sleep well tonight, ma'am?" officer akana asks.

"the deal was for \$200.00," roxy replies.

"i can appreciate that, ma'am. but please just answer my question."

“she made me watch and touch myself,” the gent interrupts. “i didn’t pay to touch myself.”

“i’ll be with you in a minute, sir,” officer akana says. “what was involved in helping him sleep well tonight, maam?”

meanwhile keoki has managed to corner officer peko and fills his ear with names, dates, matching hair fibers and anything else that would tie stan to the prostitute ring, and the sale of meth in front of the building.

to my surprise, no one is taken away in cuffs. instead, the officers return to their desks at the station with paperwork to catch up on, keoki heads to the apartment he won’t be in much longer, mrs wainwright locks herself behind a chain in her apartment to boil little children in a black cauldron while the blouseless return to the sordid pleasures taking place in rooms 303, 305, and 306.

once in my own spot, i snap off the leash, and give bensonhurst a biscuit before he bounds over to kerstin who coos at him from the mattress. “*oh, kleiner schatz. mein süßes bensonhürstchen,*” she says.

slipping off my shoes, i retreat to the bathroom to douse my face in cold water. by the time i return to the main room, the pup slumps at the foot of the bed flossing his teeth with one of my errant socks.

i lie next to kerstin telling her what just happened in the elevator.

“i hate this freaking building.” i say, “we’ve got to move.”

kerstin curls beside me, the wedge of her hip prodding my backside, and she wraps her arm around my belly.

"i want to go back to africa," she says.

"to the sudanese desert?"

"no. to liwani," she replies. "my grandparents' land near gomo is just sitting there, overrun with weeds. and i'd like to see it."

i move closer, not away.

"we should buy plane tickets on our credit cards and get the hell out of here."

i tell her about my latest plans to found a school, and to raise a generation of young hipsters. "we could stop off in berlin for a few days before heading to liwani via a stop over to see the pyramids and the sphinx. it'd be cool. i could show you around hoppa, and if you're good i'll show you where i first lost my virginal aspect in a lime quarry near your grandparents' farm."

"virginal aspect?"

"y'know."

"that'd be nice."

"what part? the school?"

"all of it," she replies.

i nuzzle closer, the fecundity of apricots from her hair rising into my nostrils, and kiss the back of her head.

"are you going to cheat on me?" she asks, pulling away.

"no," i reply.

"why not?"

"why not?"

“yeah, why not?”

“because i’d be foolish to throw away the one thing i’ve been given that is better than i imagined.”

“okay.”

“okay?”

“yup.”

and i am like a little boy who flaps my feet and giggles with his girl who fills envelopes with food to save the world.

kerstin lies on her back-sideways, her legs open, wide and dangling onto the floor as i take her at the edge of the mattress, my arm raised up so i can look down at her brows bucking, her grey eyes orbs clouded over with mounting shakes shaking loose, her lips cinched and clenched, her stomach tightening as the *schokolade* of my hip tap taps against *weisser zucker*. chocolate on vanilla. *vanille auf schokolade*.

i hold myself as deep as i can manage, her back arching, and her mouth puckering open as she cums like a train trembling into a tunnel, and i’m a train and she is a dank wet tunnel.

“*mein lieberlieber schatz.*”

looking in her face, i want to carve our initials in a tree in schwarzwald, and on a bench in berlin, and in the red soil of the liwani national park, and her hands wrap tight around my shoulders, and we are an infinity of encounters,

colors clipped with sound, lost among thundershowers,

solar eclipses,

and stars that are belts and that have the look of loyal hounds.

CHAPTER VI. FAUX HEMINGWAY

in the early light-grey, i wake up on a morning i go to campus to teach. a cock crows, a reminder of hoppa with its wire chicken hutches and yellow chicks, balls of fur, trotting after their baby mamas. kerstin continues her deep slumber while i sit on the balcony, bensonhurst on his haunches staring up at me for a clue as to what event jonah ayot will next pull out of the ether. above us the big light does its fair best to ride in the arc that will change the angle of the shadows it leaves behind, an early breeze clipping palm fronds.

apartments and bungalows hem in the pup and i, a city of mustard-colored birds floating from corrugated rooftop to rooftop. although, come to think of it, hemmed isn't the right word. more accurately, i'm finally catching a glimpse of how good it can be to be embraced by a snug sprawl of architecture and noise and someone to love.

did i mention i see a shrink once a month? well, i do. so, sue me. on moving to kaipei, i went through a bit of rough patch, so i called a bunch of random psychiatrists in the phone book to see who would make an immediate appointment to save me from myself. it turned out my plight wasn't a relevant issue unless the doctor took my health insurance. this led me to the mag, the holistic circle, and alan becker, phd., who had an opening in three weeks.

dr becker wears beige khakis and safari boots to go along with a scruffy,

hemingwayesque beard. in fact, as we talk, i often imagine myself in conversation with ole ernest himself. and jonah ayot, funky fresh gentleman, talks with faux ernest using a somewhat controversial form of talk therapy – dialogue rather than consecutive monologues as the road to mental health. i have no complaints because it's a cutting edge, non-hierarchical exchange: two men with vastly different experiences chatting about life, and in this exchange opening to what the universe has determined the meeting means. so, we talk about my kerstin and his polynesian wife who is a nurse and his kid who is dyslexic and the trials of inhabiting a more emotionally open version of manhood and my interest in the strip-club scene and the healthiness of regular masturbation. he asks me about the frequency of my restroom visits, and gives me exercises to aid relaxation that include raising my arms at ninety-degree angles from my body and dropping them slowly while i role play a conversation with the unDead. then he recommends movies and books and writes down reminders to breathe deeply, or to listen actively and to journal the occasional homework assignment.

honest, it really is cutting edge, and in the end, i feel like i'm kicking it in a bar with an eccentric older brother who fought in vietnam, whose sister is dying of lung cancer, and whose dad beat him with a two by four during his formative years. so, it helps me maintain a sense of perspective as i often wonder whether my problems seem to be daintily bourgeois to him. y'know, i complain about how it takes a coffee to get rolling out of the sheets as dr faux hemingway thinks

about how he was beaten out of bed with a two by four.

but these are just thoughts, i've been told. no harm, no foul. think whatever the hell, just exercise caution in their enactment.

during our last *tête-à-tête* (his word), i tell him how i constantly feel as if i'm in the wrong place at the wrong time. i'm in bed when i should be making breakfast. i'm a professor when i should be a writer. i'm having fun when i should be deathly serious. but of late, i've begun to see things differently. i want to be with kerstin and bensonhurst and a little brood of munchkins, even though she's *weisser zucker*.

"white sugar," he mumbles. "interesting phraseology."

"i'm finally where i want to be," i say.

"people aren't meant to be alone," dr faux hemingway replies.

"no. no," i say, feeling misunderstood. "that's not what i mean."

"bear with me," he replies. "all of this self talk about i want to be alone when i'm with someone, or i want to be with someone when i'm alone ... all of that, is another way of saying i don't want to be alone. so, when you think you want to be alone while you're with someone or you want to be with someone when you are alone, you're actually saying the same thing. you're saying you need to be with someone who makes you feel integrated. not alone and distant and fragmented."

i'm not sure if he's convoluted or i'm slow. the word integration is much too a.b.c. after-school special. it suggests marches and fire hoses and college students

crossing the racial lines to break one off in forbidden erogenous zones. also, i was distracted by the thought of his killing a viet cong. *and* i wondered if he was really talking about sweet loving with his polynesian wife, *or* of his own feelings about his dying sister. no harm no foul, these are just thoughts. and anyway, i figure his intention hardly matters; what's somewhat relevant is the use i put to whatever i'm understanding about what he's saying. take his little speech about being and not being alone; i select bits and parts and apply them to what i'm already thinking. like when i was with clementine, i hankered after the opposite of what she wanted. if she was into going for a walk, i didn't want to budge from my comfortable perch in front of the computer. if i slept in, she wanted me to be up having breakfast with her at a café. if i took a long dump in the *badezimmer*, she'd be knocking at the door because she wanted to get in to have a shower, and i'd wish i were using the relatively deserted one on the fourth floor of the library on campus. my behavior caused her to sulk because of how my desire for solo outings showed a general callousness to a future in which i'd make babies with her. so, to appease her we'd go to matinees together and i'd wish i was there by myself. at least, this is what i tell dr faux hemingway.

"yes, one should be able to have time alone if that's what gets one's motor hot."

"motor hot?" i reply.

"a hot motor, yes." he replies.

oh, this is another thing about the good doctor. he's a freudian, so everything i

say comes back a little dirty. and i gather that he's making obvious connections between a moment alone and sexual repression. the alternative, making it something oedipal much too disgusting to contemplate.

"being alone doesn't take as much effort," he continues. "and it doesn't come with complications afterwards."

i'm thinking what he means is that my aloneness has meant i didn't have to worry about whether i was a constant laugh riot, or gainfully employing myself in all meaningful facets of what it meant to be engaged in a relationship. "with kerstin, i don't have any of those anxieties. in fact, not only do i want to be where she is, i've started feeling a little like what clementine must have felt like around me. demanding. a nuisance. and i even see ways in which i'd be bummed if kerstin didn't want me around."

"you're invested in her in ways that feel messy and demanding and that make you realize how much you don't want to go back to being alone."

"cool," i say.

cool? i need to stop saying that to a man who was in the tet offensive.

we have another forty minutes and i can see he's warming up to playing someone dead i can confront, or forgive, or just chat with about how they're dead and i'm alive and what we're all feeling and what we didn't tell each other when there was still time. (trust me, his methods are quite ahead of their time.) true to form, dr faux hemingway asks me about early memories of mama and baba and whether i remember them touching (which seems pretty disgusting to

me). and i say can't think of any, and he gets real quiet, a tactic he uses to force me to come up with something else (one he learned in a prisoner of war camp near laos).

in response, i finally blather without a sense of where i'm headed. "one time, i asked baba what i was like when i was a baby. was i a laugh riot? something. and baba says, go ask your mother. so i do. and she thinks about it. and she says she can't remember much either."

"how did it feel?"

i don't remember. "bad, i guess."

"yes, bad." he nudges the box of tissues near me before pushing with more about death. "keti was your friend," he says. "and then he died."

"yup."

"and precious' who was the first friend you had where intimate touch was involved, also recently died in a knife fight in a bar."

"uhuh."

"and by intimate touching, i mean a nuzzling type, skin-to-skin, or heart-to-heart touching."

"gotcha."

"you once said, you felt guilty for leaving precious in liwani. and the relationships you've had since then have either been highly impulsive, or in clementine's case remote and distant. consequently, you turned on being touched, really touched, because it was a sign of weakness to feel connected to a

need for consolation over leaving precious, and ultimately the only sense of community you've known."

okay. sorry for this. but this shit is cutting edge, and i think of the rev in a hospital bed i've yet to visit, i think how freaking sad it all is. how freaking, freaking sad. and i sniffle, reaching for the box of kleenex.

he looks at the clock. "ahhh, we did some good work today." he stands up. "same time next week?"

the setback.

kahoutek's comet is on its way to the northeast for the first time since 1926. i'm jobless, living in curranvale city with the rev, and feeling like a kept man after graduating with a phd in religious studies. i have no idea what my next step will be. i'm not cut out for the ministry because while i have no problem talking about ideas expressed in the tradition, i'm not a born again. what interests me is how a theologian like søren kierkegaard speaks of abraham's sacrifice of his son, isaac, and how the same topic is dealt with by jacques derrida.

i blame both the rev and my gramps for this. being around them was like swimming in a

meaty stew, and any ignorance of their wide frames of reference led to an uncomfortably embarrassing drowning. but, what i've taken from it all is a genuine interest in being a better person as well as an enjoyment of the high

church's rituals of worship: the cramner prayer book, kneeling in the pews, communion, and the solitary visits among stained glass windows for quiet moments of reflection. however, i'm not particularly concerned over where a good idea comes from – an informal chat with a complete stranger, a smartly written book, whatever. but, none of this is all that marketable and i have to deal with the fact that i've taken out so many loans i'll be paying down the interest until 2020.

the rev is cool about my predicament, in part because he blew my inheritance on his unemployable son, elisha. but he's been retired from his parish for a couple of years, and his pension isn't enough for him to consistently take care of what i need: shampoo, liquid-gel deodorant, the basics.

initially, my thinking is that i should get a job teaching in a department of religious studies as nearby as possible. it'll enable me to get back on my feet moneywise, i'll have the freedom to keep exploring ideas of interest, and if i get enough courses i'll also be able to take care of the rev. at his age his mind is still sprightly, but he needs a hand maintaining colby manor, and i constantly worry that he'll have a nasty tumble down the stairs when he's left alone. of late, his lady friend, loretta tucci, has made rumblings about the two of them moving into a smaller place together. so another option is that he'll sell the house and i'll have to move out on my own.

i feel pressure, the spigot is taxed to the max, so i bump up the level of my devotion to the sacred.

truth is what i seek, not reassurance. it's half an hour to doomsday, and there's a blue moon, and all of it's uncanny, all of it. and as i return to st peter's for communion, i kneel in front of reverend collins, and i wonder whether i'm actually eating and drinking the flesh and blood of christ, or if i'm doing so symbolically. either way, i'm unsure what the point is. as i return to my pew, i think of the long-haired son of God – quite darkskinned - who went around preaching the importance of compassion, not cannibalism, and i wonder, again, how it's any different than the cow's blood conchellema makes her followers drink from the calabash.

we sing a hymn before shaking hands with our neighbors, may the Lord be with you, and i'm impatient to start a new chapter.

faith without deeds is bogus, and so i'm like clockwork, returning bi-weekly to swill from the silver chalice, and cross myself, and to listen for gramps's quiet, still connection to the voice of the God of Abraham for instructions as to what of value i must sacrifice. and as i send out job application packages to schools as far as the yukon, i scour my day for a tangible sign to give me hope, and there's a certain spot in my abdomen, where i feel ... the buzz of excitement and yet not all at the same time.

i'm not sleeping more than four hours per night, and the insomnia is worse than usual because it's happening in curranvale city.

look, i don't want to grow old and die here like everyone else i know. everyone, that is, except q. and eliza may who got their graduate degrees,

booked passage for the new york writing scene, jumped on the first available amtrack, and didn't look back. so, as the weeks become months and i continue to remain a curranvolean, the more i run low on the juice to keep me going. no one is hiring, and i realize if i don't make my big move soon, it'll be curtains. deposit me in a landfill. the rest of my days will be spent trapped here envying people who've moved to villas, and who take dips in their own kidney-shaped jacuzzis.

i pass the days doing maintenance-type tasks that have no larger meaning but that leave me with a relatively satisfying sense of *über*-productivity. they give me a much-needed boost to do more maintenance-type activities in order to do even more maintenance-type activities. and then i go to bed and read a chapter from the upanishads before praying on bended knee in the glow of the lesser bright.

afterwards, my pillow is too fluffy, and so i adjust to different positions on the bed until disks in my cervical vertebrae no longer jam into my thoracic vertebrae.

i wait for my mind to empty. i pray.

God is absent. kerstin is there. hoppa makes a return appearance, and i go over all the people who have done me a nasty turn as well as the torments i wish upon them. professor iton. babycakes. mrs dinkins, my fifth-grade math teacher who gave me a c on an assignment i handed in late. gordon hislop who called me fat. fiona ndereba who turned me down a slow dance. bingo 'jackpot' jefferson. demarion armstrong, cad. and i seek forgiveness for my debts as i forgive debts owed to me. then i wait for sleep, unaware of when it'll come, like death.

two hours later, i turn from my belly to my back to my side, and ponder how

it wouldn't be so bad to never have existed. no, not that exactly. i think of how people say, "what if that child who got aborted had been the next einstein? how tragic is that?" and then i think, well, let's go with that. what if there is someone who could have existed that would have invented time travel; does it matter? we don't know what we're missing, and that theoretical einstein doesn't have to spend sleepless nights trying to get his spinal column to pillow ratio just so, *and* he won't have to think about the unDead, *or* to meditate on the people he's attached to who will eventually die.

lucky bastard.

in the morning, i groggily say the lord's prayer, cross myself, and try to feel like gramps, the holy man, as i read the apostle paul's rebuke of the galatians for their loosey goosey interpretation of circumcision as a covenant with God. those dang galatians! paul will rhetorically mess a brother up who puts adherence to the law before an act of faith. then i pee and eat grapes from the fridge and boil a couple of eggs and eat them and chat with the rev about the golden mean and go online and see what the best and brightest are posting as articles and message-board jabs on what is wrong with other people. then i pay a bill or two and reply to an e-message or two and make an appointment at the dentist far enough into the future so i don't have to think about how meaningless it is to take a time-consuming bus ride and to wait in a waiting room and to listen to all the costly things i'll need done to maintain the health of my decaying molars. and it's lots of nothing piled on top of more nothing as i'm tempted to get high and return to

the strip clubs to get enough of a buzz to provoke insights into the meaning of doing.

weeks pass dully, and for a change of pace i go to a “comet party” at the house of george chang, a seismologist i know from run-ins at the campus centre. he lives in old town, and has arranged a bank of telescopes on the roof of his building so the gathered can watch kahoutek rub its flaming tail against the night sky.

at around nine, i show up at george’s door with a gift-wrapped bottle of sparkling water. then walk into a dark room that rocks missy elliott as folk mill about in groups beneath a replica of the universe projected onto the ceiling.

“holla,” george says.

“wazzup?”

“make yourself at home.” then he’s off to entertain a group of astronomers who crack one another up by describing what element on the periodic table they are most like.

“come on, fred. manganese? try cadmium.”

“cadmium? have you lost your effing mind?”

“typical cadmium response.”

“sounds more manganese to me.”

once i’ve left my sparkling water among bottles of wine in the kitchen, i trek through bodies to get to the bathroom, and there is demarion armstrong, dub king, as intense as ever, tapping bongos on a couch beneath a painting of

penguins.

“demarion armstrong,” i say.

“jonah ayot,” he replies.

he pushes aside a canvas bongo bag, and i plonk down beside him.

it’s the first time i’ve seen him since the thursday i took the rev’s buick for a late-night drive, and then waited outside their artist loft for him and kerstin to return from one of their twisted work-related outings. at about two that morning, they walked arm in arm up the path of the building, kerstin leaning heavily into him. then they disentangled momentarily while she searched in her handbag for her key. however, passions overcame them as she dropped the bag, and giggled picking it up before he cradled her face in his hands. then they lingered on the front step hugging one another.

eventually, they got back to the key.

i do not feel guilty for doing the only thing any red-meat-eating male with an ounce of self-respect would have done. since i still had a copy of her key, i used it to follow them inside.

in the dark i tip toed up the stairs, negotiated giacommettis in the hallway, and made my way to kerstin’s door where i could hear incoherent muttering.

aha!

i pushed open the door. demarion was in her bed, curled with her under the covers.

“is this what you call collaborating?” i asked.

"what the fuck, jonah?" kerstin said.

"s'up, man," demarion said.

i slammed the door shut, and tumbled over wooden plinths twice as i made a run for the buick.

oddly, i was surprised by how little i felt as i drove away, and i thought of how it was a relief to finally have a logical explanation for kerstin's erratic behavior.

after five minutes of uneventful driving, i stopped at a convenience store for a pack of smokes.

"will there be anything else, sir?" the cashier asked.

i pointed to an ad beside the cash register. "it says, if you don't ask me if i'd like a snickers bar with my purchase, i get one free."

he clucked, irritated.

"can i get my free snickers?" i demanded.

"that deal expired yesterday," he said.

i looked closely at an ad with yesterday's date. "gimme a break. it's only 2:30 in the morning, so it only expired two hours ago."

"two and a half hours," he corrected.

"give me my snickers bar," i said.

"take a chill pill, man."

"you take a chill pill," i replied. "take it and shove it up your ass."

"jesus! if it means that much to you. take it."

"i don't want it anymore."

"suit yourself," he replied.

"i will."

once behind the steering wheel, i noticed my hands trembling, and my heart racing faster than i'd known it to have done before.

i drove onto the I-7, hit 150 mph, and kept accelerating until i began to weep. pedal to the floor, i took corners much too fast, and kept going in the direction of the unDead. i passed trucks without much of a care, and i only began to slow down once an empty gas tank forced me to pull over onto the shoulder in the middle of nowhere. then under a canopy of bright stars, i stood jacketless and cold, waving down speeding vehicles.

by the time a hippie couple in a navy-blue van stopped to offer me gasoline from a canister, i was pretty much a wreck. kahala, a blonde transplant from the californian surf scene, called me his brother, and patiently listened to my tale of heartbreak. then i was offered a blue pill by sahara, his hairy-legged other half with a plain yellow dress.

"beautiful, man," i said.

after we hugged and they'd driven away, i began to see unicorns emerging en masse from the brush. wave after wave of white unicorns swept past me, rubbing against the sides of the car and causing the earth to quake. so, i curled in the back seat behind locked doors until the stampede diminished. and after i was fairly certain i wasn't quite so high, it took an anxious half an hour of driving

well below the speed limit before i pulled into a gas station, and then onward to the security of the rev's at colby manor.

that was it for me. i was done with kerstin and put blocks on the phone, my e-mail, and any other means she might have to get in touch with me.

anyhow, i don't mention any of this to demarion armstrong, cuquean. instead, we chat beneath a projected universe like long-lost buds. surfacey. nothing about how he's a woman stealer who preys on the girlfriends of friends. nothing like that. i'm christ-like, full of his blood and flesh and forgiveness.

"how's the reggae band?" i ask.

"oh, there's a new album dropping in the fall," he replies.

"sweet."

then it gets plain weird. demarion clambers onto the couch, crouches on his haunches, and leans in real close, his nose about an inch away from mine,

"your eyes," his is breath hot and sour against my chin. "they don't ... hold on." he grabs a candle from a side table, and trains its flickering light about two inches from my nose. "right there." i blink. "they don't so much reflect the light as much as they drink it in."

"yours aren't too bad either," i reply.

"there ... over in the cornea. it's just like kerstin said."

"come again?"

and he's like, "one thing i learned about singing is that your heart has to be broken to really go there. and i'm not talking pop music either. think bob marley.

or ella fitzgerald. think billie holiday."

"is there something wrong with my eyes?"

"your heart has to be broken to be a true storyteller."

"dude!"

he sits down next to me. "people were surprised by kerstin's acting in *stands with angels*." he tataptataps his bongo. "but they didn't know about the number you did on her."

"so, the eyes are fine?"

"didn't you ever wonder why her work got so interesting after your break up?" he doesn't wait for an answer. "you messed her up pretty good."

"messed up kerstin." i laugh. "i think you got it the wrong way around."

"she loved you, man," he says. "but you wanted to keep her a secret. then you'd blow her off to spend time with that christian sister. that really fucked with her."

"it was complicated."

"not according to kerstin," he replies. "she says you were all about the colored sisters. and you'd only mess around with her because you thought she was an easy white chick."

"jesus, no."

"she figured you were ashamed of her," he says. "and were saving yourself for marriage to your black madonna."

"that isn't what happened."

“well, it is to kerstin,” he replies. “she felt used by you, but it took her awhile to scrounge up the will to leave. y’know, she’d get away for a bit and always came back. so, yeah, you messed her up pretty good.”

as i’m on the verge of explaining the democratic nature of my sexual tastes, we’re interrupted by yelling in the vicinity of the *wisenheimer* astronomers.

“two minutes until the comet.”

i’m among the first to make a mad dash to the roof. by the time i realize i’ve missed the streaking star and wandered back down to the apartment, demarion armstrong, dub God, is nowhere to be found.

in the subsequent days, i can be contacted in my rooms at colby manor googling kerstin to see if i’m able to track an e-mail address among the one hundred plus pages of links about her. she’s married an organic-toothpaste tycoon, and she can be seen in a substantial number of action shots either paddling about in a big-ass canoe on the pacific ocean, or surfing in the waters off kaipei.

i start to look into job openings on the island, and whether it’s because of behind-the-scene actions of conchellema or favors cashed in by gramps in the out yonder, unexplainable forces guide me to a listing for an adjunct post at the university of kaipei in their department of religion studies.

the online application form is much too long to take on without a short break, so i stare out the window at a worm wiggling in a robin’s beak, and try to envision a future with kerstin – full of lots of assurances that i do indeed want to

throw a party in her pants (and by that, i mean throwing a party inside them and not while wearing them).

thwack.

plastic rips in the *badezimmer*, and i hear the rev groan.

i dash into the hallway, kick in the bathroom door until it breaks open, and find the rev passed out in the bathtub wrapped in a torn shower curtain. i clamber in after him, and try to staunch the bleeding at a gash in the back of his skull with a sponge.

by the time the ambulance arrives, he's conscious.

on our arrival at mullins hospital, an intern stitches him up. then he's admitted indefinitely in order for the medical establishment to conduct miscellaneous experiments with his brain.

i'm spooked by the thought of losing him.

anyway, both loretta tucci and clementine are regular visitors. and without his consent, a plan is hatched to put colby manor on the market while he moves in with loretta whose place has no stairs. the subtext, i have to grow up, pretty much, and branch out on my own.

within the month, i crash on clem's couch over the protests of her hubby, the joode, a fella she met during a three-year stint at curranvale city bible college.

my new living arrangement gives me front-row viewing of a life in which clem does triple duty as choir member, sunday school teacher, and christian wife of the joode. currently, he holds it down with a job as a foreman at phillips and

collins construction, which means he's always exhausted at day's end. also, i learn the couple operates by the catch phrase, think globally and act locally, something they're both given to quoting without prompting. and they live out the promise of this creed by running a group for refugees that meets at st peter's episcopalian every tuesday.

since i'm crashing on their couch, i make an appearance at a meeting, and i sit through one speaker after another with an overwhelming desire to slash my wrists (not for real, but metaphorically). as i listen, i get to look at a world of people who've managed to miraculously get out of concentration camps the population at large vaguely hears about. and i think of hoppa because it's full of similar people only imagined to exist if it's clear their harsh circumstances are somebody else's fault - a corporation that makes a bundle on sneakers, a despotic asshole, the people themselves who have much to learn about personal responsibility.

during a short break, i get my back up a little because the joode goes off on folk who don't get it that their cushy standard of living causes others elsewhere to suffer. and then he starts laying into me about how i should jump on the next available plane to liwani and return to help my people.

"i'm still trying to figure out how i can be of the most use," i respond. "going back, and showing up in hoppa like, here i am folks, seems a bit ungrounded. i need to ... you don't jump into a river to save a drowning man without a life vest. otherwise, you both end up with the fishes."

"is this a joke to you?"

i thought i was being serious. "sorry?"

he rattles off a quote about children dying of starvation every minute. then clicks his fingers, gets silent and clicks them again. "that's the time it takes for a child to die somewhere in the world. thirty seconds you've got to change the man in the mirror, jonah."

"i hate that song," i reply.

"no, no, the message," he says. "you need to make that change and take advantage of all your privileges."

i get snarky. "you mean like having dead parents."

"like how you have a phd and you don't date black women," he says. "i'm not judging. it's just ...self-hatred."

"correct me if i get this wrong. so ... i hate myself, and you figure this is because i don't do enough to help my own people *and* that i've slept with women who aren't black?"

"you're being defensive."

"no, wait. i'm really just trying to understand."

"what i'm saying is there are many fine, educated sisters who can't find a brother who hasn't lost his way," he says. "it's tragic."

i realize i'm leaning much too heavily against the edge of a table full of potato chips and pizza that has begun to rise from its hind legs.

"you talk as if we live in a village." i step away from the table. "and there's a

finite pool of eligible marriage partners."

"you just don't get it, do you?" he replies.

"i don't get it!" i raise my voice. "*you* don't get it!"

clem jumps in. "jonah is good people, hon." she snakes an arm around his waist. "he's good people."

the joode is a gentleman of sorts. he apologizes, and offers his hand for a conciliatory shake between men. then he makes a speech that ends with a reminder to "... think locally, and act globally."

clem gets fidgety and tells the joode there's dip that needs topping in the other room, and could he hop to it.

while hubby hops to it, i stew about persons in general who think it's in their power to confer the mantle of goodness on the heads of other people.

"jude's good people too," she says.

"suresure."

"at least, he better be." she pats her womb. "i'm pregnant."

"whoa."

"two months."

"two months. jesus and mary jones, babe!" i kind of thought her marriage was one of those starter jobs, and we'd end up together someday. wiser. more settled in our lives. "i'm happy for you."

"really?"

"surely."

she waves me over, and gives me a hug. she believes i need one because my parents died after baba gave mama aids. i hug her back because i know she'll be in curranvale city for the rest of her life, and that she'll have eight kids with the joode, and after he loses his job as a foreman at phillips and collins construction, she'll be left raising the munchkins and working as a waitress while he prays for God to intervene and make their life suck less.

the pregnancy lights a fire under me, and it makes me more determined than ever to skedaddle out of curranvale city. so, i blanket the market with my resume, and of the twenty-two schools i apply to, the great mystery ensures kaipei is the one that comes through with both an interview and an offer to start teaching two freshman-level classes. it's barely enough money to get me through the month, but at least it's a beginning. and if it comes down to it, i'll just take on another part-time gig (maybe writing freelance articles with witty observations of kaipei *à la* mark twain in hawai'i).

saying goodbye to curranvale city is much more difficult than i thought it would be. i have friends here. i know how to get around without so much as a thought, and i don't have to think twice to find the best burger in town. i've been here so long that i'm plugged into an art scene that has me out and about most weekends. and if i want to go dancing, bonobos plays the latest hippity hop. and i also like the church service at st peter's.

then there's the rev, and the distance from him, and the many ways i'll once again fail at putting my personal needs ahead of those of the collective.

kaipei will also mean starting over again, and i'm unsure whether i have the energy for it.

clem throws me a goodbye bash at her place, the joode can't make it because of a chernobyl-like disaster at the construction site, and i sit in the living room as loretta tucci, meticulous in a black evening gown and pearls, wheels in the rev in a chair. he's thinner, and the hair on his head is the color of snow, and he's missing a front tooth. still, he corners me beside a snack table and is loquacious and full of ideas about death as a return to an atomic state, which arbitrarily permeates all organic matter. "imagine, part of one's rotting body infiltrates the root of a tree that grows leaves which become a part of the larger food chain. so, there you are in bits and pieces all over the place. in a dog. or part of the ocean. or as clouds that return as rain that dribbles into the mouth of a child who is outside playing a game of soccer."

loretta looks sad and excuses herself to greet elisha tusker jr, the rev's useless son, who pops in with his wife, dorothea. the hopeless couple snipe at each other as usual, except there's even more venom in banter that has given her energy while he comes across as weather-beaten. behind them, mrs petra freud, now just mrs petra, makes it by for the endless supply of wine, it seems.

we sit in the living room gabbing about how loretta's father used ice boxes to store food in the olden times, and how these huge chunks of ice were delivered by the ice box man every three or so days. and the rev talks about how it used to be when people popped in without calling first, and how it was to know the milk

man, and loretta reminisces about when groceries were delivered by horse back on fridays (or thursdays, she doesn't remember). mrs petra drinks, dorothea tells us facts about the danger of driving with cell phones, and elisha tusker jr macks on clementine in the kitchen despite the fact that her pregnancy has begun to show.

after we have laughed and eaten finger food, the evening ends with the rev leading a hand-holding circle in prayer.

“Godbless,” is the last thing i remember him saying.

on the flight to the island, i sit in coach beside gordon wishburne, the celebutante with a hard-hitting show on the hardships endured by God-fearing, hard-working, law-abiding, home-and-gun-owning americans. his head is much, much bigger than it looks on television, and i listen to hippity-hop music on the headphones while drafting countless screeds that scold him for coarsening the culture with his show.

report. log thirty-five:

our voice of real america is downright adorable. he’s fulsome with the please, ma’ams and thank you, good sirs. he helps an iraqi gentleman seated next to him fill out a declarations card. he’s quick on his toes to move into the aisle to let the gay fella in the window seat go to the *badezimmer*. and he accepts the main entrée from the stewards of the sky without making insensitive comments about tushes. and yes, there’s no clear-cut incident that would give me the opening to take him

to task for making the world an uglier place. so i relax into watching an in-flight film about a dashing mobster who loves a coat-check girl.

kaipei is a boiling cauldron of heat. and much like the time i came for my interview, i'm disappointed with the view on the drive in from the airport. sure, there are palm trees, and yes, that's a good thing. however, the majority of the trip is either on a three-lane highway, or else through a city jam-packed with people and overcrowded with dull cement, like any other city just about anywhere. no paradise. or, at least only glimpses of its potential in the smattering of teal ocean in the horizon.

i try to think of it all as atoms quite possibly infiltrated with bits and parts of my kin as far back as the unTime.

quicker than anticipated, i'm deposited by cab in front of an office that is locked, and sit in a tie and jacket on the stair while waiting for the end of a lunch break at my temporary lodging in a buddhist temple's dormitory. thumb-sized cockroaches swarm around me as i sweat what feels like blood.

"that looks hot." a muslim woman in a *hijab* points at my suit. "real hot."

"so does that," i say of her *hijab*.

she's from china. and is either going to or coming from her third *salah* of the day.

"this place runs on people-of-color time," she says. "lunch breaks can last anywhere between one to two hours."

"you did not just say that," i reply, immediately regretting that i sound like a

hipster doofus.

"i'll say it again if you want." a breeze kicks up discarded paper and dust in the parking lot. "we operate on people of color time."

i'm too jet lagged to be linear in response. "do you know how hot it is?" i ask.

"88 degrees," she replies.

"i'm melting," i say.

"here." she reaches over to loosen my tie, and unbuttons the top of my shirt. "that'll put the melting off until you decide it's time to button up like a colonial officer again."

"an officer in her majesty's elite guards actually."

"close enough," she says. "i could let you into the cafeteria, if that helps. it's against policy, but it's much cooler in there."

i point to her *hijab*. "isn't that breaking one of the pillars of islam? thou shalt not let a stranger into the cafeteria without the permission of management."

"it depends if we're talking sharia-law or not." she picks up one of my bags, and carts it off in the direction of the front door.

as afrah sees me safely inside, she launches into more of the sharia-like laws that govern the buddhist dormitory. there is a table with three computers in front of a door leading into the kitchen. the computers are temperamental, so i shouldn't bank on using them for anything other than e-mail. the kitchen looks more like a boiler room. afrah points out the ins and outs of how we're supposed to keep food stored in plastic containers with our names scribbled onto them in

indelible ink. then she says, "put all foods in plastic containers to keep the ants and cockroaches out."

"is that a scripture?" i ask.

"no," she replies. "but the spirit of it can be found in the koran."

she's kind of edgy for a muslim, and i immediately begin daydreaming about how we'll be the best of buds. late-night coffees. endless chats about religion between games of chess. and quite possibly making out with her in that *hijab* once in a while.

there are other items of importance, but they all seem to revolve around things not to do. no guests are allowed in rooms after ten at night, especially of the opposite sex. no food in the rooms. no men on the second or fourth floor. no loud tomfoolery or lighting up barbeques indoors. no stealing shit, or sacrificing fatted calves to baal. the usual. and by the time my tour of the cafeteria is complete, enough persons-of-color time has elapsed for me to be able to collect the key to my dorm room.

i'm not going to complain about my bachelor lodgings on the third floor. the walk-in closet of a room has a single bed, a bedside table, a desk, a metal chair, a lamp, a closet, and a plug-in fan. it's stark. and to my liking. i pay four hundred dollars for the room and an extra one hundred for a balcony upon which i can pull out my metal chair any moment day or night to gaze upon arteries of tangled palm trees and low-rise apartment buildings.

if i stand on the balcony and spin around and around until i'm dizzy, i lose

my bearings. maybe i'm looking out at a back alley in laos, or manila, or seoul. it's all there - beige scooters, rusty bicycles, brown skin, women dressed to ill in white cotton dresses, men primed to pounce in cotton shirts, beige pants and slippers, oldsters with wide-brimmed hats squat on haunches having a chat with their age mates, children with bright smiles run naked from one stairwell to another as fellas have their heads in the engines of beat up trucks, gals hang laundry on clothes lines, big shots in black suits wear dark sunglasses, the lame hobble using branches ripped from nearby trees, floral patterns brighten kimonos, stray dogs and chickens roam among mounds of garbage, pop stars on tvs sing in japanese, monks walk around in brown and mustard habits, chants escape from the temple among the grunts of those taking a martial arts class, and there's a steady mix of fist fights, and loud arguments, and dust.

i like it.

my only problem is that in the two months i live there, i can't get any real privacy, not even with my door locked and the curtains drawn. every morning sounds from other time zones intrude upon me as i enter the buddhist temple, and light incense at the altar before saying the lord's prayer. then i'm out in the monotony of sun that shines all day, most days. and for two months i cannot translate the noise. it belongs to a migration of sound bites i'm vaguely familiar with as i take a bus to my job; cars honk horns for reasons i can't fathom, and people hold conversations in dialects that leave me guessing at their meaning. it's as if i've crossed over into chaos, and the only sense of order comes out of my

strict adherence to bureaucratic procedure – picking up a regular paycheck, getting a medical plan, ensuring money is deposited into a 401k for my retirement, and showing up on time to fulfill my teaching obligations.

the two classes i teach are introductory religious studies and faith in literature while i await an opportunity to be offered classes in what i've spent the last four years specializing in, identifying the different types of sun imagery found in the bible. confidentially speaking, it's a little bit different from what expected. i have to share an office and a desk with five other adjuncts, and for two months i live on close to \$1,000.00 in the inexpensive dorm among students from everywhere.

afrah and i become fast friends, and i learn she's divorced and has a couple of kids living with her mother in a small town outside of beijing. every morning i see her waiting for a ride to campus. and every morning she listens to madonna on headphones over the ears of her *hijab*.

"like a prayer?" i ask.

"no, like a virgin," she replies.

"i don't think you should let your kids listen to her."

"not a problem," she says. "they love biggie."

i think of his ten crack commandments. "maybe i misspoke, madonna's fine."

afrah misses her kids. and on the hard days, her eyes are red and swollen from crying. at times like these she regrets her decision to take a couple of years to get a business degree, and she seems to get a genuine kick in the womb when she hears the local children horsing around. it appears that her little ones are too

young to make sense of the numbers she gives them for the amount of days it will be before she sees them again. and i'm mostly useless when this is a problem. i say, that sucks. or hmmm, as if there's real thought going on behind my eyes. but she's usually good about not making me explain myself.

today is one of her hard days, so i joke about the usefulness of emulating the behavior of muhammad when he didn't have twenty-first-century technology to deal with.

"he didn't have to worry about porn on the internet," i say.

"i see," she replies.

"see what?"

"you're the one who's been using the dormitory computers to look at smut."

"God, no," i reply.

"i knew it."

"no. no. i don't do that."

"the women on the fourth floor were betting on you, so they'll be getting a dinner out of it from the second."

"you bet that i was the pervert?"

"wouldn't you?"

it doesn't bother me as much as it should that i come across as highly sexualized. however, it does make me wonder what standard is being applied. is it racial? or, am i just one of those unfortunates who oozes with "it"? the former is most logical when one takes a look at cannabis, the black-asian with the lime

crocs that the second floor put their money on.

about cannabis:

he's a whiz on the computer, he did a stint in the army, and while fighting in iraq he took digital footage of his comrades and their war-time tomfoolery and later put it up on a web site for army recruits.

one night during my second month at the dorm, we get to talking about the insane excitement that comes with the whiff of danger in combat.

"anytime there was a mission, i was always the first to volunteer," he says.

a risk taker. "what about ..."

"dying?"

"you have a daughter," i say.

"oh, you're talking about the photo op," he replies. "soldier goes off to fight for his country with his wife and baby giving him a hug before he climbs onto a plane. flags. cue the music."

"okay, if you put it that way."

"so, yeah. the truth is after the first six months of marriage, iraq was a relief. i mean, jovana and i hooked up at a club, were together about a month before she got pregnant, and we only got married cause her parents were catholic."

"so, you ..."

"no. i didn't have a death wish," he says. "chances of getting out alive increase when you put yourself totally into surviving."

"but the ..."

“risk,” he says. “hell, the major reason my relationship didn’t work was because i put so little of myself into it.” he pulls out a picture of a girl with ponytails from his wallet, his eyes tearing up. “combat is simpler.” he wipes his eyes as his phone buzzes with a reggae ring tone. he answers it, brightens up, and excuses himself to get his scooter ready for a trip to the pink diamond, a strip joint a fifteen-minute walk away. “wanna come?”

i don’t begin to notice the beauty everywhere until i’m hired, through one of cannabis’s wartime contacts, by hollister and associates, care givers. i’m sent out to work three shifts a week for the sunderlands, the amount of money i have doubles and so i move into the aspen homeowners apartments, a five-minute walk from the beach. freedom. i can come and go as i please. i have money in the bank, a roof over my head, and a fridge stocked with food. if i want to take in a movie or get a bite to eat, no problem. but despite this something ain’t right. a feeling that has me walking past the pink diamond, thinking of taking in a bit more liquored-up titty-bar action with cannabis. i don’t know, i figured ... after all this time God wouldn’t still feel like an abstract concept of decreasing value, and my desire to write would return. instead, my sleep is shit, and it comes in snatches, an hour over here, another one over there.

for a sense of purpose, i get serious about finding kerstin. and although i know she’s married to the toothpaste tycoon, i still want a face-to-face so i can tell her exactly how i used to feel about her, and to find out whether demarion

armstrong, dub poet, was on the up and up about how she really felt about me. i also want to see if our meeting will show me whether any of those feelings remain for either one of us. as dramatic as this sounds, i've begun to wonder if she's the only person i've ever truly loved. i mean ... precious was puppy love. and yes, there was some sort of deep feeling with clementine, but we were never a good match. then babycakes came along, but that was twisted and full of deceptions. and i'm not one to assume i'll eventually find the right person by hooking up with a dusky gauguin emerging from the shadows with whom i'll merge ecstatically with foam drifting atop the high seas. so, i begin the pursuit of my one true, on-again off-again love with light, breezy e-mails. hey kerstin, what'up. i'm on the island now. terrific. couldn't be happier. what a great life you seem to have. i loved *im chor der engel stehn*. and look at you, marriage. congrats. so happy for you. oh, before i forget, i'm looking for a place with decent jumbo shrimp. suggestions? thanksomuch. we should meet. :) coffee? wheneverwhenever, you know. we're both so busy. when it works. whatever.

and then there's her steady trickle of decreasingly engaged responses. blast from the past. wow. how long has it been? gosh. tobias and i are so blessed a bit busy with a shoot in vancouver next month. i know, i may be the luckiest person on the planet. we must do lunch. *bis bald*. whoa, jonah ayot. small world.

i try hard not to get obsessive about her intermittent messages. yeah, yeah. i play it off. no worries. la de dah. but i'm hurting, and not in a good way.

when all else fails, dear romantics, throw yourself into work.

i go to faculty meetings in buildings with names i can't pronounce, and walk streets with names i can't spell. i have students with names i can't remember, and go to faculty parties with folks who have children they take to beaches i can't get to without a car. but i still have trouble taking care of the simple things like washing and feeding myself, activities that require energy i can't seem to muster. and after all is said and done, the move to kaipei hasn't changed a damn thing. i'm as far away from God as i've ever been despite my best efforts, I worry about the rev, and i spend a bit more money than i ought to visiting the ladies at the pink diamond.

worried i'll blow it at school with my inability to beat an encroaching depression, i get it in my mind to go back on sleeping meds for a couple of weeks, at least until i'm being less impulsive and more on track in the conventional ways. once rested, i'll forget about kerstin and i can begin the arduous process of memorizing this unfamiliar landscape, and teaching students who know real hardships like poverty, and the destabilizing loss of their cultural stuff.

i trundle off to the emergency at kaipei hospital, wild eyed, and with disheveled hair. after an obscenely long wait among folk who appear to live on the street, i'm taken to a room where an intake nurse documents the sad tale of my previous descent to nutterdom (delivered in a monotone in order to prevent a rash decision to permanently confine me in their mental clink). fat chance. it turns out i haven't either tried killing myself, or else bludgeoned another human

with a trowel in the past twenty-four hours. hold up, she fetches an intern for a second opinion.

an hour later, a skinny dr brother who hasn't yet begun to shave shows up in a pair of green scrubs. okay, the shaving crack is a bit too oldster of me. what i mean is that dr hollins is young – which i totally don't have a problem with, and he's a brother which is cool, and he proves thorough as he asks the same questions posed by the intake nurse while taking copious notes. after ten minutes, he interrupts to ask whether i'd consider being videotaped for a study he's doing for a conference he's attending at month's end.

i'm flattered, but no thanks.

i've learned a crucial lesson from my last interview. this time, drawing on all my skill as a dramatist, i give the grand sweep of a larger narrative that includes gramps, the liwanian civil war, the rev's health problems, the move and the repercussions of my unrequited love for kerstin (who is a white woman). "it's been much on my mind of late since she hasn't responded to my last five messages in multiple media."

when i mention my recent trips to the pink diamond without cannabis and the staggering amounts of money i'm sticking into garter belts, he gulps, looking troubled.

encouraged, i emphasize a recent night where i think how keen it would be to not exist, and a worry about the cratering economy, and an irrational fear over recent cut backs at the university. all true.

success. dr hollins fairly flies to consult an attending physician in the hallway as i try to make a decision as to which of the more potent, addictive pills i'll ask for. ambien. chlonopin. not atavin, that plain sucks. in response to his impassioned plea, young dr hollins is loudly chastised by the attending for an inability to spot a pill-popping thrill-seeker working the refs to get himself a script. tough love, he is told, and so my nigga returns full of apologies, none of which will give me any relief. then he sends me on my way with directions to a nearby pharmacy from which valerian and st johns wort can be procured over the counter.

soon after this, i begin seeing dr faux hemingway. and for several months i can be found trying to locate myself by looking at maps, atlases, and spinning globes.

hoppa isn't on any one of them. it's a non-place, and maybe even less than that. it's so insignificant that it reminds me of how much i miss itouri city when i move away after mama leaves me (a tragedy dr faux hemingway takes great pains to remind me of with his dramatic re-enactments). during those years with gramps, i miss being in a place that has a heartbeat. i mean, the city comes equipped with the itouri city show. and presidents from all over africa attend the festivities. they arrive from ethiopia, ghana, malawi, swaziland, botswana, you name it. they come and sit in the royal box at itouri stadium with his excellency, our president for life. and as i sit between mama and baba in a huge crowd, the liwani army marches in unison, slapping down their booted feet in dust before

turning to make a smart salute to the presidents from africa. afterwards tanks go by, then there's an airplane show that zip zips overhead, and after the national anthem, the crack 6th regiment has a mock battle in the middle of the field. and there are smoke bombs of bright pink and yellow thrown around as everyone in the stadium roars.

i sit between mama and baba who are using soft words like darling and pineapple to call each other. then tribal dancers jump and sing praises to the president for life, and they're a boogie-down production of fast-moving hips.

the best part is when the horses come out to do the steeplechase. and darling baba puts one arm around pineapple mama's shoulder and another on my knee, and we wait for that rider with that horse which clears the water jump clean. and i gasp along with darling and pineapple and the crowds when the horse's back heel nips the last barrier. and how we all roar together when it doesn't fall - jinjabi and wasimbi, old worlders, new jack swingers, religious fanatics, members of the secret service, government lackeys, and everyone in between.

afterwards, pineapple mama, darling baba and i walk around the fair. i get a helium balloon, and we look at displays of cars from europe. france has peugeots, germany has mercedes benzes, sweden has volvos, and finland has saabs. while we walk through the crowds, we are linked hand to hand to hand, and i'm slam bang in the middle of liwani. and it doesn't matter that mama is crazycrazy, or that baba is a back-slidden big shot. we just do a race together where there is cotton candy and baba says, on your mark, and mama starts

running and she pulls on my hand and says, run jonah. and i run too and baba says, hey that's cheating. but it's like he's having a laugh riot. and he still passes us before we get to the cotton candy and he and mama hug and say darling and pineapple and they pull me inside their circle where i am cozy at the center of unTime.

it isn't long after this that the big trouble starts. see, baba buys records, not cd's, because he says he likes the scratchy sound the needle makes in the grooves. and for the longest time i think he says he likes scratchy grooves. so, i like records for their scratchy grooves. and during the week of the big trouble, i'm messing around with keti playing knock down the soldiers, and while i'm setting up my army near the record collection i see a cover that has a stereo smeared with vaseline. keti and i look at it, and like the photograph so much that we decide to play the record. and it's this african-american man saying motherfucker and pussy and dirty words like that.

while he talks, an audience laughs and laughs.

at first, keti and i are terrified. we stop the record, and look at each other, and look at the record cover with vaseline all over it, and look back at each other. then we go back to playing with our soldiers, but soon we decide to try the man with the motherfucking again. this time he tells a story about going to the toilet and taking a shit and having no toilet paper to wipe his asshole. the crowd in the record is laughing and keti and i start laughing because he's talking about assholes, and the only reason we stop listening is because mama pulls up in the

driveway in the car.

when keti and i go looking for the record the next day, it's gone. we can't find it anywhere, not even under mama and baba's bed where they keep their secrets.

"maybe we didn't even listen to the dirty record with vaseline smeared on it," keti says. "maybe we were in the unTime. "

unTime.

often there are things that happen here that don't actually happen. like when keti and i race our rally cars in the garden in the liwani safari rally, and we drive to places like butomo where there is mud to splash through, so we get stuck and have points taken away from us. it's made up that we are there because we are really in itouri city in the garden. and sometimes that is how i feel about being with mama and baba and keti in itouri city. maybe it happened and then maybe it didn't. maybe i was playing in the garden in itouri city and i just thought it all in my head and i never really had a mama and a baba and a best friend called keti.

in those may or may not days, gramps comes to the house for a visit. he stays in a room that is supposed to be for when i have a brother or a sister. i tell mama i don't mind which one i get when she asks me how i'd feel if i knew i had one coming. but i really do care because i don't want a sister who will make me have tea parties with dolls at the dollhouse. and gramps is supposed to stay for five days, but he and baba have a big scrap right away.

the two men don't see eye to eye, mama always says, because baba is an

atheist, another word i find in the slight bookcase that means God isn't around to help liwani win soccer matches in the africa cup, and to help them go to the world cup, and that explains why it's silly to offer up prayers to the sky which is just full of stars and planets and maybe aliens with antennas and bug eyes. but that isn't the fight they have on the maybe visit of gramps i may have had in the unTime. this one is about mama and what she needs from baba, and the vows baba had promised before God, and how it is bad for me to listen to dirty records and baba needs to choose the family chop, chop, because no one is getting any younger. after they have been sharp with each other, baba says he has wasted hours from his life and now he will never get them back. then he gets into the car, and squeals off to where he stays for days and days even after gramps has left for hoppa.

when baba comes back smelling of fun, he asks if i want to watch the german *bundesliga* on the telly with him. i sit beside his shoulder and we look at borussia mönchengladbach and bayern münchen. then mama comes from her room and she doesn't say any words because her friend, sylvia, who is a super duper christian, comes to the house. but today is different because sylvia doesn't say the hardest scriptures she can think of like she usually likes to. she doesn't say, "'1 corinthians 6:9-10. do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.'" instead, she helps mama silently carry some suitcases out

the door and into her car.

the whole time baba looks to the telly, and afterwards he gives to me a taste from his beer until my mind is light and i lie on the floor to let my brain spin around as i laugh.

and so that is what i think of itouri city. it's coming and going like mama and baba.

oh, i forgot to mention that when i eventually move in with gramps i have a pen pal from sweden. nils something. blonde. always in the bright yellow soccer jerseys of his national team. and he sends me letters from stockholm about all the things he wants to do to bail out hoppa-ites. and why not? hoppa is where people come to bail other people out. and gramps is right in the middle of it bringing in foreigners to build a clinic for the sick, and a camp for kids who don't have any folks. there are the people who come in to fix us up or to teach us english and math or to run the clinic. and they dole out candy and bring in camera crews to record the experience for a purpose connected to making money once they go back wherever. and yes, when they leave, others come, or don't come, while hoppa-ites wait for another bailout. and when the foreigners show up, they look sad, and shake their heads, and they are thoughtful and serious. and when they hear gramps talk about baba and mama they sigh and do not look me in the eyes and they say i must visit them, i must give their people a testimony. and so it is that we are sad, bleeding sad. like depression. like a story that makes you weep at the end and say how sad it all is. and sometimes there

are drives to raise money for us. and it's sad money. sad, sad money earmarked for sad, sad hoppa-ites who have no real family. and i get it. yes. we need help because we're so damn poor and we butcher each other and there are famines that choke the shit out of the earth and malaria kills folks and there is aids. and gramps says everyone needs help, even foreigners need loans to send their kids to school, or to buy a car, or to put money down on a house. or as help to get hired for a job. so, get over it chop, chop.

but i may have gunsfeldstein syndrome, and i can't really make myself fully accept all this as fact.

take the people of hoppa. it's as if most of them want to get out. and the ones who leave to go to itouri city only to return with a swagger. swish swagger. and it's the things they do when they're in the city that seems to make them worth knowing. they go to night clubs with the jinjabu and the wasimbi side by side, and with europeans who've come to snap photographs of lion prides, and with locals who've made a killing since independence by priming the pump and working the system to their personal advantage. and the prodigals from hoppa are comfortable there, and they make friends with the fella who is using the night to decompress from working at a brewery, or the sister who is going to secretarial college and having a girl's night out, or the hustler who lives in the shantytown. and these citified hoppa-ites know how to grind up against a wall with the european tourists they will eventually get laid by.

and so it seems that the only defining feature of my home town is that very

few people want to be hoppa-ites.

and so i tell faux dr hemingway how the joode thought i should be more like a hoppa-ite. but what he's talking about is some idea that makes for palatable, sentimental storylines. not this thing where take precious, she was never much for the church. but she loved that psalm, "yea, though i walk in the shadow of the valley of death." just that part, not the rest. not the bit about fearing evil. she just liked that king david would have got why she carried a switchblade instead of a bible. and she didn't give a fuck if she bought the farm, or kicked the bucket, or whatever. it was all the same to her. death meant no more hoppa and no more people like her mama whom she couldn't put behind her. "get thee behind me satan," and she liked that jesus said that because she liked how he was ice cold, and how he said fuck it to his mother and father and went off and became a savior.

dr faux hemingway takes notes, and after a roleplaying exercise in which he is me and i am precious, he recommends that i use my down time to workout.

within the week, i get myself a pass to work at pheidippides fitness club on all this buffness, here and here and here on my inner thigh. and i join a rag tag group for the four to five o'clock spin cycling class, and under the guidance of former olympic speed skater cage solesoles, i slowly pull myself together with a diet of exercise, caesar salads, locally caught shrimp, and a burgeoning relationship with the sunderland family.

i put God on hold and i set about living life here on earth.

dr faux hemingway finds evidence of my progress as i buy a bonsai tree from a fair run by the kaipei bonsai society. and although i kill it in two months, i'm told i've begun manifesting signs that i'm capable of sustaining a healthy relationship. additional warnings of my increased good health are on display as i'm punctual for my classes at u. of kaipei as well as fully prepared with slide shows. quizzes and handouts are scrupulously photocopied on the sixth floor of the rontakaheen building. i attend meetings to organize meetings, and respond to e-mails that process the carnage produced by disagreements over the direction of department of religious study policy.

on sundays, i float on the surface of the pacific ocean, looking up at clouds that hide light in the folds of their gowns, the salt water calming me as i think of both kerstin and the rev less and less whilst focusing on being a force of good like gramps. i float while the greater light drops beneath the horizon, flaring in an engorged ball of orange that suffuses into a purple halo crowning the encroaching night.

when bensonhurst tires of waiting for his day of good times to begin, he goes after my pant leg, a clue from him that it's time for his morning constitutional.

i'm careful to limp quietly out the door so as not to wake *gummibärchen*. and on the other side of paradise, stan the super is on his way to his office after taking care of a noise complaint from mrs wainwright. he's shirtless, and accompanied by miriama, lyric's girlfriend, who is about to relieve him for a shift

at the front door working the cameras, somethings she does twice a week.

"i understand you've been encouraging keoki to fight his eviction." miriama is silent, her eyes trained to the ground.

"that's a bit overstated," i reply.

"mrs wainwright has been awfully permissive about the dog." the rule of her condo board is that dogs are allowed on the condition it's documented upon moving into the building. "it'd be a shame to make her regret this."

we get on the elevator. "i don't get how she got it in her head that i said keoki should fight the eviction."

"i'm not here to judge."

"i mean, he was upset and i listened to him vent. that's it."

"talk sense to the man," stan says. "being a professor and all, he listens to you. tell him we've been more than reasonable in giving him a week. but the guy hasn't paid rent in two months for God's sake." miriama watches numbers light up above the door as we drop past the different floors. "look, i'm trying to be reasonable, but mrs wainwright isn't the only person in the building who's uncomfortable having him around. he sells pot, and that's not the kind of thing they pay for to live in this building."

"i doubt i'll make a difference."

"talk to him before this gets out of hand."

10:30 a.m. i flash a pass at the bus driver and sit alone in the handicapable

seating, my bag full of notes to go through for a day ahead of lectures at school. outside, the street is a steady putter of rusty cars, the smell of oil rigs. and to the right is a boulevard lined with pale orange flowers, a breeze shakes branches in a nearby park, and a brother makes his home beneath the hanging roots of a banyan tree. every day he lounges in a chair besieged by his belongings - blue tarp, an ice cooler, a knapsack, and yellow nylon ropes inexplicably wrapped around his legs. he's an artist, and he draws sketches in pads, and every day i wonder what it means to live out the rest of one's life on an island in the middle of the pacific ocean, and if anyone is going to care about the sketches he leaves behind after he's taken a leap off a cliff, and washed out to sea to become shark bait. and yes, i think of kerstin, and how her day will be spent attempting to harness her will, and apply a whip to flanks as she drinks a coffee and chases it down with the cigarettes she gave up, in a moment of clarity, three weeks ago. she has obligations in the wider world - at the bank, and the post office, and she will be irritated by the slow pace of the island, and the overlong lunch breaks that mean she will have to return to complete a mail out in an hour, and she will think about a conversation still to be had with tobias that can't be avoided if she doesn't want it to hang over her through the week. and i hate myself a little that i've already begun to count on day's end, returning to a fridge she's recently furnished with leafy produce from a local market. and i'm frustrated with myself that i'll happily cook a meal for two, not one, and i'll need to share it with her, languorously, and in front of the television.

CHAPTER VII. MR DANIELS

there are twenty students registered in each of my classes, but on any given day the number of attendees hovers between eight and fourteen: a collection of oldsters returning to school for the opportunity to spruce up their final acts, the recently divorced taking a shot at putting disappointments in the rear view, the newly hitched launching into what will be the most documented portion of their lives, the virginal who sit beside those in the armed forces to whom they are grateful for keeping them safe at night, those who speak english as a second language next to those who await court dates for beating the shit out of their lovers.

in april, the state-funded school will be under review for its accreditation, and subsequently, the renewal of its government funding. so, as many students as possible have to get through the semester with a passing grade of at least a c- as well as with a mastery of the latest state-wide requirements. my goal, as i understand it, is to make sure i don't lose any students to an ever-increasing attrition rate that peaked at a high of forty-two percent last year. thus, i must find innovative ways to fulfill curricula goals that meet evaluative criteria. on top of this are my personal ambitions. in order to ensure i make an impact on people's lives, i'll need to show a list of scholarly publications, a range of skill in the number of different courses i'm willing to teach, and in the end gather a stack of

positive evaluations from the students.

warily, i look over a ledger that keeps a tally of the deeds accomplished last week towards my academic ends, and i tabulate the number of lapses i've made in keeping the level of this performance in line with my expectations. sadly, it's what i'm able to do for students outside the classroom where i'm lagging behind. take kawika daniels. twenty-four. second year. child of a fella doing a ten-year stretch for battering a man he suspected of sexing up his wife. kawika missed the first week because he had "walking pneumonia." no note. after class he stays to tell me how much he loves the class, and how he's committing his life to getting his degree, so help me God. i say, suresure. then he talks, somewhat inappropriately, of a nightclub he works where coke is the drug of choice among the employees, and how a female colleague sucks cock for a snort. and i say, sure, sure. and he says, can you ... help keep me on track? not a problem, i reply.

so i keep an eye on him, and i'm happy to see his active participation in class discussions during the second week. and by the time he stops showing up, i've already made an emotional investment in getting him through (this quite apart from the larger institutional mandate to turn the attrition rate around). and how it stings to sit him down in week four and remind him about staying on track only to listen to tales of a return of the walking pneumonia, and a roommate who has tried to hang himself, and the hatred he has for all the cock sucking and coke snorting at work. listen, i say. here's a number to call the folk at mental health services, talk to someone and no more missed classes. great, professor, he says.

i'm going to call as soon as i'm out the room and i promise on the grave of my grandmother i'll never miss another class. but when he does eventually show up for another class, he lies about going to see someone to talk over his problems, and lies about having his assignment stolen, and he lies about how he'll be back next class (with his missing work).

it takes twenty-five minutes to get to campus, and five to walk across the shorn grounds of the campus to my office on the fifth floor of the rontakaheen building. as always, professor lionel patel, my officemate, is elsewhere - teaching, or looking after his newborn, or searching the stacks in the library for books to help him get another paper done for another conference that'll help fill out his file to apply for tenure. i turn on the air conditioner, and twiddle my thumbs while waiting the fifteen minutes it takes for my computer to judder into motion.

there's a stretch online that fills out the morning with an intense burst answering e-mail; today students will miss class because of nose bleeds, or bouts with the latest virus plaguing the national news - swine flu, chronic a.d.d.- but notes will be made available. and what work will be missed today? and what is happening in class on friday? and when exactly is the next paper due? and can i attach another copy of the assignment on a message to be sent as soon as possible? kawika daniels promises to put in an appearance, swears he will have the essay due weeks ago, and apologizes for his latest absence due to "a most serious tragedy" in the family that involved motorcycles at night as well as a

funeral. there are also announcements from on high that need attention. a sheet of desired courses to teach during the summer session needs to be turned in by 2pm. a guest speaker will be in rontakaheen 430 at 2 to talk about the bible stories as a form of literature, not a divinely inspired text. and there'll be a rally in two days to protest the state's imposition of a furlough, and a 15% cut in wages. there's more. but i need to give myself over to at least half an hour to work on my lesson plan, one that can later be parsed for a sign, a clear hint, that professor ayot is making a small difference in this wide, wide world.

chop, chop. i hop to it, walk stairs, and check my mailbox in the department's lobby before dumping the overflow of junk in a recycling bin. that done, i'm accosted in the hallway by the enterprising first year, mr o'neill, who would like me to write a letter of recommendation for a scholarship he's applying for. as he talks, he peers into an i-phone for messages, and because i'm on much too much caffeine, my right brain is provoked by an image of kerstin sipping at the lip of a cup of orange pekoe tea, one that props me up with feelings that may or may not be versions of *joie de vivre*. then i wade through more students in a corridor that is scrums of folk who appear out of sequence sputtering into view.

today's class of eleven responds to my lesson like those who wait on a beach for a wave that they will scurry away from once it approaches.

i take attendance - no kawika daniels - and introduce our topic, mind over matter, matter over mind. beginning with the story of the cold call from the fella

at gingham's fine furnishings (the one i took yesterday that came with the offer of a coffee table, a book with photographs of the dakotan badlands, and free mailing). my left brain notes a pellucid quality in the eyes of my variously aged crew, one that suggests scruples at work that keep them returning to class. and my right hemisphere makes the opening argument of an audience-friendly attempt to engage some of life's larger questions.

"most of us have a friend who tells stories about a friend who tells stories," i say. "and it takes forever for anything much to happen in the tales told by our friend's friend. so in today's class we will *not* consider how my story is an example of such a tale (insert laughter). nor will we look at this particular story as a personal failure to stoically merge my will in a harmonious agreement with a nature that is under control (insert more laughter). instead, we will go over some of the different views on what comprises human nature taken from the reading you should have done for homework. then if time allows, we'll apply some of these ideas to the present, or to what i've been referring to as the information age."

(i'm much more lucid live than i appear in the re-telling.)

mrs palea and ms temple rest with heads on their desks – the former has a teen in jail; the latter has three different kinds of psychotic meds kicking synapses around in her gourd. master zingfannel hasn't done the assigned reading but says what he thinks anyways (living his life off the cuff which he will get away with until he won't.) the student athletes are absent. master chin, ms

huang, ms nakamura, ms ohayahi will all be silent unless compelled to speak. and then there's ms nawahini, and the enterprising mr o'neill, whose speech will be crisper in the years to come if they continue to practice. ms yamaguchi and master kwak are bored because everyone else in the world isn't smart – the ones who say stupid things, the ones who teach them from books with stupidity that can't be applied in the real world. and on it goes as i respond to a question from master zingfannel with a much too convoluted screed that clarifies george berkley's view that matter is a form of the mind – a sense experience - and subsequently there is no such thing as matter.

about the screed.

let me backtrack for a moment. see, there's a universal truth that i swear by, and it's that the majority of human beings – somewhere in the eightieth percentile according to sources highly placed in the linguistics racket – have a low threshold when it comes to feeling they've been insulted. say hello to them, and there's a problem with the way you say it. ask about their family, and there's indignation about how much of a hypocrite you are because ... well, do you really care? do you? really? and the classroom as site, to use the technical jargon, is one of the locations this behavior is most clearly distilled.

take the beginning of the lesson. the last stick of chalk breaks into tiny fragments on the board when i try to write the berkley quote "*esse est percipi*," or "to be is to be perceived." and so when zingfannel, who went to a private school and has plans to join a law firm, asks a question that reveals how his tutelage as

the editor of his high school yearbook has given him the tools to go far in the system, i'm feeling insulted by berkely whose ideas seem ridiculous in the face of a state government responsible for slashing budgets that purchase chalk.

to be is to be perceived! really?

i'm uncharacteristically irritated by the chalkless classroom, and i sound less enthusiastic than i'd originally planned. "... so much like john locke claimed," i say. "it's sense experience that writes itself upon the blank slate that we are, and through this act of the mind we are traces of memory and bundles of ideas." i can't find another stick of chalk to jot down my salient points. "one can sum up their thinking with the words 'matter need not apply here.'"

holy crap! matter need not apply here. really?

and as i continue to talk, i find myself arguing for everything kerstin's opalescent navel makes me rail against, my lecture a thinly veiled attempt to save me from myself, and from kerstin, and from the lie that i'm indifferent to a need for my life to make a difference in the world of fact. i think of kawika daniels as i come at the zingfannel with talk of kantian ethics that say the best good is the one that causes the least harm to others, and i say the highest philosophy is the one that would have one do only to others what one would have done to oneself. and as i pick my way towards moral absolutes, i look out at folk who will soon trek homeward to the wards that have made them angry with utopias, and frustrated with the lack of restfulness caused by the deals they've made to produce capital. and as i continue to lecture, i inadvertently mention a

band whose video kawika told me about a couple of weeks ago with a song that gripes about the pressures of the brisk pace of a life. blam. there's a sudden burst of liveliness, and an in-class debate breaks out over the idea of images of life that can't bear up to reality.

"esse est percipi," i scratch on the board with a chalk fragment.

drawn in, they become an ornery pack in which they linger, putting off queries lying in wait among parasitic catfish at home. finally engaged, they set aside a medley of ailments that have slowed them up during the past days. and they are alive in ways that have them talking about how "people are shameless self-promoters," and about "fashionistas with blogs who go to meditation centers after visiting high-end shops."

"good point, ms yamaguchi," i say. "but let's try to make the point by returning to what david hume might have said on page twenty-three about the mind as an abstract idea."

they interrupt each other in a rush to speak.

they talk about how one day people will become passwords, and they will only be able to be accessed through the mediation of a screen, and that already matter is becoming less important than how it is perceived.

i have to work to get them to raise their hands before speaking, and to get them to listen to different points of view.

"okay, folks. time's up," i say. "we'll have to pick this up next class."

there's a buzz of conversation as books are deposited into bags, and mr

zingfannel talks with ms nawahini trying to clarify a point he made about rules, and mrs palea gives ms temple an encouraging pep talk about ingredients for a recipe of a life well lived. master chin, ms huang, ms nakamura, ms ohayahi make plans to form a study group for the essay due in two weeks, and ms yamaguchi and master kwak agree to disagree about whether texts are mind or if they are matter.

i look towards the doorway; still no sign of kawika daniels. and i realize how much i want to return to hoppa where textbooks are scarce, but even conchellema would agree all students must be punctual for class.

2:30 p.m. i'm drained by the time i get back to the aspen homeowners, and i'm not ready for the scene unfolding in the lobby.

miriama casually studies her computer screen while lyric, buzzah, and casper carry yards of metal pipe, and chase a petrified keoki up the stairs.

"what the hell?" i shout at miriama.

she ignores me.

my broken foot hobbles me as i clutch onto the banister, and will myself up the steps. the pain, steeping in an ankle that feels cluttered with shards of glass. i can hear the occasional whack, and keoki's muffled screams receding further and further away. my thighs burn, and i'm out of breath, and by the time i get to the third floor, my foot has been banged around so much i have to sit a moment to adjust the boot cast. then i'm away, chasing clanking metal and stomping boots.

when i get to the fourth floor, i can hear footsteps accompanied by laughter bearing down on me, and soon lyric and his crew brush past.

"get out of my business, my bizness," the boss says. "stay the fuck up out of my business."

i ignore him.

"ludacris. word of mouf," he says. "that's the real shit right there."

i press on to the sixth floor where a curled body props open the door to the roof. panicked, i bend over keoki, and stare down at a face that is pulp and blood.

"i give up," he mutters.

"we need to get you to a hospital."

i hoist him into a sitting position, take off my shirt and hold it over a flap of skin hanging open at the side of his face.

CHAPTER VIII. THE DEVIL'S HELPMEEET

on returning from the hospital and an afternoon of shopping loaded down with plastic bags full of groceries, kerstin and i see mrs wainwright stalking our hallway, but we don't have enough time to pretend it isn't happening.

"yoo hooo," she sing songs.

okay, the devil's helpmeet didn't say yoo hoo, but whatever she says sounds like that in my head.

"i'd like you to take a look at this." she clicks away at a her blackberry and calls up a recent photograph of an empty packing box beside my front door. then she looks at kerstin. "this is not how we maintain the hallways in our building." she clicks onto a shot with my door as it currently appears, boxless. "i know you haven't been with us long, and it takes time to adjust to the way we do things around here, but we have standards. you understand?"

"the lighting isn't the best in the first pic," kerstin responds.

"is she being a smart mouth?" mrs wainwright asks me.

"she's right about the lighting," i reply. "next time use the flash. it'll get rid of much of the graininess."

mrs wainwright harrumphs before heading off to get a board-sanctioned note pinned on the public bulletin board in the lobby with a list of both current and past complaints about us.

kerstin and i lug our purchases into a door blocked by a tail-wagging, pirouette-turning bensonhurst.

"guten nachmittag, kleiner mann," i say.

"hallo, schätzelein," she says.

the pup sniffs the bags while we put the groceries away in the cupboards and the fridge. then i log onto the internet while kerstin takes bensonhurst outside to pee.

there's a message from loretta tucci about the rev's health having taken a nasty turn. the doctor gives him a week, and she says i should fly to curranvale city as soon as possible.

i sit at my desk staring at her words on the computer screen.

once kerstin gets back in, i wait for her to get settled by lying on the mattress before breaking the news.

she stretches out her arms. "come here, baby." and pulls my head down onto her belly.

"isn't this uncomfortable?" i ask.

"ne," she replies, stroking the back of my neck.

"i'm gonna need to get a black suit for the funeral," i say.

"i'll come with you."

"to find a suit?"

"to curranvale city."

"what about bensonhurst?"

"i'll take care of it," she replies.

she pulls me tight and close.

"i wish i could cry," i say.

"it's easy," she replies. "look."

she scrunches up her face, sniffles and tears drop from her eyes.

i follow suit. scrunching, sniffing, nothing. then i nuzzle closer surprised by
how warm she feels, like sleep.

PART THREE. WAVE

CHAPTER IV. THE ISLAND

in a purple sundown, the gang assembles on the rolling green acreage of the macmillan cemetery: bensonhurst the trusty hound, kerstin the belle of the islands, and the professor. under jonah's watchful eye, bensonhurst chases yellow butterflies around a chapel on a hill where kerstin sketches in a pad among the mullioned windows of a building that survived a fire in 1903. stone edifices regard us with disinterest as she studies traces of smokedarkened stone among a row of arches, her brow buckling under lines of strained concentration. jonah sits on a plinth stone with my back against a white column, and think about how he has been so used to being detached and outside of his own experiences that it's rather stunning to be inside them. and from this vantage point, he's amazed by how kerstin reaches him. no, not just reaches him. she reaches inside him. little things. the hot pink bra strap peaking at her shoulder as she leans forward and then back while she draws. then kerstin hops up, tells jonah to give her a second, and heads to the *badezimmer* without knowing how he watches her recede from his frame, waiting for her to reappear in that skirt that ends above a scar on her knee. and when she slumps down onto a different gravestone with her sketches, he watches her decide whether her left leg is going to be drawn up to her chest before or after she has another sip of coffee.

today, her hair is a nest of loose curls parted left, and she's a hint of blue eye

shadow, and a nose that drops like a sloping cliff above that pink mouth she once claimed is overfull with tongue. and when jonah thinks of how she confessed she likes to kiss in movie theaters like a teenie bopper, he's back on a toboggan ride, and he reacts to her without reservation, completely amazed that he feels certainty where there was absence of feeling. the chapel's weather vane shivers above us among this bastion of crypts and engraved heart-shaped slabs, and winged seraphs blowing into trumpets, and stars of david and menorahs and sun crosses, and marigold flowers that are diseased and pining against ruins of pocked stone.

his foot feels better than he can remember as he watches bensonhurst tear around head stones without worries about trudging on the unDead.

there's a funeral going on inside the chapel. a blemish of black clothes and headscarves. a mordant harp oozing from an apse. a gathering that matches an abject strain that darkly marks kerstin's moods that change with the tides. like, even when she's happily focused on a task, she's unable, it appears, to overcome the residue of a life that has been steeped in rituals of monochromatic sameness. at least this is what jonah notices in her perpetual movement between chairs and sketches and the cigarettes she claims to have given up.

they've made big decisions in the last couple of days - about going to the rev's funeral, and traveling abroad once we pull the money together. along the way, they've worried they'd get so caught up in all the difficulties that they'd start to feel in over their heads. (they're a fragile ecosystem and the world is about to

come weighing in on them.) it calms them a bit, though, that the decisions are ultimately theirs to make; and the bottom line is that they want to do it all together.

CHAPTER X. BANANA HILL

from what she remembers of the better days with *mutti* and *papi*, they were the kinds of lovers who did everything together. they got up at the crack of dawn, and while drinking their coffee and eating their omlettes, they opened up 'the book' to go over all the activities arranged for the day. then they'd consult before trundling off to the grocery store where *papi* pushed the cart while *mutti* decided what they'd put into it. he'd smile as she gave reasons of varying legitimacy for getting rid of the two choices he made on his own.

"we need to find another mayo with less calories," she said. "and the tuna ... well, it has to be steeped in water not oil."

so, he mostly followed, pushing the cart for his beloved. and as *mutti* and *papi* unloaded their purchases together in the kitchen, she would change how he arranged the lower shelf of the fridge. "it'll be easier to access the tomatoes if they are to the left of the mushrooms," she said while reassigning all of his choices. and he loved her so much he didn't seem to mind going along to get along, and he loved her with such ferocity that she could tell him they'd forgotten peanut butter, and he'd immediately hop into the car and make a trip to fetch some.

being apart was also something they did together. he'd go off to teach math, and she'd take the car to the mechanic. but she'd always call him to say that all

had gone well, and all would be ready in half an hour, and yes, it cost two hundred dollars. and he was unsettled until he heard these reports from her. and after a day of staying in touch, they'd go to bed at 10.30. *gute nacht*. and if he was up too late grading student papers, she'd be upset with him in the *morgen*. they never argued. she just wouldn't say much over the scrambled eggs, and he'd be quiet until she'd forgiven him for loving her as much as he did.

on that day, kartin's *mutti* tells the fam she's going shopping at safeway, and while they wait for her usual phone update from the produce section, she leaves their small town with a traveling salesman while still in possession of her shapely ass.

she calls *papi* from a payphone in rochester, new york.

"i won't be coming back,'" she says.

he laughs

"no, for real," she continues. "i'm leaving you."

he's silent.

"jesus, please say something," she says.

"what about the trip to berlin this summer?" he asks.

"you want to talk about the trip?"

"ja."

"i'm going with steve."

"that's not what i meant. it's too late to get a refund on your ticket."

"jesus. how much do i owe you?"

"that's not ... why are you doing this?"

"why is the sky blue?" she replies.

"rayleigh scattering," he says. "when light moves through the atmosphere the shorter

wavelengths scatter ..."

"listen, i'll call from the road,' she says.

"i don't understand."

"in the meantime, could you pass the message on to the others?"

"seriously," he replies. "i don't understand."

papi takes two weeks to get around to telling kerstin. instead, she is told *mutti* has gone to the poconos alone because her dr recommended it for the alleviation of stress.

so, life goes on.

papi, the math teacher, continues to be an introspective man, and it becomes kerstin's role to dutifully convey conventional niceties to him during meal times. then after the second week is up, he calls his daughter into his study, leans back in a chair, stares through spectacles at an open geometry textbook between his hands, and says, "*mutti* won't be coming to berlin with us this summer."

"why not?"

"why's the sky blue?" he replies.

"if *mutti's* not going, i won't go either."

"that's not for you to decide."

"where's *mutti*?"

he slams the book shut. "she's not coming back home."

"what did you do to her?" she asks.

he stares at his odd daughter, noting again how much her moods are like her mother's. "nothing."

"*mutti* would never leave me."

"well, *kleine frau*, she just took off and left us."

"you're lying."

he sighs. "you're much too young to understand these things."

"understand what things?" there's something feral about the girl. "that *mutti* hates living with you? that you don't know how to do anything without her help?" it took him seven years to make kerstin stop biting him. "i'm old enough to understand these things."

he doesn't have any interest in defending himself. "never mind."

"*du kannst mich mal!*" she shouts.

he re-opens his textbook and ignores her until she leaves him alone.

it's the longest conversation they've ever had.

solace of sorts comes in the garb of *oma* and *opa* with whom kerstin speaks the old language. *oma* wears thick socks and spends her days filling in as *mutti's* replacement on the domestic front. she wanders from the kitchen to the bathroom to the bedrooms armed with household ammonia; she's followed by

her housecats and puffs on cigarettes.

“doing basic tasks sucks up every part of my day,” *oma* complains to *kerstin* as she scrubs the dining room wall. “i don’t even have the energy to sew anymore.”

her routine has changed and she’s uncertain if she’ll ever be able to make more of the dresses she sells on consignment at *vivian’s* boutique on main street. and of late, she also has *opa’s* stubbornness to worry about. see, he refuses to let anyone fix gaping holes in his trousers, or take his driver’s license away from him. and since he still loves driving his beat-up ford bronco, he’s currently recovering from an accident with a telephone pole in which he broke two ribs against the steering wheel. six weeks on, he refuses to let anyone give him a hand. instead, he follows *oma* and the ammonia and the cats around the house in order to talk about the innovative change that was the ford 49 sedan.

“it had a single fender,” he says. “and rear windows that opened. remember?”

oma grumbles about her messy daughter-in-law while scouring the inside of cupboards.

“i’d drive you everywhere because you looked so *schön* in it,” he continues. “what a sleek car that was. i was the envy of the neighborhood. i am telling the truth, *richtig?*”

“i can’t concentrate on talking to you and trying to clean up after that woman, *mein herz.*”

“believe you me, the 49 sedan was a work of art. it had spring coils instead of

an axle. the engine purred ...”

while *opa* pursues *oma* from one cleaning task to the next, *papi* spends long days at school volunteering himself as a swim coach, and then on his return home locks himself in his study until he makes a sullen appearance at meals.

the family eats *oma*’s cooking in silence.

in subsequent days, kerstin watches *oma* and *opa* whose latter years are held together by the stories of the people they’ve collectively known who’ve done them a nasty turn. neighboring farmers in liwani. clerks at the post office in goma. mr volker who didn’t marry and died alone. janice wilkins who was a ladies’ tennis champion on the continent, became the wife of a paper pusher who bored anyone he made contact with, and died of pneumonia. robert schinkle who didn’t live up to his promise as a politician and who was killed in a hunting accident that may or may not have been a murder. but outliving these people isn’t enough. volker didn’t vouch for them to join the country club. janice wilkins refused to tear down the fence that encroached upon their farmland. robert schinkle didn’t warn them about the effect of rains on the road to gomo the day of the accident. so, *oma* and *opa* become two people presiding over a treasure trove of hollow victories in their world of flawed human beings.

although kerstin asks them about it, her grandparents are unwilling to talk about what happened after the car accident, and unable to discuss what took place on their return to germany during the war. it’s as if the capacity to remember clearly has been muddled by these other slights. details are always

confusing. time sequences suspect. there are far too many names to keep track of. and so her grandparents remain, at messy loose ends from her, concave and curved like a sauce pan.

this is about when her migraines start. so kerstin buries herself in an enterprise to break a horse on uncle ebenezer's farm too wild for the adults to tame. patient and with her attentions affixed to the mare, she slowly moves closer, resting on her haunches until time matures enough for her to stroke the mare's muzzle, and feed cubes of sugar into a mouth with a slab for a tongue. without a *mutti*, kerstin slips a rope around the horse's neck and forgets the pain above her right eye, patiently waiting out the bucking before she teaches it to canter in a perfect circle. then she mounts the wild mare, and clings to its neck while whispering into its ears.

opa tells wolfgang bader about his strange granddaughter's heroics with the horse, and word spreads to the hardware store run by the reichmanns. eventually, it gets to reverend hoffman that the story would make a wondrous subject for a sermon about man's dominion over the four-legged beasts of the earth. soon word gets out that *prinzessin* can break stubborn mares, and a sudden celebrity finds her as a result of a report in the local paper.

in the subsequent months, strangers descend on their little town, and kerstin hates the dribble of odd balls looking for the girl from banana hill who communes with troubled animals. brightly painted vans invade the countryside, folk who believe in ufos and a homeland on mars and clothes made of hemp. so,

kerstin shies away from them and hides with her headaches and sneezing among hay in uncle ebenezer's barn, and she dreams of a day when she will reincarnate as a mustang that runs freely through wyoming plains.

once she's old enough, and *opa* and *oma* are both among the unDead, and she has just lost her virginity to jakob weiserman, she sits through another dinner in a home where there's little that passes for conversation.

"did you pick up the dry cleaning, *papi*?" she asks while he alternates between gulping down pea soup and grading quizzes at the head of the table.

"ja."

"is it in the car?"

silence.

"*papi*!"

"ja. in the trunk."

"you don't stuff freshly dry-cleaned clothes in the trunk."

"*richtig*."

"next time, i'll come along."

he mumbles incoherently and continues to grade until she leaves him alone.

kerstin stares at a picture above his head of *mutti* and *papi* taken beside remnants of the berlin wall on the day her *mutti* told him "*ich liebe dich ganz ganz schrecklich*." but instead of feeling excited about how she's finally decided to leave her gloomy *papi*, kerstin feels like a fraud while staring at him across the

dinner table.

“would you like to take a drive this weekend?” she asks. “we haven’t done anything like that in a while.”

it’s the first non-pragmatic, non-household-related subject she’s broached with him in months.

“next week is bad cause i’ve got midterms,” he replies.

“we can pack a picnic.”

papi grunts non-committedly. “*super.*” then continues grading.

kerstin’s migraines are getting worse and she no longer responds to heavy doses of ibuprophen recommended by dr kaufmann. the sense of inertia is unbearable, and she now knows she must leave *papi* alone in that big house, and that he’ll hate her for it.

that night she packs a canvas bag full of clothes and re-makes her bed. then she sweeps a hand over her dresser to make sure there’s no dust before standing in the doorway with her bag slung over her shoulder. after waving goodbye to her empty room, she leaves *papi* a note on the kitchen table with a rambling apology and carefully lets herself out the back door.

she has enough for bus fare to curranvale city. so, after a three-hour ride takes her to the humpity hump of an unfamiliar metropolis, she finds her way to a park with a bathroom, and then sets up shop on a bench with a sleeping bag. a little after three in the morning, she pulls the bag up to her chin. golden lamplight provides her with a sense of safety from the restless others who roam

about in the semi-dark, but she still clutches onto a kitchen knife she'll use if anyone bothers her.

a gust of wind startles her, knocking a garbage bin hard against cement, and so she distracts herself from fear by talking to her *oma* and *opa* about their years in liwani before the great war, and the peach sunsets over the savannah, and the pride of lions that wander out of the bush and onto the farmland, and the puff adders, and the talking waterfalls, and the stories of the unDead who roam through *lichtlicht*. and after the metal can rolls for a good while spewing bottles and crumpled paper onto a paved walkway, a cop with a baton makes an appearance.

"no one is allowed in the park after midnight." he's grizzled, and fat. "you're going to have to move it along."

she blurts the first thing that comes to mind. "are you irish?" she asks.

"am i what?"

"i'm new in town, and i've always had this image in my head of this city full of irish cops." she's afraid he'll whisk her back to banana hill. "you know how that is? camaraderie at the pubs after work. singing ballads."

"are you being a smart ass?"

"*nein, nein. nein.*"

"listen, i don't know what they do where you come from, and frankly i don't give a good god damn. but in this country, there's no one allowed in the park after midnight. *capisce?*"

“comprende,” she replies.

kerstin packs up her belongings and walks for a long while through a maze of winding streets. she clutches onto the handle of the knife, turns around at the slightest sound, and crosses the road if a stranger emerges from the shadows on the sidewalk in front of her. her sinuses hurt, but she won't let herself think she's made a mistake as she finally makes her way to the outskirts of the city centre in order to sit under a bridge with at least six other folk bundled in blankets. she finds a spot far from them, holds her knife against her chest and eventually drifts off to sleep. early the following morning, she's on the move, walking back into the labyrinth to look for waitressing work in a restaurant. by five o'clock she finds a diner on collins street that's looking for an emergency hire, and by the start of the evening shift she serves customers burgers with gravy and fries.

after two weeks under the bridge, she has enough money to rent a room in a boarding house downtown, and she unpacks the contents of her canvas bag into a pile in the corner of a tiny room with a view of a brick wall. then she sleeps deeply for the first time in a good while.

during her shifts at the diner, she meets aspiring artists – blaaanka daaarling, eee-hon, and demarion armstrong, dub impresario. they talk intelligently to one another about conspiracies involving the c.i.a. to infiltrate groups run by local political activists. they believe man's landing on the moon was an elaborate hoax. and they speak with certainty as kerstin is drawn into discussions that continue in after-hours coffee joints.

soon blaaanka daaarling encourages her to join them in taking a class offered by terrel bunt. political artist. embarrassed that she can't afford it, kerstin pretends that she's too busy with her work at the diner.

these are the days when money is all kerstin thinks about. she notices all the ways the lack of it makes her unhappy, and how her new friends have little trouble dropping sixty bucks every time they go out. it's a difference in circumstances later confirmed when kerstin attends a party that the late-night diners throw in an artist loft they all share downtown.

on hump day, wednesday, kerstin wanders through a room of original work hung with huge pollock influenced canvases and unusual giacometti-like bronze sculptures randomly set up on the hard wood floor.

"you like?" demarion armstrong, dub stylist, asks her.

"fucking a," kerstin replies.

"we need a fourth to help with rent," he says. "you should move in here."

"how much?" kerstin asks.

"\$400 a month."

she pays about that for her shitty room. "would it be cool with everyone else?" she asks.

"hey, blaaanka," demarion armstrong calls out. "she's in. we've got our fourth."

"welcome home, kerstin," blaaanka daaarling replies.

and so kerstin's migraines disappear as she joins those who encourage her to

paint abstractions of uncle ebenezer's barn, the horse named saskia, and of her days as the girl from banana hill. and it's among friends who see themselves as misfits that kerstin starts to get comfortable without a *mutti*.

CHAPTER XI. THE ART DISTRICT

jonah ayot's someone who came into her life because she was smoking up after her first legitimate show at shipley's art gallery with blaaanka daaarling, demarion armstrong, dub king, and eee-hon.

as the night draws to a close, they aren't in a hurry to leave. so, the four of them sit in a back office chatting about the crappy work of the other artists. and between cigars, demarion armstrong, dub meister, produces his ouija board. then they dim the lights, and congregate in a spooky circle around a board placed on a milk cart.

wind rattles the open window, and kerstin is the first to commune with the unDead.

she holds the planchette, and the spirit moves her hand to various letters on the board. O. then P. she is lightheaded. A. another swirl of wind rushes the window and knocks a book to the floor.

she stands up. "i'm not doing this anymore."

"OPA," eee-hon says.

"isn't that grandfather in german?" demarion armstrong, minister of dub, asks.

"cool," blaaanka daaarling adds.

kerstin gathers her handbag. "i'm going home."

during a smoke break from loading canvases into demarion's truck, kerstin takes a look at the only picture of the lost years that she carries in her wallet. *opa* is a handsome, clean shaven paper pusher. his blond hair combed back as he wears the brown uniform of a low-ranking officer in the nazi party. his chest boasts the *reichsadler* and the *hakenkreuz*, and *oma* sits beside him full of *liebe*. she's pretty in a blazer, a long skirt, and a cravat, her fair hair pinned back, and parted left. and standing between them, *papi* grins in beige knee-length shorts, and high white socks. his white skin scraped at the knees.

the ostheims assembled in a studio for the photograph look every bit the conformists kerstin got to know. they're people who didn't flee hitler's germany. instead, they flew under the radar while one brother is sent to russia to die in a camp, and the other went to france as meat for the advancing allies. and kerstin can't help but wonder how they dealt with news percolating up about the jews, the homosexuals, the gypsies, and the political opponents loaded into trains and carted away to concentration and extermination camps. and she wonders what they thought of the pregnant women, and the children sent to gas chambers, and the babies thrown into fire, and the pillows made from the hair of human lab rats. and the only thing kerstin is able to understand is that they did what they could to survive. they didn't make waves and so they got by as the war ground forward, and the losses mounted, and the country was ravaged by starvation.

to fill in the gaps, kerstin spent her early teens watching documentaries at the local library, and she slotted her grandparents into a storyline she constructed

about the years after hitler's bunker suicide. traumatized soldiers returned from the front to a world that was absurd, there were the nuremberg trials, and she wondered if *opa* and *oma* were among those re-educated by getting marched through the extermination camps. and so kerstin thought about how her grandparents would talk of a new life that began on a steam liner to new york, and talk of their first sighting of the statue of liberty and the empire state building. they talked about *opa* joining stanley grady's insurance company, and how they were transferred to the pennsylvanian countryside into a world of accountants with desks and papers and numbers to tabulate. and kerstin was later born into the new world they created, one where *opa* and *oma* hoarded canned food, bottled water, newspapers, and blankets in the basement.

in their final years, all they'd lived for tainted by bitterness, they took up cudgels in a final, epic battle they waged against each other, brandishing scowls as they hated those for whom life was much happier. and so as kerstin aged, her grandparents clung to one another like two people who'd jumped out of an airplane with one parachute, growing increasingly entangled in the wiring the closer the ground approached. and two weeks after *opa* died, *oma* joined him in the *lichtlicht*.

as kerstin takes down her pieces from the gallery at the end of the show, she thinks about how she doesn't want to become like them, a person who can't seem to talk about the important things that have happened in life because they're distracted by pettier ones. not kerstin. this isn't going to happen to her.

within a week of the ouija board hijinks, she'd booked a flight to see liwani for herself, and to disentangle from some of their stories that made little sense to her.

on her first night at the hilton in itouri city, there's a thunderstorm. and by the time she wakes up at dawn, the city is a war zone of rival factions. for three days, she wanders the hotel, with other foreigners, from their bedrooms to the lobby to the dining room and back to their bedrooms. it pours with rain, the phones doesn't work, electricity is cut. and on the fourth morning, the storm breaks and there's a triple rainbow in the sky as government troops are dispatched to escort the tourists to the airport. and as she waits to leave liwani without answers to her questions, she stands in a line behind jonah ayot, funky fresh gentleman.

jonah talks her into attempting a reconciliation with her father, and they go to banana hill together for a visit. on their arrival, *papi* ticks her off by not being around to pick them up at the bus station. he has rituals he won't adjust, a series of long walks at seven in the *morgen* and three in the *nachmittag*. everything with its time and place, day in and day out, unlike his daughter who checks in with her body to see what it is that she impulsively needs.

after jonah and she spend time with old friends at a bonfire, they go to the house to find *papi* in another of his subdued moods. he barely acknowledges jonah, says three words to kerstin, and then is quick to retire to his study.

irritated by his rudeness, she charges after him.

“what the hell, *papi*?” she says.

he has his back to her, staring at his bookshelf.

“*papi!*”

his shoulders shake, and he begins to sob. “come back home, *kleine maus*.”

it’s the second time she’s seen him cry, and she can’t stand him for it. so, instead of consoling him, she scrambles out of there with jonah ayot and his knotty hair and his smile that crinkles above the bridge of his nose despite having lost both his parents. and afterwards, she can’t bring herself to tell jonah how badly she’s behaved. instead, she grows increasingly quarrelsome over a principle she isn’t even certain she gave two shits about - keeping their relationship secret from the rev. she gets that there are cultural barriers to hurdle, and that jonah has some sort of african respect for authority. she knows there are real costs for those who go rogue – the loss of an inheritance, getting cut off from the family teat, ostracization from the tribe – and she’s seen enough evidence of the disastrous effects of openness in her own battles to convince her *papi* that she won’t marry jakob weiserman, of the polished suspender weisermans. she gets all that, but she still goes hard at jonah.

feeling guilty, she decides to tell him this on the day before he finds out about his grandfather’s murder.

that afternoon they walk downtown plugged into an ipod that plays experimental music featuring junkyard scraps for instruments, the kind listened to by people who eventually hang themselves in motel rooms. they have hands

in one another's back pockets as they mill about on a street crammed with folks who've been flushed out of rooms like rats from an overflowing sewer. lock-in-step, they pass a store window cluttered with objects that will accrue in sentimental value – trinkets, goblets, a picture frame that belongs to a period of some historical import - and as the tips of his fingers reach out for hers, kerstin almost apologizes. but, a beggar asked them for change, and after they've fished out two quarters from their pockets, the moment has passed.

two days later they have a stupid argument about clementine at the ralstone county gorge.

three weeks she mixes tequilas and ganja at a house party, and then becomes terribly emotional while chatting with demarion armstrong about jonah's unwillingness to cut clementine out of his life.

"you and i are friends who're still in one another's lives," demarion points out.

"yes, we are," she replies.

"and it isn't a problem, is it?"

she's way too stoned, and bursts into tears. "no. but i still don't like it," she says. "i can't help myself."

"you shouldn't be around all these strangers tonight," demarion replies. "i'll take you back to the apartment."

yes, she's overwhelmed and has smoked too much ganja. without jonah, she's anxious, and feels like a steaming sidewalk in the heat of a summer afternoon. or,

so she says as demarion armstrong escorts her back to the studio, consoling her until she's comfortable being left alone.

there's no sexual stuff. none. he's like a brother to her.

then jonah bursts into her room.

CHAPTER XII. PARIS

before tobias, kerstin's never really been alone. there'd been a stretch of a little over a month at seventeen, but the rest was hopscotching from one intense physical encounter to the next. so, ten years later when another rushed but promising situation, with a flautist from the curranvale city symphonic orchestra, devolves into a slow descent into ambivalence, she vows to herself that she'll take at least one year to be on her own.

the timing can't be more fortuitous. she doesn't need anyone to split her rent, or with whom to make the compromises associated with a companionship that make the days more predictable. her work in *im chor der engel stehn* has recently been nominated for a best lead at cannes, and she's receiving positive critical notices in the mainstream press, her performance compared favorably to that of a young meryl streep. the future is infinite with the possible, and an oscar within reach if she moves to hollywood, and gets the right studio picture - middling to big budget, its subject matter designated to provoke laughter and tears.

the days after her post-cannes nomination aren't quite what she expects. the phone isn't ringing off the hook with offers, and apart from a trickle of articles about her in the local papers, nothing much has changed. she's imagined industry insiders tracking her down in the phone book, swirling her away to long lunches, and proffering offers in which her input in script development is

sought. instead, it seems that few people are paying attention to her once-in-a-generation type gifts, and absolutely no one is in a rush to hire her onto ongoing projects.

kerstin seeks the advice of madame clairbeau, her acting teacher whose method is taught at the new school's acting studio.

her mentor, wrapped in a cowl, is on the way to teach a class as the protégé rattles off a list of worries.

"hollywood will come," the madame replies. "but for now, you need to get new head shots, put together your reel, and continue working on your craft." she stops at the door of the studio. "time has a way of sorting all this out."

"*danke schön*," kerstin says, thinking how little of it she has left to leave her mark.

ignoring the part about patience, kerstin forges ahead with a new plan. so, on a crisp fall day, she leaves the artist loft she shared with blaaanka daaarling, and eee-hon, and kerstin walks the crowded streets of looserville city on her way to her own apartment. she loves her friends, but none of them succeeded on her level, and being around them too much makes her work less than the other actors whose interviews she devours.

the past decade has seen high tech make obsolete much of the assembly-line work in the plants that filled the city's coffers. so, she walks among those who are unable to find alternatives that will bring back the boom that had seen curranvaleans buying up real estate. but as she approaches her rent-controlled

one bedroom in old town, her sense of optimism can't be dampened by the crown of smog that encircles the skyline, or spoiled by the perpetual taste of petroleum that encrusts her tongue, or ruined by a clot of pedestrian traffic bundled in winter jackets and tainted with the putrid stench of a dying city.

her brownstone apartment on 11th is wall-to-wall tile, the lease renewable at the end of each month, and the neighborhood has back alleys of red brick and cobblestones. in a blink of an eye, she can shop for records and browse bookstores among the clothing stores and restaurants on 6th. it feels right somehow.

upon her arrival, kerstin climbs up four steps and presses a buzzer.

vernon priestly, her seventy-eight-year-old landlord, fumbles with noisy chains and locks before showing her into the office space he maintains on the first floor. the shutters are drawn, and the room is untidy with packages of ladies' panty hose and white tube socks he sells wholesale to local vendors. as mr priestly talks about his "uncanny instinct for being able to read people," kerstin signs her lease on a desk surrounded by empty plastic bags and cardboard boxes. then she's given keys, welcomed aboard, and escorted to the bottom of a staircase where her new landlord yells upward to get the attention of the occupants on the third floor. the only discernible response is a tinkle tankle of wind tussling against a curtain on the second-floor landing.

"gareth and sean live above you," mr priestly says. "they were supposed to be here to say hello, but they're bike couriers."

meaning what? she thinks. "huh, imagine that."

he supports himself by holding onto a banister. "they're gay, you know. so, i hope you aren't one of those people who's bothered by progress. this building is open to anyone who gets their rent in on time."

"bothered? *nein*. not at all."

"off you go then, doll," he continues. "i'll be here til at least eight if you need to chat, or a pair of socks, maybe pantyhose. i only sell in bulk though. so you can get as many hose as you might reasonably need at a fraction of the mark up you get at your local store. "

"sounds good, mr priestly."

"excellent," he replies.

once inside her fully furnished apartment on the second floor, kerstin slumps onto a leather couch, turns on a television, and settles into a repeat broadcast of ladies' figure skating on the grand prix circuit. tonight, a spunky romanian is a hipster who points her fingers while simulating a cowboy firing pistols. next up, the american national champion falls on landing a risky triple, and afterwards puts on a brave face whilst clutching a bouquet of flowers next to her coach as they wait in the green room for her scores. the prohibitive favorite, a japanese skater in flouncy white, is flawless in her execution. however, while the announcers enjoy her technique, they feel she lacks the energy of the american and the spunkiness of the romanian.

the hours pass, and kerstin doesn't budge for anything other than toilet

breaks.

when at long last she can't find anything else to watch, she goes to bed, and listens to the gay couriers above her stomp about loudly in their domain.

how happy she is to have a place she can call her own. how guilty she feels for the good fortune that has made it possible to leave her friends behind at the loft.

for the next month, kerstin wakes up in the morning with a mission to do one task each day towards her larger goal to move to los angeles – she has enough work at the s.p.c.a. to cover her monthly overhead and her schedule is flexible, so she can work as often as she needs in order to save enough for the change. yes, money won't be a problem. she has room on her credit cards if she runs into any unforeseeable emergency. all she has to do is make sure she continues to make her minimum payments on time as well as to hold back on her natural impulse to splurge on gifts for the important people in her life.

the latter proves to be the biggest test because she enjoys buying trinkets that speak to her of the people she loves. blaaanka daaarling collects antique figurines of ballerinas. eee-hon enjoys acquiring jewelry handcrafted by indigenous persons without discrimination as to continent of origin. but it is her *papi* who costs her the most. fountain pens. tie clips. a baseball jersey of the pittsburg pirates. charging forty-odd dollars on the credit card once a month feels less costly than phone calls they're ineffective at. in return, *papi* sends her cards with pre-inscribed messages, other people's words telling her that she's a lovely daughter, or to remind her that despite what he thinks of her dubious life

choices, she's still loved.

every *morgen* kerstin rises to an alarm that goes off at 7:30, *guten tag*, and calibrates her body like it's an engine. three cigarettes get the cerebral cortex humming, she stretches her muscles while showering in a tub stained with an accumulation of half a century of rust. then she immerses herself in a series of steps to determine whether the day will be one in which she feels more attractive than the one before. should her hair fall freely over her left eye, or would it look better fastened by a clip at the back of her head? does she have a clean enough brassiere so that she won't resort to wearing the one that digs into her rib cage? jeans or a dress? the comfy black shoes, or the sexymotherfucker boots that bite her heel? set, she hastens down the stairs on her way to a cream cheese bagel and coffee at café hashim.

each day she's stopped by mr priestly who's always on the phone and on hold as he waits to talk to a customer service agent of a company that has stiffed him cents on the dollar.

"come in," he says to her. "just for a moment."

but it's never a moment as she stands in his doorway and watches him waiting for music on the speaker phone to be interrupted by a human voice while he simultaneously places pairs of tube socks into plastic bags and tells her the latest about his thai bride. "jai bolted the bedroom door again last night," he says. "it's not the kind of thing you expect from a person you've given everything without asking a darn thing in return. sometimes i think all she's

doing is waiting for me to die so she can sell the place. i'm not kidding. this is the house i grew up in, and it's probably worth at least half a mill *without* the sentimental value. it just goes to show ya, if you're too generous, people will take advantage."

mr priestly's summation of his worldview always ends with the hard-won nugget, it just goes to show ya. see, at one time he believed what goes around comes back in triplicate. so, he spent a lifetime giving and giving. but now when he thinks of the future, he sees a finite amount of time that doesn't give him the faintest hope that he'll ever receive enough of a return for his efforts. case in point, the business trip to bangkok that netted him his bride.

five years ago, between meetings with exporters and trying to get the best quote on bulk shipments of women's pantyhose, he strikes up a conversation with a desk clerk at the hilton about his own lucrative wholesale business. in passing, he mentions the wives of several of his famous clients - a four-star general, a chess champion, and a senator from massachusetts. the chat doesn't last long, and mr priestly promptly forgets about it. fast forward to later that evening, the desk clerk knocks on his hotel room door, introduces him to his sister, jai, and then he excuses himself to take care of a dispute at the front desk. while awaiting the brother's return, mr priestly offers jai a seat and a glass of brandy.

in response, she undresses.

"no. no," he stops her. "not required."

she mutters in thai, bursts into tears, and from what mr priestly comes to understand, she's afraid if she doesn't please him, her boss, the desk clerk, will beat the crap out of her. the pantyhose wholesaler is moved, and pays the fella in american dollars to spend the rest of his spare time with jai. it's a matter of speculation as to whether any sexual favors were given or received. but by the end of his trip, he proposes to her, buys her freedom, helps her get visas and plane tickets for both her and her son. then they all fly to curranvale city in order to begin a new life together with an implied understanding of jai's duties in the kitchen and the bedchambers.

over the years, mr priestly makes an annual pilgrimage to visit with jai's grandparents in bangkok. the poverty he sees causes him to weep; there is one room divided into sections by sheets. and the nephews abandoned by their father share a bed with jai's sister. food as well as furniture is scarce, but this is contrasted greatly by the endless supply of religious knick knacks on the walls. crucifixes. colored photos of the Christ. statues of mary and the manger and the baby Jesus. prayer beads. so, stirred up to give mr priestly begins sending them a monthly allotment of american currency. but what does he have to show for his generosity? jai locks him out of the bridal chamber at night.

"you'd think i was a monster, and not the person who supports her family," he says. "it just goes to show ya."

when a customer service agent on the telephone interrupts mr priestly, kerstin makes a beeline for café hashim where she helps herself to a free copy of the new

york times, and sits with an americano at a window.

on most days, kerstin stares at lovers passing by and resents the universe for its inability to give her the relationship she feels she deserves. yes, how ironic that she hates the word deserve because she can never figure out how that gets quantified. and what is it exactly that she deserves? and who's to say she isn't getting the relationships she deserves? and so she wonders if she deserves to suffer alone as a penance for neglecting her aging *papi*.

hashim interrupts kerstin's musings to ask her if she will sample a new and improved omlette he's made using ingredients fresh from the market. he has an educated understanding of what it means for an actor to be honored at cannes, so if she likes his culinary handiwork, he'll add it to the menu.

"it will be a pleasure," she says in that sucky way she's begun to use around her fans (a concept she dislikes and can't quite get used to. it implies worship, and that isn't why she got into film).

hashim places a plate in front of her, and hides out in the kitchen while she stares at a folded golden egg flap studded with cilantro. her fork penetrates skin, squirting melted cheese. and after she secures a morsel of cheesy egg, she slowly places it into her mouth, and chews her way through gypsy mushrooms, cherry tomatoes, sweet onions, and chives.

impatient to know what she thinks, hashim hurries back.

"you like?"

"i may never eat anyone else's omlettes again," she says, hating the words as

she speaks them because of uncertainty over whether she actually means any of them.

flattered, hashim pesters her with another request for one of her signed headshots added to his wall of fame, a row of framed and signed photographs of other celebrities from curranvale city – a surprisingly long list of b-listers with several seasons worth of exposure in sitcoms, tap dancers and feathery plumed hoofers from broadway, and singers who’ve had brushes with fame that they’ve parlayed into autograph signings and overly lit performances in shopping malls and fairs countywide.

“soon,” she says without conviction. “soon.”

at 9:30 kerstin goes to the s.p.c.a. where she spends her time working with the dogs that will be put down if they don’t get socialized within a four-month window, the ones who’ve been discarded like errant pennies on a sidewalk.

her latest project, flapjack, is prematurely shedding hair, and has what looks like cigarette burns along his spine. like usual, kerstin stands outside the metal bars of the cage trying not to move abruptly. then she inches along an edge with a muzzle and leash in hand.

she’ll never know what it is specifically that makes flapjack snap at objects that come within five feet of him, nor will she know anything about a time flapjack had been more than willing to endure whatever others expected of him. and for reasons she has yet to fathom, she’s reminded of the closed door of her *papi’s* study - the one that announced there were to be no traces of the sight or the

sound of her – and of how it had mattered that her father locked her out of the room, at least until it didn't matter anymore.

after a day with flapjack, kerstin is too tired to do anything except warm up leftovers before watching music videos in the apartment, and after she eventually crawls into bed, she lies in the dark listening to gareth and sean, bike couriers.

“you were late, motherfucker.”

“you're the motherfucker.”

“i was waiting for half an hour.”

“it was ten minutes at the most.”

“lying motherfucker.”

feet stomp, fists smackthud, bodies tumble to the floor. there's crashing furniture. a slamming door. feet are on the step, and there's another slamming door.

yes, kerstin tells herself, it's better to be single. she enjoys her own company, and likes making productive use of her own time. and as hard as it is to admit, she's even begun to find merit in the advice of fellow female celebs who recommend avocado face cream while loving oneself fiercely like it's party time, mardi gras. on her own, she's far from the days when she was constantly rushed by *papi* worries about punctuality.

take the time she was twelve, and *papi* finally decided to go visit his parents' graves at the family plot, hurrying kerstin out the house to make sure they got

there at the pre-determined time.

“move it,” he said. “*oma* and *opa* expect us at one.”

by noon kerstin was seated in the front seat, and still *papi* doubled back to the house to make certain the floors were swept, and cupboards closed, and the windows shut, and the garbage taken out. and when they were fifteen minutes early at the cemetery, they ended up sitting in the car not being behind their scheduled time.

kerstin never understood this about her father. they always had to be a few minutes early. never, ever late. and what if things didn’t go quite as planned. then what? they’d have to adapt. and what was the big deal in that. instead, she was always running around as if to head off a cataclysmic disaster caused by tardiness. but not anymore. now she lies in her own bed, pulls sheets up to her chin, and gets comfortable without a formal plan as to where she’ll be in the upcoming months. los angeles. maybe art schools in new york. definitely berlin.

in september, everything changes for kerstin at a press junket in amsterdam for *im chor der engel stehn*. at the after party emerick voss, director, introduces her to tobias bohrmann, organic-toothpaste tycoon.

once alone with tobias, kerstin vents about emerick voss. “his shoots never follow the script,” she says. “he improvises in the moment, and it makes for an utterly disorganized set.”

“you must have chaos within to give birth to a dancing star,” tobias replies,

quoting nietzsche.

“*nein*,” she says. “emerick voss is just plain nuts, no redeeming quality there.”

tobias is enchanted by her frankness, and soon they are lost in a conversation about her creative process. how does she find her characters? does she operate from the unconscious? how real are the love scenes? kerstin is intrigued by questions no one else asks her, not even her close friends. on occasion, they lapse into german, and by the time most of the guests have found their coats and headed into taxis or their parked cars, kerstin and tobias are making out in the driveway. and by the time they’ve discarded their clothes in mounds dotting the floor of his hotel room, kerstin’s been convinced to change her plane ticket and go to paris with him for a weekend of partying, mardi gras style, among his good friends.

as the plane cruises at 40,000 feet, their talk in first class turns to values. “i grew up in a house with an ethic of togetherness,” tobias says. “meals at the dinner table were a focal point around which we gathered. and that means all meals. like during the school holidays, my dad would come home for lunch so that we could all be together. and at supper there was always a subject we’d have to discuss. politics. history. popular culture.” ah, and kerstin likes that he doesn’t say pop culture. “as soon as one of the kids was old enough to go to school, we’d be expected to contribute to the discussion.”

while he talks about his tight family unit, kerstin daydreams about how this is what she wants from a relationship, an ethic of togetherness. she wishes she had

a *mutti* who hadn't left, and who was less of a friend and more of a mother. sure they have weekly chats on the phone. but they only see each other once a year, if kerstin can arrange to be wherever *mutti* and edward happen to park the winnebago. *nein*, they aren't married. instead, they take road trips in a vehicle that comes with all the fixins: coolers, hot plates, a television that is rechargeable, fold out chairs, sleeping bags, inflatable rafts, guide books, and a *badezimmer* that flushes. freewheeling it, they've been to every state on the mainland, are partial to mountain country, and have photographs of themselves at the grand canyon, niagara falls, and mount rushmore.

most importantly, the traveling couple shares an unwavering loyalty to the philadelphia phillies that takes precedence over all else.

take the time kerstin called *mutti* about her cannes nomination for *im chor der engel stehn*. they were at spring training in clearwater, florida. and kerstin inadvertently interrupted an afternoon in the bleachers with hot dogs, beer, and the rechargeable television as accompaniment to the action down on the field.

"i got the cannes nomination," kerstin said.

"hold on," *mutti* replied.

the crowd roared for at least a minute and a half.

"what was that again, dear?" *mutti* added. "martinez just hit a bases-loaded home run."

a muffled horn blew into the phone. "hats off to you both," kerstin said.

"okay, dear. i'm all ears. you were saying?"

“don’t remember, actually.”

“couldn’t have been all that important then,” *mutti* replied.

so, that just about sums up kerstin’s need for an ethic of togetherness in her own family.

“the one thing i could count on at dinner was that i had to be quiet,” kerstin says. “there would be three-way discussions between *papi* and my grandparents in which they all tuned each other out. everyone spoke with authority as they pronounced verdicts on the topics in question. but over the years *oma* stopped talking. then *opa*. finally, we all sat around poking at food in silence.”

tobias' grip tightens on her hand.

paris.

kerstin and tobias are dropped off by limo at the sheraton with an indoor fountain in the lobby. they have sex in the shower before joining his posse at the bar for a nightcap. and how interesting these people are, and how easy it feels for kerstin to trade banter with them. jacquin designs couture handbags and was once married to the son of an oil sheik. glinda consults celebs on appropriate clothing for photo ops and award shows and she currently carries out a long-distance affair with a woman twenty years her senior. timbo, the financial analyst, is coming off a three-year run on the forbes five hundred wealthiest, and he has recently returned from watching a camel race in the saharan desert as a guest of jacquin’s ex. tobias is at the center of the circle, cracking them up with

his ability to mimic a variety of european accents while adjudicating the jovially impassioned disputes that erupt between them.

this close community has homes in kaipei and apartments in a variety of urban centers north of the tropic of cancer. the women's bikini-clad presence at various beaches is recorded on society pages of an assortment of ironic blogs. and each of them has engaging stories to tell about illnesses, tragic personal setbacks, and other travails that show their good fortune doesn't disconnect them from other folk in the human family. and after they have laughed and finished their irish charlies and rusty nails, they decide to reconvene at the louvre the next day.

the following afternoon, kerstin feels positively fauvian beneath the matisses and is mesmerized by this merry band of entrepreneurs who talk with insider knowledge about people whose actions make an impact on the scene of successful purveyors she's moving towards – grammywinning record producers, recipients of presidential medals of honor for a lifetime of service, those who take projects from speculation to fact.

it swiftly becomes clear to her that she likes how different tobias is from her. he doesn't seem to suffer any compunctions over the enjoyments his wealth gives him, something she decides to change about herself. and why not? it seems ridiculous that she experiences so much guilt over her sudden run of good fortune. how utterly self-defeating it is to suffer over the amenities that come with her newly minted success - money to replace clothes that have been patched

at the crotch, eating out at pricey restaurants without flinching on the introduction of the bill. and by the end of a parisian weekend that becomes a parisian week, tobias and kerstin arrive at an understanding that they fit into each other like patterns in a rubik's cube. his friends like her. they are both young, unapologetically ambitious, and distinctly unlike all the other saps who spend the bulk of their days sleeping off the dull aftertaste of their latest overindulgence. finally, happiness in their professional lives is at long last equally matched by the personal.

it takes kerstin no more than three weeks before she moves into his life on the island, and leaves behind everything that is familiar in the decaying factories and nuclear plants that dominate looserville city, curranvale.

from a distance tobias's home looks like one of a number of assorted matchstick boxes implanted perilously into the slope of a mountain. they have to enter a gate that needs a secret code to set foot in the neighborhood, and a path in front of the white building leads to a living room with a marble floor, and there's a huge window with a bird's eye view of the other homes that run down the mountainside overlooking coral beaches, the pacific.

during these early days, tobias and kerstin speak to one another in german, and she likes this person she's becoming. they are a team, a term she used to scoff at for being much too corporate. and team ostheim/bohrmann gives and receives invitations to parties where winners congregate to affirm one another's inestimable value. some have made millions before turning twenty-five, and

others are among those whose talents bring home more cheddar in a month than common folk see in a lifetime. at garden parties the smitten couple caters around the pool at his mountainside estate, the elite show up to talk about their goodly works that shine the spotlight on maltreatment in the corridors of the disempowered, *and* of their efforts to raise awareness about the diseases that have lately affected members of their circle. bulimia. aids. spina bifida. dwarfism. bi-polar disorders. addictions to pain pills. so it appears to be a grave mistake, a colossal error, to call any of it superficial as kerstin used to do when she stole toilet paper from public bathrooms because this was the best she could manage.

during those first months, tobias and kerstin get busy doing work that changes people's lives. he works no less than fifty hours each week since there is organic toothpaste to sell in the asian markets, notably to the chinese with their billions of potential tooth brushers. his passport boasts recent stamps from at least twenty countries, and he makes calls to kerstin from phones thirty thousand feet in the air. she responds to e-mails from fans who have overcome a life crisis because of her performance in *im chor der engel stehn*, and during her spare time she's pleased to be invited to participate in the hobbies that gainfully fill out tobias's time, notably learning the wood-working trade by using his drill bits, nail guns and electronic saws hanging from brass hooks in the shed. they make benches and chairs from driftwood they collect from the beach, and no slouch herself, she's in and out of airports as she moves in and out of production meetings and auditions organized by a new team of agents, managers, and

publicists assembled on recommendations by tobias's circle. she signs onto a film that tells the true story of a teacher who cares for the hardened of heart in an inner-city school, and she does research at a local high school once plagued by drug trafficking and gang violence. between their appointments at far-flung corners of the globe, team ostheim/bohrmann skype one another, and make plans to spend their weekends in resorts with beaches the color of ground ivory, or else to spend lazy sundays in the house lying around on a settee in a room with a first-rate entertainment centre.

it isn't long before kerstin finds her opinion sought by tobias in matters related to interior decorating. does she think the color scheme in the kitchen matches the island at its apex? should the *badezimmer* in the guest room be furnished with architectural magazines? does she prefer marble tile for the front door? and soon she's involved in the hiring of a new housemaid, and she feels useful as she makes calls to have a new filter installed in the pool. and three months in, on one of their spontaneous retreats to a hotel with a miniature golf course, they get hitched in a low-key ceremony with glinda, jacquin and timbo as their witnesses. then the newlyweds follow up with passionate love making on both hard and soft surfaces in their suite before taking a dip among reefs studded with octopus and starfish.

all that is good crumbles. so, kerstin isn't blindsided when imperceptibly at first, little by little, married life turns on team ostheim/bohrmann much like it did with her parents. in the early days, there had been a measure of choice in the

newlyweds' canoodling. but under the loosely defined terms of a marriage contract that prioritized their careers, they find themselves hedged in by a regime run by obligation and duty. as mr and mrs bohrmann, they must make quality time together to ensure their marriage doesn't crash and burn like *mutti* and *papi's*, or like timbo's second. so, they introduce sensible policies as suggested on dvds by world-renowned speakers who motivate others to earn millions. the couple decides to spend every second weekend in one another's company, no matter what else is going on in their lives. saturday afternoons are slated for woodwork in tobias's shed followed by a date at a top-end restaurant with a french *sommelier*, and each sunday night they follow through on pre-mandated lovemaking sessions.

soon it's a burden to live up to what originally appeared to be relatively unambitious expectations, and their quality time together comes at the expense of whatever moments of quiet they increasingly need alone to recuperate from their busy lives. irritated by each other's company, the ethic of togetherness that brought them together evolves into sit-downs at the dinner table accompanied by smiling personas that help to keep the peace. gradually the sparks between them shrug with indifference and go out, their relationship morphing into the main source of whatever internal grief exists for them. nibbling away, niggling as they cart around unhappiness into the parts of their lives that have previously given them pleasure.

kerstin tells herself she needs best girlfriends, so she organizes drinks with

jacquin and glinda on the terrace at caravaccios.

they meet at noon on a wednesday. jacquin suggests they forget about the menu and focus on drinks. glinda orders a bottle of chablis. then they cradle their glasses while sharing details about details.

“when i got up this morning i couldn’t open my eyes,” glinda says. “i lay there for at least thirty minutes. didn’t move a muscle. i thought about getting up. thought a lot actually. then i figured i’d lie there until i felt the inclination to move.”

“you’ve really got to do that sometimes,” jacquin says.

“i swear to God. it was like being paralyzed. i turned on the tv, but there was nothing on. and by that i mean nothing. there wasn’t even a decent movie on hbo. and i didn’t have the energy to flip through channels. so, i just closed my eyes and tried to get a bit more sleep.”

“i find that always helps,” kerstin says.

“what helps?” jacquin asks.

“oh, going back to sleep if that’s what your body needs.”

“yes, which is what i tried,” glinda says. “but i didn’t have the energy to move. and i swear, it took me half an hour before i forced myself to kick off the blankets and use the bathroom.”

“are you taking ginseng?” jacquin asks.

“that’s another nightmare, i got the ones from chinatown. just like you suggested. but those bottles are too tough to open.”

jacquin laughs. "i made the same mistake."

"you have to tear off the tab and flip them open," glinda continues. "but did i do that? no. i was twisting and twisting and the instructions on the bottle are in ..."

"korean, yes," jacquin says.

"anyway, the pills irritated my stomach. i had the runs for days. and at first i thought it might have been something i ate. i mean, i'd just tried the samurai plate at that new place on ulukawi avenue, genki sushi. and the akami looked a bit off. but i thought to myself, i'm here. so i went ahead and ate it anyway. but by bedtime, i'd been camped out in the toilet for hours."

"that's disappointing," kerstin says.

"what?" jacquin asks. "the ginseng?"

"no, genki sushi. tobias and i were so looking forward to trying the place next week."

"you should still go," jacquin says. "it turns out i have an allergy to ginseng."

and that is their visit. stomach ailments. restaurant recommendations. snafus at work. spa visits. and these people whom kerstin once found so fascinating in paris are suddenly quite humdrum. as she drives home along the watabene highway, she thinks of what a mistake it would be to think that life with tobias is all bad. there are still moments when it's thrilling to hold hands as they tip toe around seaweed lining the edges of the churning pacific. or on sunday afternoons, the old magic returns while they lie together on the settee under a

bulk of newspapers. however, by bedtime the effect of the society of humdrum friends has receded into the past, and kerstin's ruminations about the bulk of team ostheim/bohrmann's time together leave her unable to break the habit of tallying it all up, and coming out with a thicket of unsolvable problems with their marriage. so in the morning she wakes up a little bit less refreshed, a bit more exhausted, a little less willing to open the curtains to let the sunlight in.

as kerstin struggles out of bed like glinda, she thinks of how kaipei is one of the few places where unhappiness epitomizes the height of ingratitude. it's an island that comes fully accessorized. high-end shops, restaurants with chefs trained in the old world using recipes popularized by their association with a sun king, spas in which the body can be pampered for as many hours as kerstin can afford - money is no object because tobias takes care of this. anytime she wants it, a crack squad of specialists roots out her aches and pains deep in muscle before her body is ready for a soak in the healing salts of the ocean. and since she's working less and less because her marriage allows her to be selective about the acting jobs she takes on, she finds herself with idle time. so it seems petty that she's bored, and it's psychologically perplexing that despite all the rest she gets there continues to be an increased dissipation of her energy. therefore, she lounges on beach towels with jacquin and glinda at a cove listed as one of the world's ten best by time magazine , and she loses control over who she's becoming as she watches the behavior of the boys and girls who leave the beach to ride around town on scooters, or the svelte bodies of those who wax the surf

boards on which they spend their days as shark bait. and she feels envious as she imagines them dressing up in the evening to go drink themselves silly beneath a flutter of strobe lights.

in order to be proactive, she organizes an outing.

tobias, timbo, jacquin and glinda go dancing, a throwback to their whirlwind courtship. but ... tobias looks like an old fuddy duddy with his windmilling arms and robotron dance steps. and kerstin is embarrassed, and in the days to come she begins to manufacture reasons to go to nightclubs alone. she tells tobias that she's with glinda whom she also lies to by saying she has joined a society of bonsai tree enthusiasts in order to cultivate a 300-year-old bonsai tree for hubby's birthday. and from her barstool, she watches the aging flounce about on the dance floor in circles of three or four, their handbags in a pile on the ground in their midst, their hair stiff with spray. occasionally, boys on the make peel one of the group away, and then grind their penises against backsides. and no, kerstin doesn't want to judge, but everywhere she looks the dissatisfied cling to hopes that romantic adventures lurk around the next corner, if they are patient enough, if they continue to show up at the bar, if they go to openings at the gallery or attend house parties and benefits given and received.

nothing gives her pleasure, and yes, it seems ungrateful to kerstin that she misses the old gang on the mainland with whom contact has become less frequent. and even though they remain on good terms, she can't relate to the arguments they used to bandy around between them, those passions chocked

full of an incoherent surliness with status quos. and anyway, the old gang has already begun to make choices, which remind kerstin how they've all moved on. eee-hon has joined a financial company that buys up toxic assets and turns them around for a profit. blaaanka daaarling overdosed on prescription painkillers and currently is in group therapy seeking relief from her addictions to relationships with boys who know the latest dance steps, and who give her costly trinkets as they lie about their fidelity to her. demarion armstrong, dub poet, is the only one who kept the old faith. he moved to harlem, started a reggae band, and was last seen on the streets of manhattan trying to sell his latest c.d. and what would he make of her now? yes, she'd been an artist once, and then sold out by aligning herself with money on an island peopled by those whose money makes the world a stink hole. or, that's how she would have thought about anyone who had done what she did, and so they'd probably find themselves at odds and ends – arguing over ways to re-define her.

so, when jonah phones her during one of her mandated quality sunday afternoons with tobias, she's happy to hear from him, but unwilling to get together in order to see someone who knew her when she was a more vibrant person.

"i loved it," jonah says of her film.

"and you're a professor," she replies. "*genial*."

"huh," he replies.

"*genial*, it means brilliant."

"*nein*," he replies. "you're ignoring the etymological roots found in the old norse. it means, friendly from genial."

she laughs. "no, *genial* is from genius, genius."

"genius? come on!"

and it's as if they hadn't spent ten years apart.

unfortunately, this call also brings out the animosity lurking in the unexplored crevices of the *kleine deutschland* that is ostheim/bohrmann. first, tobias mocks the way she laughs while on the phone with her *schwarzer*. he tells her she sounds like a snorting walrus. then hubby follows her from room to room conducting a pointed interrogation that attempts to elicit confessions of a latent desire for *negerküsse*. she tries to explain. yes, there were the things she'd said about liking black guys in the early days of the marriage. but at the time she'd been exploring an idea about how comfortable it felt with tobias, someone she could talk to in the old language. she wasn't saying she'd been into black guys. *nein. nein. nein.* and the more she tries to explain, the more entangled in misunderstandings they become.

"you're addicted to *schokolade*," tobias says.

she tries it from another angle. "if anything, i've had a thing for people who experienced real suffering, and there was a time that struggle seemed more real than the world i move in with you. that's all i was saying."

"fuckfuck." he pursues her to the bedroom.

"was?"

“what if i started hanging out with say ... miss kaipei.” the twenty-year-old who’s been hired to be the face of the latest bohrmann toothpaste campaign.

“and i said, i was doing it because i was drawn to her stories about coming from nothing. *das wäre voll daneben.*”

“i really don’t know what we’re talking about,” kerstin replies. “if you don’t want me to talk to jonah, i won’t.”

“you’re free to talk to whomever you want. but don’t kick up a stink if i start spending time with other women.”

“like miss kaipei?”

“that isn’t what i’m saying.”

“go right ahead. talk to her. christ, go out for drinks. see if i care.”

tense months pass slowly. kerstin limits her contact with jonah to the occasional non-committal e-mail. and one day tobias returns at three in the morning, drunk and sloppy. then he proceeds to describe an evening of abject boredom in miss kaipei’s company. “the shoot went late, she was hungry, and so we went out to dinner,” he says. “we shared some calamari and then ordered the lamb on special.”

“why are you giving me the goddamn menu?”

“anyway, i knocked back schnapps to deal with all the little things she kept doing to drive me crazy – chewing gum, constantly staring into a hand mirror, her lack of interest in the wider world of politics.”

“it’s after three in the morning.”

“i drank too much, and couldn’t drive home,” he replies. “i got miss kaipei a cab, and then i called timbo to pick me up. you know timbo. we ended up at mulligans for drinks. and when i realized the time, i didn’t think i should wake you up with a phone call.”

fuck it, kerstin thinks, and “oh, by the way, i made plans to meet jonah for drinks tomorrow.”

“ah,” he replies. “*negerküsse*.”

incensed, kerstin moves into the guesthouse.

by morning, her anger is replaced by guilt. one that dredges up memories of how *oma* and *opa* treated each other in their final years. so, kerstin calls jonah to cancel their outing before castigating herself for acting in a way that’s messing up the good thing she has in kaipei with tobias. for crying out loud, they live in a home on a mountain slope, and whenever she needs to go anywhere, she can jump into a car, or take the tiki tiki highway to the shrimp shack on uj’ulema cove, and take her order past the house once owned by michael jackson, and descend the short drop to a jutting promontory of rocks with a view of whales jumping waves.

she makes tobias waffles for brunch, he gives her twelve long stem roses, and they sit across from one another swapping comparisons of the traffic on major highways the world over.

from that moment forward, kerstin works on making *limonade* out of freshly squeezed lemons. if she’s irritated by tobias’s early morning humming of

schlagers, she imagines what her life would be like without him. no more trips to the spa. no more expensive bottles of wine in the company of her new girlfriends. maybe a waitressing job. and rather than blame him for her own unhappiness, she decides to focus on building herself from the inside out. so, she gets in touch with her agency, lights a fire under several butts, and within the week she signs on to re-unite with emerick voss, director, to do a light romantic comedy shot in the city of re-unification, berlin.

CHAPTER XIII. BERLIN

deutschland is the brother's grimm. rotkäppchen. hänsel and gretel. goethe's die leiden des jungen werther. nietzsche's also sprach zarathustra. wagner's nibelungen saga. kant's kritik der reinen vernunft. das kapital of marx and engels. mein kampf. kartoffeln. bratwurst. sauerkraut. bier. karneval. confetti. bon bons thrown from trucks. altweiberfastnacht. kreuzberg. ausländer. türken. muslims. german samoa. german east africa. france and germany kicking each other's asses in the war. elsass-lothringen. the e.u. the euro. fortified borders between e.u. and non e.u. countries. the fucking english with their pound. european identity. who to let into the eu. the rejection of the crescent and star. banned headscarves. crosses over doors. cold northerners, passionate southerners. the modern north. weed from the netherlands. house music. battle rap. der himmel über berlin. wim wenders. russian signs. the love parade. white fabric over the reichstag. little istanbul. artists. re-unification. bananas. unemployment. disillusionment with capitalism. resentment over re-building the east. cobblestone streets turned to asphalt. the left. radicalized youth. extremism.

and the acting gig is a well-written lead with conventional prescriptions for male-female behavior. but kerstin finds herself relying on crutches to muster up the energy to fake interest in the part. she uses cigarettes and coffee for a pick up, and then valium for the still quiet that enables her to pretend to inhabit a late

twenty-something who juggles success as a top legal eagle with the demands of single motherdom. as isabelle, kerstin wears high heels and suggestively unbuttoned blouses while slapping down men who are both intimidated as well as full of admiration for her brainy beauty. and after a day of shooting is complete, she continues to wear high heels and suggestively unbuttoned blouses while she takes long walks near the potsdamer platz and the brandenburger tor.

the e-mails:

kerstin. i'm about to swoop and circle in the fragmented ways of the funky fresh gentleman.

first to catch you up, it's a cold night in kaipei, i sit at my desk, wearing two pairs of socks, grey sweats, and a thick woolen cardigan (all provided *gratis* by giorgio armani). there's no moon and the sky's drab with the odd bored-looking star.

earlier today the rolling stones played a free concert in pualele park. and yes my leather clothing, by ralph lauren, was tight by design rather than accident. and while mick did his jagger thing, i got to thinking that at a certain point in one's life it might not be okay to be a screaming, tight-panted rolling stone fan. if i may be so bold as to ask, what are your considered views on the subject? jonah, gentleman.

Gentleman -

I just sent the last cast mate home from my suite at the Hilton overlooking the brandenburger tor after a delightful night of beer and board games and actorly chit chat. Now I have a quiet moment to think about and respond to what you write. The question, I believe, should not be if at one point it is no longer okay to be a screaming, tight-panted Rolling Stones fan, but if it is ever okay to be a screaming tight-panted Rolling Stones fan.

From Kerstin, one of the top five, no, three actors of her generation.

dear numbers one or two or maybe three, there i was answering important e-mails to heavy weights in the garment industry - my views on slim cut jeans are of considerable value among young designers in luxemburg - only to come across yours and to read it with much interest.

a little background first:

i don't talk about this much, but when i was a kid i was the liwanian chess champion. i don't get into it much because most dapper gents have a sad tale that is full of promise and ends with a seedy scandal (c.f. pee wee herman). anyway, as an ambitious chess prodigy i took on motumbo jones, the one-eared african champ, in a duel of the chess titans. it became a talking point on the government-run liwani radio station, voice of liwani, and soon the one-eared nationwide were having scuffles with the two-eared in the back alleys of itouri city.

for the duration of our three-week duel, the country ground to a standstill. to recollect the moment for you is impossible given the limits on my time. so, suffice it to say that i introduced my patented castling move and yes, was crowned the youngest ever african chess master – the details of which i leave for the middling to quite good poets among us to describe.

what followed was quite unexpected. nay, nothing gave me pleasure. the frequent sexcapades with my groupies (the chess maters) quickly lost its piquancy, my stools were consistently pellet shaped. and by the time i took on the one-eared motumbo jones in a rematch, i was trounced in what has since been dubbed 'the thrashing at wolo river.'

what is my point?

i'm a former check-mating machine. jonah.

Chess Master –

When I was younger, I wanted to become a circus director, then a female mechanic, and finally a Bondgirl. Currently, I act in a film that I have little interest in. Each day, I think what does it matter to have a legacy in which folks can gradually lose interest in films stockpiled at Blockbuster?

My point: Did you know I have a very long tongue?

K.

dear k,
 when we talk long, do you mean like giraffe long? okapi? anteater? have you measured it? and what did you use, a tape or a ruler? thuggy j.

Thug,
 No measurement. However, I can clean my eyebrows with it. And I do not mean any of this in a sexual way whatsoever, if that is what you were thinking. K.

okapi.
 no, i wasn't thinking about it being sexual. see, the dapper gents were over for wine tasting last night and conversation turned to how supposedly lots of your sistren feel ho hum about sex, and this ambivalence is normal, and men with raging libidos have to like suck it up or else learn to create a mood with days of relaxing-type exercises for areas adjacent to the vulva to get your sistren ready to donate their flowers as if for a charitable cause. so, no. nothing sexual. no. not at all. j.

Chess Master -

A lot of my girlfriends with long tongues have complained that they want sex more than their boyfriends. In fact, last night during a sleepover with the other actresses and in between resting our heads on one another's bosoms and kissing after the pillow fight, the girls and I talked about how much we love our long tongues, and sex, and in our ideal world we would fuck at least once a day. All kinds of it, too, fast and hard and slow with a sweaty, happy break in between. But until we find men up for the task, we'll have to make do with what pleasures we can eke out during Girls Nite In. K

okapi. giraffe,
 the dapper gents and i read yours with real delight, and we'd be glad to have a colloquim with your long-tongued friends. (how does doing so in three weeks work on your schedule?) i won't go into details as the language involved in some of our proposed oral presentations is rather technical, but please bring jammies. we'll provide the wine (hot chocolate is discouraged), and we request the enclosed instructional materials be read prior to the workshop.
 monsignor

Monsignor Dapper J --

It's the middle of the night and I can't sleep. If anything, I should put my insomnia to productive use and work on memorizing lines for tomorrow, but I can't do that because my head is filled with thoughts.

(Did I ever tell you that I may be the messiest person when it comes to the household and paying bills and eating regularly and healthily, but that I go crazy when all those thoughts in my head stop being perfectly organized and logical? Whenever I lose control over my head, I get very nervous - and a little excited and happy at the same time, strangely enough - and smoke too much and fidget around and bite my fingernails. Ok, lighting a cigarette. Better.)

After reading your last, I feel the need to make a confession. When I was born, my parents were very young and very much in love, and I grew up with them walking around the apartment naked sometimes and kissing a lot. I can't even recall when I first learned about sex because all those body parts and what you could do with them were never a secret. Then one day in summer when I was in second or third grade, the boys were running around the schoolyard during break, lifting up the girls' skirts and reciting some rhyme about underwear. I thought they were so stupid and became really annoyed, so when everyone settled down for art class after the break, I stood up next to my chair, lifted up my skirt and pulled down my panties and yelled, "Is that what you all want to see so badly?!" I can still see my classmates' shocked faces and then all the shouting and giggling and pointing, while one student ran outside to tell the teacher coming up the stairs. After class, she asked me to stay behind and sat me down, and I felt so humiliated because I had never gotten into trouble at school before. (I had always been a quiet, shy, good girl with pigtails and braces and glasses.) Then she explained to me how what I had done was so wrong, and how it would reflect badly on the whole school if any of the other students told their parents, and I was so ashamed. Add to that that I grew up in a small town in the country, and it felt as though everyone knew what I had done and thought it was the most immoral act of the year. Looking back, I want to laugh at that story but I can't because I remember that feeling of shame too well, and I still blush only thinking about it. K.

kerstin

when i was a little spry chess master living in liwani, i loved dogs. my favorite book in the world was dogs, dogs, dogs. before going to sleep every night, i'd flip through the book trying to figure out which one i wanted. an irish wolfhound. a great dane. an alsatian. anyway, there's a picture of a golden lab next to a story of a dog who breaks into a liquor cabinet, gets drunk, and then falls asleep.

unfortunately that night burglars come in and rob the home, so his doggy parents are upset with him for not doing his job and for getting drunk. now the dog feels really guilty, and as soon as his master types go to sleep, he commits suicide by jumping out of a window. and i'm so moved i decide i'm going to get one of those golden labs one day.

okay, at some future point i see an ad up on the bulletin board at school with the picture of a golden lab that looked exactly like the one in dogs, dogs, dogs. oh, yes, a bit of background. i go to this snooty anglican school, and the pup is from a litter that one of the snooty british settlers is attempting to get rid of. so once i get home, i plead with my dad to get me the puppy. he says sure, and i call the british guy to ask about getting the pup. we have a good chat, and he is excited that he will have one less pup to worry about. well, my dad and i go to the fella's house and as soon as he sees us, he gets really weird. he starts saying that he thought i was english from the phone call, and that he has changed his mind about giving up the dog, and thank you for your time. i feel crushed, and on the drive home my dad explains how it is with some of the white settlers, and how this guy doesn't think as africans we can responsibly raise a dog.

so, that's that.

here's the odd thing. i still have a copy of dogs, dogs, dogs. and i looked at it as adult for the first time several years ago. it turns out that the story of the drunk dog was fiction, but i'd always thought it was real. jonah.

Jonah --

Last year, I was going for a walk one evening when I found a small, dying bird on the sidewalk that didn't move although it was obviously terrified. I picked it up and brought it home, and then I sat on the terrace with the bird, wrapped in a towel, on my lap, and I talked to the bird and I cried, and the bird was so calm and just looked at me and bled from its beak. Those two hours I sat there with the bird while it was dying made me feel as if we are all devastatingly alone, and that breaks my heart.

Kerstin

k, when i was also a boy hans was my best friend. his big thing was his dachshund without a lower jaw. other kids would give it bones to watch it slather them with a tongue that lolled out its mouth. i was always terrified of the dog because its favorite pastime was to maul my leg. and looking back, i have no idea what kind of damage a dachshund without mandibles could have done? j.

Jonah,

I think I told you that I connect better with animals than humans; my first best friend was a horse that lived on the farm next door, and I know that the dogs at the shelter love me, in that way that maybe only dogs can, no matter what I do or how flawed I am. And I often choose to lie on the floor with them rather than to be around people. It makes me sad that I cannot connect more with people, and I don't want to wake up one day and find that I have become a crazy old cat lady (or whatever the equivalent would be with dogs). I know I could make more of an effort, yet this is another thing that exhausts me: wearing that friend-mask, and the fear that if I take off the mask, the relationships may self-destruct or, even worse, not change at all.

Kerstin

prinzessin. i feel some weird primordial need to sit quietly with you. j.

Jonah –

I have been memorizing my lines for the last few hours, and if I read another sentence from that script, I am going to rip it to pieces. So, I am taking a break to write to you some more.

There is a definite distance I feel from my character, Lillian, and her relationship with Oliver. It leaves me cold. I cannot relate to the utter desperation that seems to lie at its heart, that pathetic need to be loved, or to at least share a life with someone, no matter how ill-fitting that someone might be. As I re-read bits and pieces of it, I want to yell at the pages, "No, no, that's not true! That's not what relationships are like!" And I wonder what makes this portrayal so different from my experience with relationships, and I guess once I strip away all the romantic stuff, that sugar-coating, maybe the relationships I've had are not as different from the one between Lillian and Oliver. I know that I have been with people so I wouldn't have to be alone (especially when I was younger and living far from my family). It was easier to sort out all the pragmatic everyday survival things together rather than by myself. Who that person was never seemed as important. And there was always a power play at work, a need to control the other person beneath all the romance. I think this power play that somehow seems unavoidable is not only ridiculous, but it also seems impossible to end it in any fruitful way; an imbalance of power cannot be good, and somehow I don't think a balance is either. Kerstin

guten tag,
 a quick reminder in case you forgot. get up for your shoot. drink plenty of non-booze-related liquids, and think of how you are cannes' best lead nominee. also, do not look *herr direktor* in the eyes. these are his most alluring features and many an admirer has been dashed by the shoals residing therein.

this morning, i've been thinking a lot about smell and how i smell and whether i smell like a fisherman (which, if i remember correctly) is a whiff that works like an aphrodisiac for you - the smell of the trawler and the cod and all the loud scents that the fisherman brings to market). j.

Jonah -

Today's shoot started off a bit shakily, and all I could do was stare at the camera with that blank, what-the-fuck- expression. The rest was fine, although I suspect - and this is gonna hurt you as much as me - that Emerick Voss was playing footsie with me under the table (and he smells deliciously of cod). K.

k., i'm so disappointed in herr direktor. i hope i'm not talking out of turn here, but he strikes me as the kind to let down the dazzled flowers who gather around him (you will not be the first, nor sadly will you be the last). jonah

Jonah -

When I read what you write, I always smile, and oh, sometimes, amidst all that silly giddiness, my brain kicks in to tell me that none of this makes much sense - and yes, that there is my marriage. I love Tobias. And I need to see Lillian through another scene before I go to sleep. And ... And ...

Kerstin

k, coming to kaipei seemed to have a momentum all its own. and now i have a lump where my heart is supposed to be. lumpy and raw and full of brush fire, livid with the need to say the most irresponsible things about you (things i'm supposed to tell you).

case in point: you're the one for whom i would take sabbaticals in order to study dribulets of sweat sliding down your back and that necklace that dangles from

your neck, flashing with the light of the moon, and to hear once more those moans of yours that are like sapphires like sulphur. and how i want to carry your books because i have this sense that i was moving towards you as a boy (wearing a scarlet cap and going to school where the windows rattled the dark at night). and i needed you then when i felt most out of sorts even though i didn't know it was you i needed. so i said prayers (i had belief then) and these prayers were scattered into the atmosphere like the way the sunlight comes through the portal of an airplane window, coming in unfiltered by cloud that drags through light like the ends of a blanket through grass. and as a boy my thoughts of you (who i didn't know was you) dissapeared into an amorphous nothing. and this nothing it turns out was something, it was you.

now i wish to sit beside the widewide ocean, water surging as we are lifted high, higher, like a fricking helium balloon disappearing among green parakeets. j.

Dear Reader,

The e-mail from Jonah to Kerstin that should follow in this sequence is omitted due to its sexual content and the racial sensitivity of the material.

The Editor

k, so, yup. there's this humming sensation in the pit of my stomach. it's like a hot water bottle and it seems to be where i'm holding you right now as i drift off thinking of you curled up warming all my extremities. j.

k,

not to badger, but i haven't heard from you for a couple of days. are you okay?
j.

kerstin,

i guess i went too far. yes, and i'm sorry, not for what i said because i meant all of it. just sorry ... that 's all.

kerstin,

okay i'll leave you be. although, i'm confused. very confused.

on her return from berlin, kerstin makes an effort with tobias. she cooks him

three-course dinners served with gravy boats under a candelabra. and then they sit opposite one another pussy footing at a varnished, long table. neither one admitting to feel anything other than okay.

“you’ve been so quiet since you got back from the shoot,” tobias says. “are you angry with me?”

“*ne*. i’m okay.”

“really?”

“*ja*, just a bit tired is all. you?”

“same,” he replies. “we really ought to take a vacation.”

“*ja*. a vacation. *schön*.”

“how’s the seychelles.”

“*super*.”

but it never quite materializes because of scheduling conflicts deep into the calendar year. a toothpaste conference in beijing. an indie shoot in new york. unsatisfactory plane fares between desired dates. a crisis at the office in bombay. and so kerstin tries her hand at domesticity. (maybe it’ll make a difference to tobias that their home is spic and span, and they will finally be able to loaf happily about on a stain-free couch before he playfully unfastens her bra.) she scrubs the floors, dusts shelves and unloads the dishwasher before tobias returns home. then after a late supper, she puts on a recent purchase of red lingerie with a bunny tail, and douses herself with moisturizer before joining him in bed where tobias reads a book on how to be a better delegator.

"how's it going, *schatz*?" she asks, lounging seductively on the covers beside him.

"i'm really exhausted."

"is there anything i can do to make it better?"

"i just need a decent night of sleep."

kerstin reaches over to touch his leg. he flinches, and stares harder at the book.

humiliated, she turns out the lamp at her bedside, and lies awake with her back to him, and at sunrise, she makes him scrambled eggs, writes a note with instructions to warm them in the microwave along with the bacon, signs it *küsse küsse*, and then she drives to hinealko beach. after circling a parking lot, she walks a pebbly incline, and removes her slippers before hiking the half-mile to a nook curved out in a rock face by thousands of years of pounding high tide. she lays down a towel and clambers into what looks like a tomb. rolling herself cigarettes, she peers out at surfers who brave choppy waters, and looks at the dark boys from the mediterranean who saunter by, and stares at the blonde girls who hover on the edges of the encroaching water, their jack russells playing among jockish surfer girls lugging waxed boards into the pacific.

she notes her legs need a shave, and that she has scars on her knees, and that there are some wobbly parts at her thighs she didn't have five years ago. tobias may no longer be attracted to her, but she likes all these things because they are hers and she has stories to tell about them. (look, scars. - yes. did i tell you about that time a dog at the shelter ripped off another dog's ear and i got bitten trying

to separate them? look, wobbly stuff. - yes. did i tell you that when we shot *im chor der engel stehn*, i didn't let myself eat chocolate for three months?) so despite what her hubby thinks, she likes the way her body looks, and feels, and smells (especially after a day in the sun).

she reminds herself that engaging with jonah while she's having troubles with tobias is a mistake, and the real problem is that she suffers from the post shoot blahs, and if she relaxes through this latest upswell of sadness, it will disappear. but against her will, she daydreams about the long odds of being at the chaotic airport in liwani in which she found jonah, and she wonders if jonah and she push forward just a little bit, a bit more, whether the feelings between them will survive spending time together. the passion didn't survive with tobias, and it's what she expects with jonah since her own grand relationship narrative goes as follows: girl meets boy, there's attraction, they get physical, they spend all their time together and get to know each other, they don't like each other as much as they used to, but there's now a relationship with all its comforts and safety, the expectations inscribed in the other are disappointed.

the end.

two by two women from the island trudge past in mustard wraps, an orchid at the ear, their bare feet sinking in the loose white sand as kerstin places a hand on her solar plexus, breathing deeply from her belly, and regulating the rise and fall of her stomach. but no matter how much she tries, her thoughts continue to move like a concord, like an amtrack train. whoosh, whoosh like *opa* going zoom

zoom from here to there. lickity split. and she wonders why this rush-rush like a speed skater, and why this whoosh whoosh whoosh like a ferrari going vroom vrooom.

oma said that when they first moved to banana hill, *opa* believed that their best days were ahead of them. and that they'd get everything they hoped for if they worked hard enough. so they were enterprising and respectful in their dealings with others as they ran a corner store stocked with goods imported from the old country: *schwarzbrot, graubrot, brötchen, milkaschokolade, haribo gummibärchen, lakritzschnecken, negerküsse, spekulatius, lebkuchen, fleischwurst, leberwurst, mettwurst, rotkraut, sauerkraut, bratwurst, frankfurter, currywurst, müsli*. a bank loan carried them for the first few months, and they were able to fill the shelves with their expensive imports. however, the german community at banana hill was largely unenthusiastic about specialty treats from the homeland. and one day, *opa* woke up at five in the *morgen* and announced he couldn't stop his mind from chasing after something he couldn't find a definition for in german. and so he slowly retreated from the world and into a smattering of anti-semitic jokes he remembered from when he was a boy in prussia.

five years later, *opa* complained about not feeling so well while at the dinner table, and everyone ignored him since this was a ritual with him. after grace, he looked up at the ceiling fan, smiled, and toppled forward into a bowl of pea soup. *oma* followed him into *lichtlicht* a week later while sewing a pair of *opa's*

trousers.

now kerstin understands *opa's* despair a little better as she thinks that one of life's big absurdities is that despite loving tobias they can't seem to settle on a collective definition as to what gives their life meaning. instead, they zoomzoom from here to there, and do not talk. and so she must learn from *opa*, and stop chasing after the next fickle obsession. but even this thought is an obsession.

there was a time in the early days with tobias when she thought, good, she had everything she wanted, and she was content. but it didn't last very long, and now she has started to think about what else there is and what other little surprises life still has to offer. Good Lord, she wants to stop thinking like this. but she's afraid if she does so she'll become like her *opa* and retreat into the awful thought that her life is an endless expanse of that's all there is, not bad, mostly quite nice, sometimes happy, sometimes sad - and somehow just not enough.

in the following days, tobias and kerstin make a date to play tennis on the courts at lokapu park. they dress in whites and buy two fresh cans of yellow balls. then tobias signs them up for an hour, and they warm up with light volleys on court nine.

the sun shines hard as they practice serves before they tackle a set.

kerstin plays to his backhand, and despite this constant attack on his weakness they are polite to one another.

"nice shot, tobias."

"danke, meine frau. that was an excellent serve."

"better return though, much too good."

she flushes from the neck up as tobias charges down another one of her crosscourt top spins hit to his back hand.

"well played, kerstin."

"thank you, *liebbling*."

"no, thank you, *schönste frau*."

"no, thank *you*."

she's up 2-1, so they switch sides of the court, and her mind cannot be still. it goes vroom vroom on her latest obsession about how to make it possible for two people with their own lives to be better when they co-join. it shouldn't be a bland compromise. no, what she wants is for her and tobias to become more themselves together. fuller. richer. more enthused, mo' better. and when the rough patches hit, the other person is there to lean on until the better days come. and for whatever it's worth, she wonders if she can get what she wants with tobias. but, what does she want? and the only answer she manages is that she wants to be so in love that she laughs and laughs and then cries because she doesn't know what else to do with all that happiness inside her. and she wants those special moments to outshine the trivialities of everyday life, and not the other way around.

"nice lob," she says.

"i got lucky."

"not true," she replies. "you read that one well."

"*danke*, baby."

as the weeks pass, kerstin moves through the world vaguely clinging to a hope that something will click. clickclick. and so she finds herself sitting on a bench in a dog park reading eliza may's novel, the reverend's apprentice, and between pages, kerstin watches dogs gamboling about.

is she crazy wanting a different kind of marriage?

a husky pup runs over to her, brushes against her leg, and wags its tail as she scratches its spine.

"i hope tetrus isn't bothering you?" a plump, sunburnt woman in a calico dress says.

"not at all," kerstin replies.

"i'm jean."

she has a nose ring, and tattoos of the yinyang running down a calf.

"kerstin."

she's a nurse, and as they chat about how jean is thinking of getting another dog as companionship for tetrus when she goes to work for night shifts, kerstin remembers flapjack, the dog who was abandoned outside the shelter and who was a constant danger until her sanity was restored by human contact.

"there were lots of dogs like flapjack," she says to jean. "a few had been raped by some seriously sick fucks, some beaten until they were crippled, and there was a huge, 150-pound sweetheart of a dog whose owners, before abandoning

her, had put a collar on her when she was a puppy without ever taking it off, so her skin had grown over it."

"good, Lord!" jean exclaims.

"some of those dogs became aggressive or fearful, but a lot of them would become trustful again after only a matter of days of affection, and they'd run up to me wagging their tails and licking my face and craving just to be touched. and if i got down on my elbows and knees in front of them, they'd go crazy with excitement and jump up and down and lick my hair."

"it sounds like you should get a dog," jean says, throwing a stick for her husky to fetch.

"i don't know," kerstin replies. "i travel a lot for work."

"hey, i'd be glad to be a godparent, and tetrus could use a buddy who comes for sleep overs."

"i don't know," kerstin mutters. "i just don't know."

the following day drizzles rain, so kerstin visits a pet store. and after a long afternoon of eyeing chinchillas packed into tiny cages, she sits on a towel in her nook watching the ocean toss and twirl. is she like the chinchilla she watched gnawing on the bars of its cage? she closes her eyes, regulates her breathing, and waits five minutes. on opening them again, the rain has stopped, and there are three enormous rainbows in the sky.

it's a sign.

see, she's lived in kaipei for a year (a long time in the same place for her), she

got married, and all that - but she made that mistake of trying to appear a little different than who she really was in the beginning of her relationship with tobias. she tried to be just a bit more interesting and adjusting her responses to what she thought he wanted to hear so that he'd fall more in love with her. she even pretended she was a hip surfer girl once on an outing with jacquin, glinda, and timbo. all she did, though, was paddle out on her board, sit on it, and long to return to land. but whatever she did, there would always be disappointment later on when she couldn't live up to that image she had created for him. and, no. she didn't get married lightly; she knew it wasn't going to be all flowers and happy times, and although she really, truly loved tobias, something so essential to her was lost. and this whole thing breaks her heart, and whether or not she will be happy in the future is secondary to the fact that right now in her marriage, she's not, and she cannot give up on the belief that she could be with somebody who would want to carry her books to school for her.

she doesn't love tobias anymore. and she'd much rather be alone than stay in a marriage with someone she doesn't love.

kerstin drives home in a brief flare of sunshine, and while waiting for tobias to get home, she scrounges up the courage to leave him by giving herself a pep talk in the bathroom mirror.

at long last, she's interrupted by his car pulling into the drive way, and the resumption of rain, and tobias's footsteps followed by the rustle of his keys in the door.

"anyone home?" he says from the kitchen.

"be right there," she replies from the bathroom.

she puts her hair into a bun, looks at her face one more time, and then goes to talk with her husband.

she doesn't want to be unclear, so she gets to the point. "we're in trouble, tobias," she says.

"and it's not something i think we can work through."

"what are you saying?"

"i want a divorce."

tobias sits down, ashen and trembling.

in response, kerstin is incoherent. blabbering. the pace at which everything swirls around her is so fast, holy fucking shit, and she sits on the edge of the kitchen counter fighting waves of nausea. her hair feels like a mess, and she unravels like the wheeeeeee uttered by giddy children on a merry go round. wheeeeeee. and suddenly, so much is changing, not inside her anymore but on the outside now, and there seems to be too much that is outside of her control; and then she wonders if in a few months, she'll look back at this moment and wish she had done something differently. but the future is nothing but a blur; no certainties, just whoosh whooosh, and it's a bit like an exploding star, and so she talks and talks, and the severity of what she tells tobias shocks him to no end. he cries and shakes and she remembers he's a good person, and it fucking hurts and hurts and hurts to see him like this, and after a long pause he says he wants her

“to get the fuck out of his house.”

as she goes for a barefooted walk in the rain, water tickles between her toes, and she is a girl again among puddles in an oversize yellow raincoat, and as the rain soaks through her cotton dress and drenches her skin, she thinks of jonah.

kerstin moves out of the house on the mountain slope, and into the building with the pink facade on the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal beside the kaipei rowing club. the place is furnished enough for her to function: a dresser with a mirror, a television set with free cable, a plastic table for meals, and a pull-out bed. the clothes she brings with her remain in garbage bags she can't quite find the wherewithal to unpack.

it takes her three weeks to get a job in a café where she plans to work until she can decide on a future she believes in. so, she stands behind a counter at café xanadu serving tourists an assortment of baked goods to go with the teas or coffees they cram between pristine teeth.

each day a woman with white hair and teeth streaked with black tar comes to show kerstin the way to enlightenment. the one with white hair sermonizes about the power of forgiveness and mixes in a variety of anecdotes taken from an assortment of religious texts to illustrate this truth. then she bitterly complains about the coffee kerstin serves her.

“no offence,” the white-haired one says.

as kerstin takes this dressing down, she's too drained to muster up rage brought on by the spiritual who make those around them suffer. this new kerstin is *laissez faire*, and *c'est la vie*. she tried for something with tobias and this is what it has come to, serving those with pristine teeth and enduring the provocations of the one with white hair.

during her lunch breaks, kerstin sits on a terrace watching younger women who eat hamburgers chased down with the vats of fat that come with their fries. she notices the older ones eat carrots as well as celery sticks, but still the weight crowds their thighs. and so kerstin begins to suspect that a person's life follows a predictable trajectory. there's an ascent that peaks with lithesomeness and passionate intensity, and then a sudden descent into an adulthood full of unwanted weight and despondency.

on returning to work from lunch, she despises the men who monopolize her time with long discourses on the lifespan of amoebas. and she's angry at how they don't seem to know when to quit, especially when the lines amass behind them. and for the first time since her celebrity at banana hill, she's too anxious to fall asleep at night without the lights on. and for the first time in her life, she depends on tranquilizers to settle her down enough so she doesn't lie in bed fighting to empty her mind.

strange how these things fall apart, kerstin thinks as the valium populates her blood stream.

once again, she's a child put to bed by *mutti*, never *papi*. and her *mutti* sits besides kerstin, stroking her hair while asking her to say her nightly prayers. so, kerstin asks for the safe keeping of her family, of course. and for a happy world with no wars, obviously. and that horses have enough hay for a lifetime so they don't go hungry. and she prays for the poor children in africa that *oma* and *opa* tell her are from where they had a farm. and so she asks for rain for them, and apple strudels for them to have for dessert, and for lots of money to come to them so they can have a house with enough bedrooms so they don't all pile into one bed. and afterwards kerstin talks to *mutti* about why God makes people with brown heads, and why these children do not get rain. *mutti* tells her it's the way God made them, and that they are no different than her. so kerstin wants to know why they do not get rain and they do not have enough food if God made them the same. and *mutti* tells her that it's not because of God, but because of evil that bad things happen. and then kerstin wants to know why God doesn't overpower evil if he's so good and powerful. *mutti* explains that would be nice, but God leaves things for people to do, like send hungry children planes full of food. and for several weeks kerstin slips food from her meals into her pockets, and puts them in an envelope, writes africa on it, and walks to deposit it in the mailbox down the street until the mail man complains.

then kerstin is at the time when *mutti* calls from the airport in rochester to say she's leaving.

she's in the kitchen with *oma*, *opa*, and *papi* when the phone rings. *papi* thinks

it's going to be *mutti* telling him that she has been successful on a shopping excursion to locate a baguette, and to take last-minute requests before she goes to the butcher. instead, *papi's* voice gets husky.

"i don't understand," he says. "i don't understand."

they all watch him as he talks about their summer trip to berlin before getting quiet. then he holds the phone to his forehead, which seems weird with him not saying anything. so, *oma* goes and takes the phone from his hand.

"she left, didn't she?" *oma* says.

papi nods and *opa* nods. and kerstin can't understand how everyone knows what is going on except her. then *oma* and *opa* help him to the couch, and *oma* has her arms around him, and *papi* stares blankly at the wall while she pats his back like she's banging dust out from a sack of potatoes from the old country.

afterwards, *opa* takes kerstin's hand.

"*mutti* has gone on a short vacation by herself," he says. "but she'll be back."

"oh," kerstin replies.

and then she focuses on eating, and the food gets blurry in front of her as she goes from the peas to the rice and then the drumstick, and there's silence like a cemetery in the dead of the winter, and after a blizzard when there's snow piled on top of stone, and on top of the frozen earth, no wind.

then kerstin finds herself spending time with the horses. not in a sad way, but to get away from *oma* and *opa* who have started to fight about trousers. *opa* doesn't want *oma* to sew a gaping hole in the crotch of one of his old pairs. he

wants them as is. *papi* ignores them because he's an automaton. up on time for his walk. off to school to teach. back for another walk. dinner. off to his study to prepare his lesson plan. and so *kerstin* makes decisions about what goes into the shopping cart and how much to budget that week. and *opa* and *oma* encourage her to buy in bulk so they can horde huge cans of baked beans that are on sale for a month. and when *opa* complains about *oma* meddling with his trousers, *kerstin* takes a sketch pad to the stables and draws horses with heads much too large for their bodies.

before drifting off to sleep, *kerstin* hears her *mutti* say that love survives everything, and *papi* say "your mother is my rock," and *mutti* add that "your father is the best man any woman can wish for."

on her day off, *kerstin* doesn't want to spend time alone in an apartment that feels like one of those motel rooms where people drink themselves into a state of *angst* before sticking the barrel of a loaded gun into the roofs of their mouths. she keeps herself gainfully preoccupied at the s.p.c.a. looking at dogs that remind her of happier days with the horses. as she sidles up to a cage, a greyhound pup licks her hand. licklick and she can't make herself move on to the section with all the cats in danger of being euthanized.

she sits down on filthy cement, petting the pup's head and stroking its chin through metal wire. the pup leans into her hand, arches its back and the minutes become an hour in which she signs adoption papers, and then marches

bensonhurst out of the pound.

it's in this frame of mind that she ponders getting in touch with jonah again. but she still needs to be alone for a while. she has her eight-hour shifts at work, and afterwards she has to take bensonhurst to tiki tiki beach where he is free to run along the hot sand with tetrus, their tongues lolling out the side of their mouths as they chase a tennis ball jean throws into the salty water. the tropical breeze dampens their skin and when kerstin and bensonhurst return to the apartment, they're both exhausted and spend the evenings passed out in front of a television set, his head finding spots on her leg to place his chin while he sleeps.

in the morning, she finds an e-mail from tobias with a long article attached about marriage counseling, and she thinks, no, please no, please don't ask me to see a counselor. and then she considers reaching out to her *mutti* if she can bring herself to make the call, but *mutti* has a way of strangely twisting things to make any thorny issue into a defense of her decision to start a life with edward. so for now, kerstin curls up on the couch with bensonhurst, listens to nina simone, and gets pangs of sadness because tobias, the person she is so familiar with, is no longer around. then she remembers the bad stuff, and she thinks that yes, it is the right decision to leave, and yes, she'll stop missing that familiarity in time.

and when she takes bensonhurst for a walk on the canal, she half expects jonah to appear before her, and she is disappointed he doesn't even though it is still much too soon to count on someone else.

she spends the remainder of the afternoon all sinew and heart, a dismantled string of pearls strewn on her couch next to a the pup and a bottle of zinfandel. and for the first time, she feels how incredibly tired she is of all the adjustments that she always needed to make when she lived with tobias. and so, she does something else she hasn't done in a while, she makes social calls.

once away, she talks and talks and talks and talks. first to blaaaanka daaaarling, then to eee-hon and later to *mutti*. she talks to them because they need to know: that she has moved out and why, and that she will be staying in kaipei, and that she's not a crying mess. and the story she tells is a little different each time because (and this is an obvious point) they are different people and if she wants them to understand whatever it is she wants them to understand, she needs to focus on certain parts of the story more with one person, use other words with the next.

everyone reacts better than she expects and tries to be supportive, but they also say things back to her that are colored by their own experience, and by their perspective, and by the role they each play in her life. at a certain point in each conversation, she starts feeling really drained. and she misses jonah and wants to tell him the way things are for her, or try to as much as she can with the words that she has. at their best, whenever jonah responds, in all the different ways he does, she feels like she's talking with herself, only better because she's not alone. and because he can talk to her better than she can talk to herself.

that night, kerstin unpacks boxes she's stowed into closets. then gives the

house a good cleaning in order to make it her own. the walls are almost bare, and there's not nearly enough furniture (all she has is a couch and a television on the floor). hopefully, with additional chairs and a bookshelf and a table, the place will finally feel like hers.

before going to sleep, kerstin takes off her wedding ring.

all that is good must end and the weekend is taken up by nasty, nasty talks with tobias. she tells him, once again but very calmly and clearly this time, that this separation is not about working on the marriage, but the first step towards a divorce, and that the marriage is over and that she's done.

tobias flips out.

he calls kerstin a cold bitch, and then he says she is fucking stupid so many times while they talk that she loses count.

kerstin tells him how sick and tired she is of all the insults and she says again that all this insanity just reaffirms how over the relationship is for her. he tells her that she has gone crazy and needs to calm down before making any rash decisions, and that one big problem is that she spends too much time by herself now. and he tells her again that she must have mental issues because she likes to be alone so much.

"i can't get through to you because you don't take anything i say seriously," she replies. "when i'm calm, it means i'm cold and when i'm emotional, it means that i've gone crazy. it's unbefuckinglievable."

tobias hangs up on her, but half an hour later he calls again, and he says he's changing and becoming a better person and that if she will live with him again, he'll make everything right. and kerstin says, *nein*. and there's hyperventilating and tears (his and hers), and she uses the word divorce seriously for the third time.

"you made vows," he says.

"i'd rather be alone," she replies.

the following day, kerstin receives notice from fritz, hughes and macadam to specify that tobias is blocking her contestation of their prenup.

upset, kerstin still manages to follow through on her shift at café xanadu, and to endure another lecture from the white-haired one with bad teeth about another flawed coffee.

"make me another," she's told. "except rinse the cup in lukewarm water before you fill it up."

kerstin finds a target. "*verdammt nochmal! wie kann man nur so blöd sein!*"

by the time an off-the-cuff screed against the spiritual has been delivered, an aghast manager makes it clear kerstin is to leave the café and never return.

she fetches bensonhurst, puts her hair in a ponytail so it doesn't curl in her eyes, and takes him for a walk.

she can't help thinking she has forgotten something important at home as she takes unfamiliar streets to a boulevard with neon signs everywhere, and lots of traffic, and noise, and too many people, and huge hotels. and she doesn't know

what to do, or which way to turn. and that is how jonah finds her, without her keys, cursing on the grassy edges of the lilikanahahenesakaluluhani canal.

THE END