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SKY (HYPER-CHLORINATED)

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

BY

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ABSTRACT

SKY (HYPER-CHLORINATED)

BY LILLIAN MOTTERN

Sky (Hyper-Chlorinated) is a collection of short stories rooted in the geography of Los Angeles and inspired in part by Didion's classic California essay collection, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. I've pulled inspiration from my own experiences and observations growing up in the city, where I've frequently walked, and relied on public transportation to get around. I've also drawn upon the work of urban theorists, Mike Davis and Edward Soja specifically, whose scientific analyses of the interplay between LA's geography, its people, and its myths have provided both grounding and fuel for my writing. These five short stories are imperfect glimpses of several different sides of Los Angeles (and one takes place in Pasadena), all of them focused on characters whose fraught interactions with their geographic environments are catalysts for potent self-realizations, as they try to make sense of the (often fragmented) world around them.

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Acknowledgments

Diet Pepsi

When I wake up on Wednesday the sky's a shade of swimming-pool blue (hyper-chlorinated) that reminds me of lying on the concrete outside my parents' house on the Eastside of Los Angeles when I was in preschool, and of my yellow bathing suit that matched the collection of butterfly hair clips my mother bought for me for my fifth birthday.

I press my face to the hot glass of the window in my bedroom and let my eyes wander across the flowering jacaranda trees outside and the rusty verandas that jut from the apartment building opposite mine. I keep my nose on the glass of the window pane until the sunlight begins to sting my eyes and my vision blurs and doubles at the edges.

I go to the kitchen and fry an egg (yolk grocery store yellow), and listen to the news on my laptop, and drink a cup of coffee, and throw away the egg because it has gone cold while I've been drinking the coffee, and eat corn flakes over the sink while I wait for my second cup of coffee to brew, and catch a fly in an orange juice glass and bring it outside.

And my mother calls me, voice static through the wires of her work phone, and asks me how I'm doing and if I'm feeling healthy and not drinking coffee or smoking or getting drunk or eating sugar or too much bread.

And my mother is Norwegian, by which I mean austere, by which I mean that her mouth does not move in many directions, and when she calls me my mother gives me lists of things I should do for my health, like take ice baths and lie in direct sunlight without sunblock. And I always say, "Remember when I caught a cold? Remember when I got sick from the ice baths when I was seventeen?" But I say it with humor, so as not to scare her, and she almost smiles at me through the phone, I can just hear it, and we talk about politics and big-picture things, no emotions needed, and I almost mention the butterfly hair clips.

Later I drive my sister's car to Hancock Park to visit my honorary grandmother who lives in a four-story house on the edge of Hollywood and Midtown, and stop to buy flowers at Ralphs on the way, real grocery store flowers, with mushy petals that I pluck off hastily and toss to the floor of my sister's car. When I was seventeen, I would have used the flower petals for my superstitious decision-making; to tell me, not if somebody was in love with me, but, rather, if I should take off my rainwater-soaked socks or leave them on (to prevent the death of my uncle's wife) or if my fingernail polish (plum purple with glitter) was going to give me cancer before I was twenty. It was a cycle of confusion and complications that I could only relinquish with the help of medication and a therapist in West Hollywood whose calm demeanor and Barcelona accent made me fall in love with him in our first session. Now I am twenty and can usually take the petals off flowers without worrying about death.

So then, my grandmother's house. I park right outside, across from the foliage that obscures the house from the street. And she is in the garden, I think, because she does not answer the doorbell when I ring, so I tuck the flowers under my right arm and tramp through her manicured lawn in my boots to the door in the fence that leads to her flower garden.

When I push the door open, it creaks and grinds against the concrete beneath it, and the haze of my grandmother's backyard appears, glowing orange and green in the mid-morning light, like the film of a disposable camera. Several paces away, across the patio and grass and twin lemon trees, my grandmother weeds in her bermuda shorts and thick men's loafers. Her shoulders are sharp and angular where they emerge from her tank top, and I think of my own, forever hidden beneath sweaters and button-up shirts. I know that when she leaves her garden my grandmother will put on a big linen men's shirt and button it to the top and that we'll be on equal ground again. It's only in her garden that the sun gets to see her skin.

As I approach her, my grandmother looks up, her brown hair and eyes so different from my own that I feel my stomach twist with something like disappointment. “Eva,” she says, “come help me put in these paperwhites. Jesus, the fuckers down at the nursery really tried to play me.”

I bring the flowers with me as I stride down the grass to my grandmother. The paperwhite bulbs sit like avocado pits or onions in her thin hands; when I take them in my own, they are soft and give off a strange, living warmth.

“You didn’t need to buy me flowers again,” says my grandmother, “but those are nice ones.” (They aren’t nice ones but they are grocery store flowers and my grandmother likes grocery store flowers because they make her feel like she can afford nice things even though she can certainly afford nice things now and doesn’t need to buy her flowers from grocery stores at all.)

“Ralph’s was on my way over,” I say and place the paperwhites in a heap of soil.

We drink chilled diet Pepsi out of cans in her living room and talk about the new shopping mall that is being built on Wilshire and Michael, her other grandchild, the one who is her flesh and blood (traits which do not apply to me). I will always be an honorary grandchild, the daughter of a Los Angeles transplant (my father) who was estranged from his own mother and found friendship with her. My father has the messy grey hair of Generation X and at forty-eight he can still cannot remember to eat so is always slightly too thin. When he visits my honorary grandmother she says things like, “If your wife would only call me, I could tell her a thing or two about American takeout food. For one thing, it’s not going to kill you.” According to my mother, it is this tension that prevents her from leaving the Eastside to see my grandmother; she even refused to drive out when my grandmother sprained her neck and had to

lie in bed with a neck brace for a month. Instead my mother sent over some Scandanvian tulips and a card that said, "Be Well," which made my father run his hands through his uncut hair and say, "Jesus, don't you know how to read the room?"

My grandmother calls my mother sometimes to ask her to feed my father and to take it easy for once and my mother always responds that she is, it's just that all she really likes making is lentils, and taking it easy is not something she ever learned how to do.

Michael knows how to take it easy, though, according to my grandmother; he's a master of it. Michael is an undergraduate at Carnegie Mellon but he is failing out, as one expects of children in his situation, my grandmother says, by which she means his father is a television producer. My grandmother doesn't want me to criticize Michael, and narrows her eyes when I do, but she allows herself to lay into him; to call him names and discuss his alcohol problems and poor hygiene.

Michael is two years older than I am. When we were younger, he sometimes lived with my grandmother, when his parents were having marital issues and throwing vases at each other, and he would stay in the guest room, which had a master bed in it and a big TV glued to the wall and a vast beige carpet that he wasn't allowed to spill sports drinks on. And then my grandmother would call my parents and ask them if I could come up to the house in Hancock Park and watch TV with him or play pirates or swim in the pool, and I would put on my pink dress with the flowers and my father would drive me down in his rusted yellow station wagon, that looked lovely under the lemon tree in our yard on the Eastside, but felt very rough and out of place in Hancock Park.

When I was seven, Michael and I built a fort in the guest bedroom out of a sheet and lay in the dark and ate fruit roll-up snacks that dyed the insides of our mouths blue and tattooed our

tongues with pictures of cartoon characters. (At home my mother gave me flax-seeds and yogurt and almond bread sweetened with apple juice concentrate.) I remember feeling light, and drunk on the sugar, warm in the tent, and I remember Michael sort of kissing me, later, on my mouth, while we watched a cartoon through a crack in the sheet. The cartoon was about a group of children who could solve murders and fight monsters and in my grandmother's house, with Michael, I felt like one of the loud-mouthed, precocious children in the cartoon; American and overstimulated and hyper and free to make mistakes for other people to pick up. I felt like a character; like someone other than myself. After Michael kissed me I wiped his dyed-blue, corn-syrup-thick saliva off my face and agreed to be his girlfriend, thinking to myself that this must mean I was now truly a part of my grandmother's family.

And somehow my grandmother knew what had happened and I wasn't allowed to see Michael for a year, which made me angry with my grandmother, but only because it meant I couldn't come over and practice dives in her swimming pool. Now I am the one who gets to sit in her big house and Michael is the one who isn't allowed home, because, as my grandmother says, "he needs to try out big-boy living for a change." But I am positive he could come home if he asked her.

So I ask her, "What about my mother?" and she says, "Well?" and I say, "I think I'm having a late adolescence," by which I mean that I am becoming estranged from my mother, in the way that one can when they are fifteen, but not when they are twenty, as I am.

"I think girls never get along with their mothers," my grandmother says, "And I guess she's the only one you're ever going to have, Eva."

"What if I was related to you?" I ask, then. I feel my stomach twist with the shame of the question, which I nevertheless have wanted to ask for a long time, and while I wait for her to

respond, I observe my grandmother; her big shoes and her short hair and matter-of-fact, 1970s feminism. Her lack of paranoia. My grandmother gets to do what she wants because she has enough money and a house hidden behind foliage in Hancock Park. But I don't have these things. My mother is Norwegian and her mouth does not move in many directions. I am paranoid and nervous and superstitious and cold towards the people I love.

"But, anyway, I wanted to tell you I'm out of therapy," I say, when the silence grows too much, "I think I'm getting a lot better." This is something I have not told my mother. I have not told her anything about my brain. My grandmother seems to understand this; she cocks her head at me and sips her soda.

"I think you're doing just fine, Eva," she says, finally, "always thought that about you." And then she adds, "It's pretty hard to damage yourself permanently, especially in this city."

As her voice goes low I can hear past cigarettes echoing in the back of her throat. My mother would be so happy if I never smoked again. If I stopped eating bread with my soup. And one of these things is not like the other, I think. I pour diet pepsy into my mouth and let the bubbles sit against my teeth, rotting holes in the enamel, in my jaw. I swallow and say, "I'll visit you next week," and my grandmother smiles.

"Michael's up here next week. Call me, though, yeah, Eva?"

"Sure," I say, and it's only later, when I'm driving my sister's car back to Hollywood, after hugging my grandmother goodbye and accepting her offerings of paperwhite bulbs and a half-finished package of fig newtons, that I remember I've left the can of diet pepsy, sitting sticky and half-finished, on her coffee table.

Trains and cities are places to hide

Margot shaved her head when the weather grew warmer and the cats on her street began fighting again in the night. A deacon from the big church downtown told her (confidentially) that she appeared particularly pious without long hair.

“No, like a martyr,” said Charlie when she told him about the deacon, “like a martyred saint, like Falconetti in *La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc*. He just wants to imagine you prostrate in a sack-cloth dress.”

College education incomplete and her high-school girlfriend gone, Margot found herself stuck in routine and existential crisis. Her apartment was one room and a window, but she liked it, and the neighbors she infrequently managed to talk to in the hallway. She sometimes saw Charlie when he drove over to visit from their parents house in Santa Monica where he made podcasts in their dead mother’s walk-in closet. They’d get coffee or see a movie. Lola only showed up for Christmas.

It was a Tuesday and she’d been about to take the trash out of her apartment when her phone buzzed with a message from an unsaved number.

Who is it? She wrote.

Lola, replied the number, ur sister?? Get Charlie and meet me downtown tomorrow.

Margot took the train to meet Charlie outside the YMCA where he attended AA meetings on Wednesdays. She sat in what functioned as a waiting room, a narrow line of fold-out metal chairs lined up against one wall. After a few minutes, Charlie appeared, wearing a beige jumpsuit and boots, and Margot felt the usual pain begin in her head that came back whenever she remembered that she was the sad twin and Charlie wasn’t. Charlie’s hair shone under the yellow fluorescents of the YMCA, shiny with conditioner and hair spray, and as he waved goodbye to

his fellow alcoholics, teeth glinting, Margot could see the dimple in his left cheek and the way the people around him nodded in agreement whenever he spoke. That was how their father was; extroverted and bad with alcohol. She didn't think it could end well, but she felt that way about many things.

They had not seen Lola in nearly a year and Margot, anticipating awful news, had worn a scarf over her shaved head, to affect an air of glum maturity and to hide her missing hair. Seeing Charlie arrayed in his minimalistic finery, she felt betrayed and irritable that she'd not dressed better. The musty beige skirt she'd stolen from under Sivan's bed when they'd broken up in May seemed stodgy and ill-fitting. As though she expected to meet someone alluring at the YMCA at 2:15pm on a Wednesday. It was stupid. She bit the insides of her lips and waved across the waiting room to Charlie, feeling solid and dull in her rain boots. Once outside, they dodged raindrops, crammed beneath Charlie's umbrella, until they got to the coffee shop inside the hotel on Grand where Lola sat in the back, draining an espresso.

Margot felt her stomach twist as she knew it would and she fell behind Charlie as he strode towards Lola, shaking raindrops off his umbrella and into Margot's eyes. "Jesus, Charlie," she said under her breath and rubbed her fingers under her eyes to smudge away any dripping eyeliner.

When they reached the table (it felt like walking a mile to Margot), Charlie fell into the chair opposite Lola and shook the rain out of his hair. Margot hovered against the edge of the table that was sans a chair. The scarf was damp against her scalp but she left it on anyway. Lola was newly thirty, the version where you still get to be twenty-seven, and she'd permed her hair to resemble a 1980s politician. Now, she was recovering from a broken engagement and an

unsuccessful attempt at city counsel, but her voice was light as ever, loud, and creative in its inflections.

“Kids,” she said, “hey kids.” Her teeth looked different when she smiled, larger and more horse-like, and Margot wondered about veneers and if Lola’s teeth were shaved-down stumps now. She managed to smile back at her sister, and Charlie leaned across the table and kissed Lola on the cheek. Margot watched as strands of Lola’s perm stuck to his lip balm and she looked down at her chewed fingernails resting on the edge of the table.

“How was Alcoholics?” asked Lola, like she was a regular.

“S’chill,” said Charlie, “almost graduated, almost totally done with it.”

“He’s a good kid,” said Margot, her voice loud in her own ears, loud and almost mocking. She hadn’t meant it. The sounds of the coffee shop seemed somehow amplified by the rain and she couldn’t hear. She shuffled her rainboots against the marble floor, leaving streaks of city mud behind.

“Well, get a chair, Margot,” said Lola loudly.

“What?” said Margot, to see if Lola would repeat it in a kinder tone of voice. Her mouth tasted bitter and stale at the same time. She regretted buying the fennel toothpaste from the health food store that promised “kissable breath.”

“Margot, are you deaf?” said Charlie, his voice dangerously close to her ears as he slipped out from behind the table and began dragging a chair from a different table across the floor of the coffee shop. The legs bounced against the marble and the coffee-shop people, all faded denim and stained laptop sleeves, glanced up from their screenplays and then back down when Charlie smiled at them with all his teeth. Margot winced at the sound of metal on marble.

“Are you just standing now?” asked Lola.

“Standing?”

Charlie scooted the chair against the backs of Margot’s knees and sat back down. Lola shrugged. “I’m just asking.”

“No, Jesus, Lola, I can *sit*.” Margot sat down in the chair and tasted blood in her mouth where she’d bitten her lips too hard.

“Alright,” said Lola, “I just haven’t seen you, so.”

“So you thought I would have just started standing all the time? As a health thing?”

Margot smiled as she said it and Lola cocked her head, ‘80s perm flopping over one eye.

“Well, congrats to Charlie for being an alcoholic at such a tender age,” said Lola, “congrats to us all for being siblings.” She raised her empty espresso cup. Margot rolled her eyes.

“Awesome,” said Charlie, gamely.

“I guess you should order something to drink,” said Lola, “some coffee or...something.”

She took a sip of water and grimaced into her glass.

“Can you just tell us what’s wrong?” asked Margot.

“I’ll buy ya a coffee, Margot,” said Charlie, “if the waitress job isn’t, like...”

Margot stood up and walked to the counter, stomach swirling. Only five minutes in and she thought she would like to throw up and end the whole meeting. Instead, she ordered two coffees and waited by the counter until they were ready, hoping Lola could not see the way her tights bagged behind the knees or the hole in the hem of her jacket. The coffee shop had been built inside the hotel in the 1930s and during Christmas the waiters were expected to dress up in traditional 1930s garb. Margot had only witnessed this once, when she’d first been dating Sivan and they’d stumbled in after walking around downtown. Sivan had said, “Gee, this is a sight,” because Sivan was going through a vintage phase and said things like “gee.”

When Margot returned to the table, Lola was talking about her ex-fiance, George, and his perpetually clammy hands. Charlie's face was stiff and he accepted the coffee Margot offered him with a tight smile. Lola looked up.

"Oh, good," she said, "I was just telling Charlie about Geroge's moist fingers."

"Oh, Lola," said Charlie, "moist?"

Lola laughed tightly and quickly looked at something over Charlie's head, like a fly.

"Anyway," said Margot, "what's wrong? Are you going to tell us?"

The story of her family history had been retold so many times that Margot remembered it as well as if it had happened to her. After several years of working in a factory in Oslo, her great-grandmother had packed a suitcase and traveled to Los Angeles where she'd met a man who promised to help fund her soap and candle business if she would marry him. Still unable to speak more than a few words of English, she'd agreed and, after giving birth to a son, she'd died immediately and graphically. When Margot had told the story to Sivan, she'd emitted the "graphically" part because she wasn't sure exactly what such a detail implied.

"And that," said Lola, "is how our great-grandmother came to Los Angeles."

She smiled with her new teeth and took a sip of Charlie's coffee.

"Great," said Margot.

"I am telling you this story again because we are on the brink of familial devastation," said Lola, "by which I mean, Papa has cancer."

The noise inside the coffee shop seemed to rise insurmountably and Margot's ears started to sting and buzz as though they were filled with bees.

"Cancer?" said Charlie, "Cancer of what?"

“That is the detail I don’t know,” said Lola, “which makes it more horrifying, don’t you think?”

Margot hadn’t realized she was standing up until she began to fall. The muddy marble floor looked cool and inviting as it rose up to meet her pink, overheated face, but she was halted mid-way by Lola’s arms which latched around her waist and hauled her to her feet.

“Up ya go,” said Lola briskly. Margot sank back down into her chair. She looked up to see Charlie watching her, eyes squinted and forehead tight.

“I have low blood sugar,” said Margot and began pouring sugar packets into her coffee. Her heart fluttered against her ribs like a hummingbird was trapped inside her body.

“What does it mean, then?” asked Charlie.

Lola sighed. “I don’t know.”

“Well, why did he tell you first?”

“Again,” said Lola, “as the oldest I really can’t say, except that I’m his heir.”

“If we still did heirs,” said Margot, her voice high and dreamy. Her head was spinning. Charlie shot her a look of disgust but she couldn’t decide who the disgust was intended for.

“Yeah, that’s the thing,” said Lola, her voice shifting into a nervous falsetto, “Papa wants to give all his money to me.”

There was a beat as Lola swirled her water around with a spoon. Margot watched the water turn cloudy with the remnants of coffee that had been on the spoon. She pictured herself picking up the glass and drinking the cloudy water; imagined that it was poison. She’d make a beautiful Juliet, she thought, or maybe she was remembering the story wrong. Lola finally looked up, her mascara pooling delicately beneath her eyes.

“I guess it’s wrong of him. It’s because of the problems we’ve had, I think. I mean,” her voice suddenly grew graveley, “because you’re an alcoholic and Margot dropped out of school.”

Margot swung her legs under the table and hit Charlie’s calf with her rainboot. He bit his lips and looked down at the table. Lola was looking at Charlie and Margot wondered if her sister would glance at her next. She frowned and when Lola slid her eyes over, Margot bared her teeth. She felt ten instead of twenty.

“What the fuck,” said Lola casually. She prodded Charlie in the upper arm with her fingernail. “Listen, it’s not like I agree.”

“Being an alcoholic,” said Margot, “just generally, being an alcoholic is not the same thing as dropping out of school. It’s not the same level of bad.” She picked up her coffee to drain what was left. “We never even see you, Lola, it’s like you’re always gone.”

“Well, I’m thirty,” said Lola.

Margot felt her throat constricting. She pushed her chair back and it squeaked against the floor. “So is Papa going to die, then?” she said. Charlie looked up.

“God! We don’t ask these questions. We’ve only just found out.”

“But he’s already planned his will,” said Charlie, “he must really be on the edge.”

“Jesus,” said Lola, “I didn’t get into it all with him. Can we just take a second?”

Margot stood up and pushed her chair in. Lola looked up, her eyes surprised and wet.

“Why are you getting up?” she asked.

“I don’t sit anymore,” said Margot. She removed her hair scarf because she was twenty and allowed to be melodramatic. She laid a crumpled dollar on the table; a poor tip.

“I’ll just take the train home.”

The metro station station was warm and dry and Margot found herself shivering in relief, like a cat finally let in from the cold. She ran down the steps to the redline stop and waited in the humid warmth that smelled of human piss and cigarette ash. She had habits around trains, and memories. When the train arrived Margot always said something under her breath like, “for God’s fucking sake, thank God, Jesus fucking Christ, fuck me.” It felt violent and cosmopolitan and sexual to whisper things like that; it made her feel like an old man with nicotine stains on his teeth who’d seen a lot but could still raise a ruckus. Riding the train made her feel like a person, like she belonged in Los Angeles, and it had ever since she was fifteen and impatient to visit her best friends across town.

But now she was twenty and the train had not arrived yet. She stood solidly, with her ankles angled out like whale bones. She often thought about her ankles, robed in white ribbed cotton, holding her up against all odds, planting her securely behind the yellow line. The yellow line was always there. She was always behind it. She’d almost crossed it twice. Those times were ingrained in her brain, and in her ankles. Now, they never moved; they were independent thinkers but they still feared death like anyone.

The train pulled in and the doors opened and she swung her body inside like usual, wrapping both hands around the pole closest to her. She was still prone to falling.

She wasn’t sure why but she knew as soon as the train pulled away that she was going to see Sivan on the eastside. She didn’t know why an impending death in the family should make her so sentimental. She wondered if she was making a mistake. Sivan, she knew, was up in Los Feliz most days, sleeping in the bedroom her parents had kept for her when she left for college, and supposedly writing a tv pilot about Amelia Earhart. With any luck, she wasn’t still writing the pilot; with any luck, she’d written it, but Margot doubted this. Sivan had grown lazy after

college; she had reverted back to the version of herself Margot had known in high school. When they'd broken up, Sivan had been drinking a juicebox in her parent's sunroom and texting a girl she'd met online who was a model for crocs. Crocs, it turned out, was focusing on marketing sex-appeal.

"She's interesting and also sweet," Sivan had said, "she's going to give me a free pair of Balenciaga crocs."

After they'd broken up, Margot remembered crying into Sivan's mother's shoulder. As the train hurtled forward, she opened craigslist on her phone and found Sivan's profile, with its expected listing of vintage lampshades. She sent her a message from an anonymous email address and asked if she could buy one.

When the train stopped in Los Feliz, she rushed out and up the stairs, back up into the rain, that was slowly petering out. She walked quickly up Vermont, her rubber boots surprisingly resonant against the chewing gum-stained sidewalk. When she got to Franklin, she turned and made her way down to a small yellow stucco house at the end of the block. The front yard was a mess of rose bushes and weeds that she tramped through to get up to the front door. She rang the doorbell and waited, her heart thumping and her palms slick. Sivan swung open the door. She was wearing a jumpsuit like the one Charlie had, her's lime green. She held the lampshade in the crook of one arm and cradled a pair of picture frames in the other. She froze when she saw Margot and widened her eyes.

"Okay, hi," said Sivan. The lampshade shifted in her arm and Margot reached forward to steady it.

"Sorry," said Margot.

Sivan frowned. "Dude," she said, "why are you buying a lampshade off my craigslist?"

“I think I’m here to see your mom,” said Margot.

Sivan’s mother was reading a magazine in the sunroom. She looked up when Sivan opened the door.

“Margot,” she said. She gestured to the sofa she was sitting on. Margot sat down. Sivan hovered in the doorway.

“How’s the model?” asked Margot. Sivan shrugged.

“We broke up,” she said, “by which I mean she gave me a pair of Balenciaga crocs and left.”

“Sivan is working on a television pilot about Amelia Earhart,” said Sivan’s mother, “it’s really coming together.”

“Yup,” said Sivan, “it’s really getting there.” She smiled at Margot.

Margot shifted her shoulders. She looked down at her fingernail polish.

“My dad has cancer now,” she said. There was a moment of silence.

“God, fuck that,” said Sivan passionately, “that fucking sucks.”

Margot felt Sivan’s mother’s hand on her shoulder. She let Sivan’s mother hug her.

“I miss Los Feliz,” she said, “And I miss most things, actually.”

“We miss you,” said Sivan’s mother, “at least stay for dinner.”

Margot stood up slowly and Sivan gestured to the lampshade.

“I threw in a couple picture frames too,” she said, “if you want them.” Margot nodded and handed Sivan a crumpled twenty dollar bill.

“These lampshades are a horrible price,” she said. Sivan’s mother laughed and Sivan rolled her eyes. “We should reunite, Margot” she said, “in some capacity.”

“Maybe,” said Margot. She let Sivan hand her the lampshade.

When she got back to the redline station it was completely dark outside and she carefully made her way down the steps, lampshade and picture frames balanced in her arms. As she waited in the familiar humid warmth, she considered how the train was like blood rushing through the body of the city. When it hurtled into the station, it kicked up wind that scattered old bits of newspaper and soda cans and flirted with the edges of Margot’s skirt. She swung her body through the entrance and found a seat near the door. The manufactured yellow light of the train car picked up everyone’s sharpest angles, casting the people around Margot in caricatures, and she folded her legs underneath herself as the train flew forward into the clear night.

Community College Muses

Orla lived in Jono's apartment, in the back room with the green wallpaper. When Jono had first moved into the apartment, which sat in a lush, tree-lined pocket of South Pasadena, his stepdad, who'd driven the moving truck, had told him that every new apartment needed a cat.

"So that you're not alone, Jonathan," he said, "Because being alone in a new apartment can be a terrifying experience."

Jono did not like animals. He could only remember ever having liked one animal in his entire life, a zebra he'd seen once at the Los Angeles County Zoo with his babysitter, Lola, when he was twelve, which had pressed its face against the fence and let Jono touch its snout with his fingers. The moment between Jono and the zebra had made Lola gasp with amazement and she'd talked for weeks afterward about the interaction which she seemed to feel very strongly was an indicator of Jono's natural gift with animals.

"You'll probably become a zoo-keeper or something," she'd told him in her enthusiastic, high-pitched West Los Angeles accent, and Jono had lied and said that becoming a zoo-keeper was actually his dream career. Meeting the zebra was a fond memory for Jono, but if you really analyzed the event, you might conclude that Jono's main interest at the time was not the zebra, but Lola.

Jono did not get a cat because he hated animals and because Orla lived in his apartment and she was better than a cat. Orla was fifty-four and she could chop vegetables for soup and play the opening bars of Bernstein's "Chichester Psalms" on the piano with her pointer fingers. She taught Jono how to separate herbs from their stems and how to grind them with a mortar and pestle. She read him *King Lear* over Christmas break and played all the parts and when he said he couldn't remember who was who, she read it again and gave all the characters different

voices. She told Jono she was an Aries but hadn't really thought about astrology since high school, and when Jono said he was melancholy in the winter she said he should blame it on being a Scorpio and bought him Vitamin D supplements from a man she knew in Echo Park.

Jono thought Orla looked like the sun and moon combined. He wrote this down in the notebook he kept in his canvas school satchel that was decorated with sardonic pins he'd bought off the internet, and saved it in case it proved to be poetically relevant later on. Jono was twenty-two and he was not interested in the aspirational, self-affirming poetry of his generation. He wanted to write love poems that people could really relate to. This is what he told Orla when they ate lentil soup at the little wooden table in the dining room and Orla said, "You will Jono, I really think so. The world is lucky to have you and your poetry."

Jono had first met Orla during the second semester of his first year at Pasadena City College, the poorly maintained, art-deco-style community college in East Pasadena that was known for welcoming anyone, from the disgraced and drug-addicted children of wealthy Pasadena homeowners, to poor kids from Los Angeles who were in community college to save money, to older people from the surrounding community, who could be seen floating around campus in necklaces made out of wooden beads, drinking hot tea out of thermoses on their way to art and music classes.

The first time Jono truly noticed Orla she was sitting in the second row of his American Literature class eating granola with her fingers out of a plastic baggie, her brown hair gathered at the nape of her neck in a tortoiseshell banana clip that had several of the prongs missing. She was wearing a brown woolen cardigan, buttoned two thirds of the way up, without a shirt underneath, and her pale chest was freckled and slightly sunburned. She'd looked up when Jono had slouched past her desk, and waved to him, her purple-polished fingers fluttering with just

enough theatrical movement to seem unnatural, as though Orla had learned to wave by reading a book, but hadn't really practiced it in real life.

Jono had felt his stomach drop and his vision go hazy as he wracked his brain for a response to the wave. "Hey there," he'd said finally, vaguely, as though to a child or a pet, unsure if he should say something more and startled by the human interaction this early in the morning. The people he went to community college with did not talk to each other; at least, they did not talk to him. He hustled from one class to the next, canvas satchel hitting his legs, head jutting so far forward that a small barcode of permanent sunburn had formed on the back of his neck, hoping that if he could get good grades he'd be able to transfer to UCLA (that palace in the hills of West Los Angeles) and that his stepdad would forgive him a little for almost failing high school.

For high school Jono had attended Harvard Westlake, a private school in a misty, lush neighborhood on the Westside that was walking distance to the Playboy Mansion. In spite of the school's reputation as a place for boys to do stupid things because they were bored and rich, almost failing out of Harvard Westlake was not what a person was supposed to do. All of the kids in Jono's high school class had ended up at Carnegie Mellon and Yale and Vassar and Connecticut College, places in the East that seemed chilly and green and were supposedly populated with short-haired girls who drank red wine and wrote poetry about World War One. Jono had never considered writing about World War One but he sometimes drank red wine with his mother when she wasn't at the rehab home in Palm Desert where she often stayed. When she got half a bottle in, she would begin to stroke Jono's hair and tell him stories about Los Angeles, which she claimed was the real kingdom of Oz; a land of unrelenting sunlight, and shapeshifters who would surprise you if you gave them a second chance.

Jono felt that his entire life was a story of second chances, which was a big thing to conclude at the age of twenty-two. He sometimes lay awake, bitterly thinking about the boys in his class at Harvard Westlake, all of them skinny and unfriendly and addicted to Xanax and coke. He resented them for their lifestyles; how they'd done drugs and slept with girls at parties and still ended up at big universities and how he himself had done none of these things and ended up in a dirty room in the basement of Pasadena City College staring at a white board that was so stained you could sometimes get the answers to math problems by squinting to make out what had been written up there before. The only upside of going to community college was that he didn't have to live in a dorm, which he deeply believed would not have been a successful experience. Jono had been told since preschool that he did not get along well with others. This after he'd bitten a classmate who had told Jono he looked like a naked mole rat after Jono's mother had shaved off Jono's hair because, as she'd explained to him in the mirror, "You'll look so futuristic and interesting, Jonathan." At age twenty-two, Jono still believed religiously in his own inability to get along well with others. The small, white-walled apartment his stepdad paid for and that he did not have to share with anyone was almost worth the shame of community college.

Jono's biological father lived and worked in a Quaker community in Western Massachusetts and taught ceramics at a local high school and sometimes when Jono called his father's phone number, he got a prerecorded message that said his father was on Sabbatical and to check back in a month.

As it turned out, Jono's biological father was frequently on Sabbatical, and since he'd moved out of Los Angeles after Jono's parents had split when Jono was fifteen, he'd stopped calling, except on special occasions or if Jono's mother threatened him when she was in a

depressive spiral. For every birthday he would send Jono a card that contained fifty dollars which Jono would put in his underwear drawer, under his socks. Jono figured if his father lived to ninety he'd have about \$1700. He thought he would probably make a downpayment on an RV with the money, or buy a waterbed.

Orla's ankles always got cold half-way through class when the big college air conditioners kicked in and started blowing under the doors. The cold air tensed her muscles and made the leg hairs she'd missed shaving quiver into a standing position. She had shaved her entire body the morning before her first day of class, the pink disposable razor from the Rite Aid on the corner of Franklin Avenue sliding through her fingers unnaturally. She hadn't shaved anything in years and now couldn't remember if she was supposed to shave with the hair or against it. She knew there was a specific direction and that going in the opposite direction was supposed to cause something terrible to happen. By the end of the process, she'd cut herself twice, once on the ankle and once under her left arm, the dull blade of the razor catching on an unexpected fold of skin; Orla's body was softer than it had been when she was in her thirties, a revelation which didn't upset her so much as make her think about the length of her marriage. It had been a long one. The shaving cream she'd purchased with the razor was saturated and pink and smelled like raspberries and bubblegum and she wasn't sure how much to use so she used it all, leaving a pink ring around the floor of the shower when she finally turned off the water and stepped out, body soft and steaming slightly. As she stepped onto the bathmat, she felt like she'd emerged from a woman-sized dishwasher.

Orla's husband, Doug, was standing in their bedroom when she swung open the door of the bathroom and he took in her naked, hairless body from across the room, hands in the pockets of his gardening pants.

“Today’s the day,” said Orla after a minute, and the cool air of the bedroom turned the soft steam hovering around her into cold drops of water. “Community college or bust.” She could feel the water trickle down her body, over her stomach and knees, pooling in the rolls of skin around her waist, and suddenly she felt deeply self-aware of how damp and soft she must look in the yellow light of the bathroom lamp.

“You look like a peeled almond,” said Doug, face shadowed in the dim light of the bedroom, his lips crinkling into the half-open-mouthed smile he used when he didn’t really mean it. His front teeth were small and unexpectedly sharp, and they were pointed, like the teeth of a reptile. After their first date, Orla had described him to her sister as a sort of lizard man, a gentle lizard man who spoke in winding sentences that took the long way around to reach their meaning. He’d become a more verbally vicious lizard man as they’d aged and she’d lost the wiry limbs and sharp hipbones she’d had when they’d first met. As he’d aged, Doug had lost all the fat in his legs, but the softness of his torso swayed gently beneath the worn fabric of the old brown t-shirts he wore when he moved through the garden they’d planted in the backyard. Doug was a natural foods farmer, this is how he defined himself, and every week he sold eggplants and herbs at a farmer’s market on Sunset Boulevard.

Jono first spoke to Orla to ask her if he could take pictures of her Norton Anthology because he couldn’t track down the new edition for less than \$100 and his stepdad hadn’t replenished his spending account in two weeks because he’d said something stupid about politics when they’d met up for breakfast. Orla said he could borrow it. “Of course you can, be my guest,” she said, her voice bouncing off the unwashed linoleum floors of Classroom 507, lower than he’d expected it to be, but soft, without any gravel. Not a smoker. She had a smile-line on either side of her mouth, each one fine but deeply cut in her freckled skin. Jono imagined she

was around his parents' age. Her light brown hair, strands of grey threaded through it, fanned out around her face like the feathers of a down quilt and clung to her temples when the air conditioning broke for a week in the middle of the semester, and her cheeks were always flushed when she sat still for too long; he'd noticed this when they'd been partnered together in a discussion and she'd turned around in her chair to talk to him, the red spots blooming over her cheeks giving her a windswept, vaguely Victorian appearance that made Jono wonder for the first time what it would feel like to kiss her, a thought that startled him in the same way he'd been startled when Lola, then new to the world of babysitting, had slapped him across the face when he was six-years-old.

During that first meeting Orla waited patiently for him to paw through her dog-eared Norton Anthology, the silence in the classroom growing, in Jono's mind, more and more embarrassing as students filed out and he was left alone with Orla and the sound of the thin pages of the book flipping back and forth as he took photos with his cell phone.

Afterwards, Orla walked down to the parking garage with him, carrying her Norton Anthology in a shoulder bag that looked like it was made out of a quilt. The squares were orange and pink and green with purple dots; the purple dots matched her fingernails. Orla told him she'd parked on the top level when he offered to walk her all the way to her car, but he saw her waiting in the shuttle stop when he drove around the front of the college to get on the freeway.

Mid-way through the semester, Orla announced to the class that she was leaving her husband and looking for a place to rent. Jono volunteered the extra room in the back of his Pasadena apartment for only \$600 a month. He worried this made it sound like he was desperate to have her come live with him, but Orla accepted quickly and moved her sparse belongings into the room in one day, most of them brand new things in cardboard boxes from discount furniture

stores. Jono helped her build her skinny twin bed frame and she admitted that she was excited not to have to share a bed with anyone for the first time in fifteen years.

“I mean, I sweat a lot when I sleep,” she said, “besides, my ex-husband smelled like beeswax.”

Orla explained to Jono that her husband was a natural foods farmer, which was not really a job but a lifestyle. She seemed to ascribe to some of the husband’s beliefs, though, and planted a bed of herbs in the backyard Jono shared with the couple upstairs. With the herbs she made pesto and dressings for salads and when the semester finally ended and the sunlight in the apartment began to turn the lightbulb white-yellow of Pasadena summertime, Orla planted wild strawberry bushes, which flowered in white and yellow and quickly produced red berries that she put in a bowl on the kitchen table. So Orla lived in Jono's apartment and Orla really was better than just a cat. She was a real human being who could speak and laugh and make soup out of vegetables and Jono was in love with her.

Jono’s stepdad came over on the first Sunday of summer break to teach Jono how to fix the toaster oven. Jono’s step dad wore a cowboy hat indoors and a pair of cargo pants that cinched around his ankles. Orla watched from a corner of the living room in her socks, mind still stuck on the way her voice had cracked when she’d said to Jono’s stepdad, “Hello, I’m Orla, Jono’s roommate.”

Orla felt fragile. She missed her ex-husband’s voice which is something you can miss about a person without actually missing them, and her bones felt breakable, like a child’s. Classes had been harder than she’d remembered from her time in undergraduate; the professors were kind but they asked a lot. The heel of her left foot throbbed from where she’d nicked it trying Jono’s razor scooter in the driveway after breakfast. She worried that blood was seeping

through her socks. She didn't want Jono's stepdad to know she was fifty-four and riding razor scooters with his stepson.

"Can you see how I'm sparking it?" Jono's stepdad said loudly from the kitchen, and Orla could tell Jono was trying to concentrate, but his eyes kept buzzing around the room like twin flies. She wished she could step in and suffer the torture of learning how to fix a toaster oven in his place. He was one of those kids who couldn't focus for more than a minute but always tried; really gave it his all. She thought his generation seemed scatter-brained but she liked that about them because she was also scatterbrained. She was a day-dreamer. She didn't think about existentialism, she thought about herbs. At least, this is what Jono had written about her in his poetry notebook which she read one weekend when he was gone staying with his family. Orla knew he was in love with her. She found it deeply funny and sometimes, when she was falling asleep, the thought would rise up in her brain, making her laugh hysterically and forcing her to muffle her voice in a pillow. She had started to laugh hysterically at different things ever since she'd moved out of the house she'd lived in with Doug. There wasn't always a clear-cut reason for the laughter; often it bubbled up randomly, rising through her ribs, up to her head, and making her dizzy. It worried her sometimes but she didn't know who she'd call or how to even explain it, so she muffled her laughter in pillows and bit the insides of her cheeks when there weren't pillows around.

Jono's stepdad was tall and thin and his arms were tanned only to the elbows, the left one more than the right, which likely meant he drove a lot with one arm out the window. Orla could see the tan lines when he pushed up the sleeves of his shirt to wash his hands in the kitchen sink. The muscles of his arms were tense, tendons popping out on the wrists, and his fingers were deeply calloused. From across the room she wondered vaguely how his fingers would feel on her

bare skin or tugging off her t-shirt. She had been thinking about hands lately, and fingers. She had been lying in the twin bed from the discount furniture store and picturing the fingers of every man she had run into in the past two months and sometimes it made her so dizzy she couldn't breathe. Doug's fingers had been soft like playdough because he used moisturizer made out of goat's milk and didn't wash his hands. On Orla's skin, they were the temperature of the tepid-warm water in the public pool they swam in during the summer, and almost damp. When they were young, when they were new, she'd asked him if he wouldn't mind washing his hands before they had sex and he'd refused because he claimed washing his hands would strip them of their natural oils. Americans, Doug claimed, washed their bodies too much. He was American five generations back. Orla hadn't asked him again but had cringed a little every time his fingers made contact with her skin. Her own hands were dry and over-washed because she liked to feel extremely clean, maybe in an attempt to counteract Doug.

Jono's stepdad left without saying anything to Orla and she slunk into the back room, citing a headache, so she could watch him pull away in his BMW convertible, dark glasses over his eyes preventing any hope of eye contact. When she reemerged from the back of the apartment, Jono was sitting slouched at the kitchen table, his eyes wet and his nose runny because of the awful shame of being a man who was unable to fix a toaster oven. Orla didn't ask him how he was feeling but said softly, mind still on Jono's stepdad, that she would make something to eat for dinner with the new dill from the herb garden and that maybe later, if Jono wanted to, they could start reading *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"I can read you a poem too," said Jono, morosely, "I think I'm ready to read one or two. I have a couple inspired by a close friend that you might like to hear."

“I’d be honored,” said Orla. Her lips crinkled and she bit the insides of her cheeks as she turned to go outside to the herb garden.

Orla lied about having a car to everyone in community college which meant she lied about it to almost everyone she knew. The truth of how alone she was had only hit her when her classmates, most of them much younger than she was, had pulled her into their conversations, inevitably asking her to talk about her own life and friends, which she found increasingly difficult as she was required to share more and more in order to keep up conversation. Orla had married Doug when she was thirty-nine in a small ceremony in Los Feliz, with a couple of her friends from college in attendance. Her parents lived in Wisconsin and she had married so much later than they’d expected that inviting them didn’t feel necessary. Orla had half a degree from Occidental College, a liberal arts college hidden away in Eagle Rock which was all scruffy prairie grass and hiking trails and coffee shops that marketed themselves as “funky.” Orla had never finished her degree but her decision to sign up for community college classes was unrelated to that. She’d signed up because she had been growing bored and didn’t know what else to do. She’d started taking classes in the spring, half-way through the traditional school year, because spring always seeped under her ribs and compelled her to make life changes. She was also, she thought, operating from a place of necessity; there was a voice in the back of her head that threatened her when she was falling asleep, shouted little insults at her throughout the day, and infrequently encouraged her to step in front of buses when she was walking near the road. She had never talked to Doug about the voice; she didn’t think he would understand if she tried to explain it. Doug believed that wellness was a choice and that anyone who wanted to complain about their mental or physical health should reassess their life choices and probably buy some supplements. He seemed to feel that Orla was slightly more broken than he would’ve liked and

asked her to stop eating certain foods whenever he sensed she was feeling anxious. He prescribed a collection of homeopathic pills and tablets that she was supposed to take every morning before breakfast which she gagged down with water.

“And if you really want to manage your feelings,” said Doug, “I’d even recommend skipping breakfast to let your body rest longer without outside interference.”

Orla had then tried *this* for a year, hunger gnawing at her stomach every morning and making her dizzy if she got out of bed too fast. She’d eventually gone back to eating breakfast, but not without some disapproval from Doug.

Now that she was living outside of Doug’s oversight Orla found that she was often nervous about making some irreversible mistake. She’d eaten french fries a couple of times with the kids from her class and smoked a cigarette once in the herb garden just to remind herself what cigarettes tasted like, and while she knew that doing these things was normal, that she was going to be fine if she behaved a little differently than she had with Doug, there was still always a dull sense of panic underlying everything she did. Doug had often told Orla that she was not a naturally well-organized person; that she wouldn’t be his first choice if he needed someone to plan something out, a life for example, and she sometimes woke up in the middle of the night gasping for breath with a horrible, vast emptiness in her stomach, overcome by an overwhelming fear that maybe she was not supposed to exist on her own.

With the encouragement of the community college kids, several of whom were in therapy, Orla found the phone number for a therapist in the back of a wellness magazine she picked up from a magazine rack outside a health food store on Foothill. The store was called Health Food City and it sat in a strip mall next to a chiropractor’s office that offered a “\$25 back-crack special,” every Tuesday. Orla had trekked down to Health Food City to see if they

could become her new health food store since she could no longer get to the health food store in Los Feliz she'd frequented with Doug. She still didn't have a car and she was ashamed to admit to Jono that Doug had purchased the car with his money and had used this as justification to keep it when they'd split. There was something deeply shameful, she thought, about being a middle aged woman who didn't have a car. She had betrayed her foremothers by giving up her career and letting a man derail her life. She sometimes looked in the mirror at her breasts and thought about cutting them off with a pair of scissors.

The therapist told Orla that she was experiencing a "second adolescence," and asked if she had ever considered becoming religious.

"It can be a good way to find some focus," said the therapist, "and, in certain settings, a pretty fuckin' good way to meet men."

"I don't think I've considered it," said Orla, "I mean, beyond my childhood flirtation with Catholicism, I've never been religious."

"Flirtation?" said the therapist, "Does that mean that you were molested by the Catholic Church?"

"I don't think so, I was just raised Catholic."

Orla thought about asking one of the kids from her class for a new therapist recommendation. Or maybe the mental health sector of the American healthcare system really was useless.

"Well, just don't try anything with your hair," said the therapist, finally "unless you really know what you want."

After she hung up the phone, Orla decided that she would never call that therapist back but realized that in fact, she did know what she wanted. She wanted to give into the dull thrill

that ran through her body whenever Jono mentioned his stepdad or she saw ads for hand cream and the thought of calloused fingers came sliding back into her brain.

The last Friday in June was the day that Jono's stepdad was supposed to come over with the parts he'd ordered online for the toaster oven. On Friday morning Orla woke up early and shaved her entire body again. She rubbed apricot perfume behind her ears and painted her mouth fuchsia and her eyelids orange with eyeshadow she'd purchased from the drug store. She asked Jono, in an especially sweet voice, if he would drive out to Altadena to buy her some lentils for soup.

"It's so we can all have supper together," said Orla, and of course she hated herself for lying, but there was something about Jono's thin arms and the patchy black mustache that he refused to shave that made her feel alright with hurting him a little.

Jono's stepdad arrived five minutes after Jono had pulled out of the driveway. He was wearing the cargo pants that cinched around the ankles but the cowboy hat was gone. His fair hair was so sunbleached that it was hard to tell if it was white or blond. Orla couldn't take her eyes off his fingers. She said, "Jono's out at the moment," and Jono's stepdad said, "I feel like we never got the chance to meet properly."

They met properly in Orla's twin bed and Orla thought, as Jono's stepdad's fingers finally touched down on her skin, how maybe she was good at planning things out after all. Jono's stepdad didn't smell like bee's wax; he smelled like his own sweat and maybe a little bit like diesel fuel, which is exactly what Orla had hoped he would smell like. He didn't seem to mind when her fuschia lipstick got on his face or that she had knicks all over her body from shaving. He just said that he was glad they'd had this opportunity and shook her hand goodbye in the doorway of her bedroom.

Jono walked through the front door in the middle of the handshake and Orla could tell immediately that he knew what had happened in the twin bed from the discount furniture store while he'd been buying lentils in Altadena. He dropped the grocery bags on the floor of the kitchen and made his way over to his stepdad. The strap of Jono's canvas satchel made an indent in the middle of his thin chest and a deep wrinkle slowly appeared between his eyebrows. He did not look like a man, exactly, but he looked angry, which Orla had not seen before. He glared at his stepdad and clenched his jaw, making the faint stubble on his chin stand up straight.

"Fuck you, motherfucker," is what Jono said to his stepdad. He repeated it twice. Then he went into his bedroom and slammed the door.

Jono did not leave his bedroom for three days. His stomach was bad-milk-sour and his head felt like it was bleeding on the inside. He felt betrayed and desperate. When he finally fell asleep he dreamt that he was being run over by a rotation of vintage cars from the Pasadena Vintage Car Show, and when he woke up he felt a wave of grief when he realized that he was still alive. When he finally cracked open the door and stepped out of his room, Orla was standing alone in the kitchen, the light from the open window picking up dust motes, and casting a gentle haze over her brown hair. Jono stood in the doorway of his bedroom and looked at the soft outline of Orla's body and the pink heels of her bare feet. He looked without feeling bad about looking; this kind of looking felt intentional; purposeful. Something slowly shifted in his chest; a realization, albeit, one that came with a lingering sense of unrequited longing. Orla was no lover, he realized, Orla was a muse.

Orla decided that she was never going to make her foremothers proud, not really, so she dropped her classes and applied for a job at Health Food City. And when Jono came back from class each day she made him vegetable soup and told him things about the day; about what she

was thinking, and about Los Angeles, a city of shapeshifters that wasn't too bad once you got to know it for yourself. The hysterical laughter was still there, but she thought it fit in well enough. It was abstract, like the city, and Orla felt that she might be abstract too; like an art project or even a poem.

Skylight Books

“We are all goldfish,” is what the local poet said when I asked her to sign my book at the bookstore in Los Feliz. That and, “can I make this out to anyone special?” I told her no, just me, it’s just me, but I’m happy alone because I’m in this bookstore and it’s going to rain tonight and wash all the smog away.

I didn’t say the last part but, being a poet, she might’ve implied it.

She had a mood ring on each finger and she smelled like apricots and and even though I couldn’t see myself because they do not have mirrors in the bookstore in Los Feliz, I knew my cheeks were flushed pink and my eyes were the glassy grey they often are when it is late and the city is seeping into my brain.

There were other people in the bookstore, too, people in clothes of different textures, wool and cotton and rough linen and sheer stockings, all of them there for the warmth of the store and for the local poet. I liked to compare the people to books in my mind; their exteriors were manufactured to reflect their insides and even if I didn’t know who they were exactly, I could guess at things based on the textures of their clothes and the colors they chose to paint their eyelids.

I think other people could sense my interior based on my exterior too, although, admittedly, mine changed so frequently that I sometimes questioned whether I could ever be fully actualized through my physical body. It was a concept I had thought about a lot about, especially as I’d gotten older and the city’s grip over me grew stronger and more important to my sense of self. I wondered if I could ever be truly free as a physical thing, or if I would need to be absorbed by my environment to feel truly whole.

I should tell you about the bookstore. The light inside was warm and tinged yellow-green because it was filtered through big wax-paper lampshades, and there was a tree in the middle of the room which you could sit beside it if you wanted to, or hug. The tree was surrounded by a circle of wooden benches and, if there was someone speaking or reading from their book, another, larger circle of metal folding chairs would be set up around the benches. Surrounding the chair circle were the shelves of books, neatly sectioned up, and all labeled with interesting, handwritten section titles, promising queer theory and erotica and graphic novels and zines and whatever else you wanted.

I had been in the bookstore many times before; I had been there in order to not talk to anyone and I had brought people with me to the bookstore who I wanted to talk to and I had invited some people with me who I wanted to kiss and had. It wasn't the kind of place you'd call magical, it was the kind of place you'd label solid and mean it because it was a sturdy building in the middle of an old part of Los Feliz, and you always got the feeling that as long as it could stick around, Skylight Books would be there with its readings and people and light.

I didn't press the poet on the goldfish concept. I think she was slightly drunk. I thought about it afterwards and I think she meant that we're all kind of in a fishbowl, swimming around each other, and trying not to sink.

7-Eleven

Izzy and I drove around in other people's cars and looked at things in the city. We didn't care about parties or movies or the beach. We really only cared about freeways and side streets and the exhilarating experience of hanging half-way out of a moving convertible to look at the asphalt spinning beneath your tires.

Because we were so enthusiastic and because we'd lived in the same East Hollywood neighborhood since we were babies and thus knew most of our neighbors, there was always someone around who would loan us a car if we asked them, and we became unintentional car-buffs who knew everything about the twenty-year-old station wagons and convertibles our parents and their friends drove.

I'd been the one to teach Izzy how to drive, after I'd gotten my learner's permit when I was sixteen. Her dad was often at work and as I recall he'd gotten his license suspended for a DUI right around the time Izzy was ready to learn driving, so I was tasked with the job of passing my limited knowledge of the road onto her. We practiced in Beverly Hills, on the wide streets off Santa Monica Boulevard, where you could swing around corners fast without worrying about hitting the cars parked along the curb, and where no one was ever out so you could play your CD's as loud as you wanted to.

By the time we were eighteen, I still didn't have my license but no one seemed to care and I'd never been stopped, so we kept driving around and I didn't worry about it. I guess I could say I didn't want the government to have my information or something but the truth was that I just didn't feel like going through the trouble of driving all the way to Glendale and taking the test.

Izzy lived with her dad in an apartment on a street off Sunset Boulevard called Catalina, and when you sent Izzy things in the mail, after her building number you had to write 1/8 because it was one of those LA situations with several sectioned-up houses packed onto one lot. Izzy's dad lived in the downstairs half of a two story stucco cube and Izzy slept in a pantry off the kitchen, on the same miniature twin mattress she'd been using since she was seven and I'd met her in the tennis court that kids used for chalk-drawing because no one ever used it for tennis.

I'd never learned to play tennis properly until our last year of high school when I took lessons with an instructor I found by calling the number on a telephone pole ad. His name was Hans Becker and he was German and lived in an apartment complex on Fountain. He was thirty-seven and unmarried and he told me I was very bad at backhand serving and that I should buy a pair of sneakers that wouldn't destroy my arches when I insisted on wearing the white converse from Izzy's closet that I had lusted over since she'd bought them (half a size too small). The converse made me feel like a pretty, shiny-haired girl who was sporty, like someone from the Westside with a center part, and when I went to the athletic store Hans Becker had recommended and saw the thick, ugly sneakers he wanted me to buy I realized that tennis only had appeal as long as the aesthetic remained intact.

Instead of learning to play tennis, Izzy taught herself Swedish from a book-and-CD set she bought from the Goodwill on Vine, which we'd frequented for clothes for every prom and date and life event. Every night during our senior year of high school, after she was done with her homework, she would go into the bathroom in her dad's apartment and close the door so she wouldn't wake him up and sit in the bathtub and listen to the CD on a portable CD player she had found in a kitchen drawer once. She would repeat the phrases from the CD loudly in order to get the pronunciation right, and sometimes I would sit there with her. I'd balance on the edge of

the bathtub, or squeeze myself into the corner next to the door and fold my legs up under my chin with my back pressed against the sink. I liked closing my eyes against the weight of the day and letting Izzy's low voice lull me into a kind of half-sleep as it spun around my head, echoing off the tiles. My mother's family was Swedish and I could pick out some of the words from things I'd overheard my grandmother saying at Christmas, but the words felt shiny and new too, when Izzy used them, like they were secrets that only she could really understand; secrets I was a witness to by proxy. She wasn't learning Swedish, I thought, out of boredom, but as a way to define herself. Izzy was the kind of person who believed in the concept of self-definition. As for me, I felt more like a vessel.

"To be truly cultured," Izzy said to me once at a family dinner party in Culver City she'd dragged me to, "is to accept everything as totally meaningless." After which she wrote "ge mig en öl" on the wall of her stepmom's bathroom in sharpie. It meant "get me a beer" and it was one of the only phrases Izzy could remember off the top of her head.

When we were nineteen, we both started at Los Angeles Community College, an expected transition from Hollywood High School, the end goal being to transfer to UCLA and get a proper education despite both having mediocre grades and not enough money. In that first year, it all still felt pretend and we figured out how we could scan old copies of the books we needed in the library and print out the pages to bring to class every day. We saved hundreds of dollars on books and spent it all on chips from the vending machines and over-priced coffees from the shop on the corner. In that first semester Izzy signed up for two low-level film classes that promised "the whole deal on basic camera techniques," and I took an English class, Linguistics, and Astronomy, which Izzy continued to refer to as Astrology no matter how many times I corrected her. We'd coordinated it so that we both had classes on Mondays and

Wednesdays and twice week I'd walk down to the apartment on Catalina and Izzy would drive us to school in her dad's old Chrysler convertible with the over-the-top chrome paint job that made the car glint like glass when the sun hit it, lighting us up like we were being captured through the lens of a fancy camera.

Izzy and I stuck together that first year, not really falling in with anyone else, wearing mini skirts and bell bottom jeans from the Goodwill on Vine because Izzy said it was our duty to ignite a fashion movement at LACC. The jeans never caught on, and despite what she'd promised her dad, Izzy never transferred out. In the middle of our second year she told me she was going to pursue film as a freelancer and that ultimately, in her view, education was irrelevant and elitist. Besides, her grades were shit. In addition to that, she'd met a girl from the desert in her Math class and they were going to drive out to the Mojave and shoot a short film on a cell phone. The girl had pink hair and Izzy said she was a "master of crochet." I'd seen the girl once, briefly, when I'd met up with Izzy after her film class, and I thought she was alright, but shallow. She seemed like the kind of person who would make you doubt yourself so you'd stick around for the long haul. She seemed to have that effect on Izzy.

"I'm very stupid, Vita," Izzy announced on the drive back to Catalina. Our hair rustled in tandem as she sped up Santa Monica Boulevard in the Chrysler, with the top down. Her hair was brown and it fanned out around her head when she drove, brushing up against my blond split ends unless she tied it under the 1960s hair scarf she sometimes wore. Izzy really liked the 1960s; she believed she had missed her era.

I told her she wasn't stupid, anger pulsing vaguely in my chest. My friends who were girls often said they were stupid and it made me worry about them and hate society and the

experience of being nineteen-years-old. I said something about how she was the smartest person I knew.

“No, I’m stupid,” said Izzy, “compared to you I’m stupid. You’re good at school, Vita. I’m shit at it because I hate it, so filmmaking works well as a career. Good way to find myself a little. Good way to meet people, too. Boys even.”

I didn't respond to that; I knew she didn't really mean boys; boys were not the prerogative. I watched her fingers tighten around the steering wheel, going white and then red. Izzy's blood sat very close to the surface of her skin; she blushed easily. After a few minutes of saying nothing she turned the car off Santa Monica Boulevard, which she'd taken very far West, maneuvered onto one of the wide Beverly Hills side streets we'd first practiced driving on. She pulled up next to the curb and stopped the car and took off her sunglasses and kissed me. She tasted like the strawberry chewing gum we'd bought from 7-Eleven that morning on the way to class and it felt so dramatic that I almost started laughing. I had never thought about kissing Izzy which was strange because I'd thought about kissing most of my other friends. She was too solid and genuine to have fantasies about. I knew her too well; she existed too much. I didn't really kiss her back and after a beat she put her sunglasses back on and tied the scarf over her hair as though nothing had happened. She drove me back to my parents' apartment.

It was my fault not to mention the kiss; she had kissed me so I was the one who had to comment, but I didn't know what to say. It took me a couple of weeks to decide how I felt about her and by the time I'd concluded that I liked her a lot more than a friend, she'd started hanging out with the girl from the desert and taking beach trips to Santa Monica. It made me dizzy and irritable to think about, so I tried not to think about it, but Izzy and I had been friends for so long that her place in my world had a certain permanence that was difficult to escape.

I turned twenty and so did Izzy and she shot a short film on a phone in the desert and I got accepted to UCLA and moved my twin bed frame into a tiny apartment I shared with three girls I'd met on the internet.

The summer of my junior year I flew out to stay in New York City with my brother who was in an MFA program at Columbia, and got a stomach ache as soon as the plane left the runway. I didn't call Izzy when I landed at JFK, not even to tell her about the stomach ache which had by that point migrated to my head, because she was with the girl from the desert, making a second short film, this one set on the Venice boardwalk. I wanted to tell Izzy how the chill of the East Coast had made water leak out of my eyes and nose on impact, that is, as soon as I'd stepped out of the plane, and how a man on the subway into the city had told me, his voice all nasal and rough, that my umbrella, folded up and tucked under my arm, was too flimsy for New York rain and wouldn't last for more than an hour. He had made me cry, the edge in his voice prodding something tender and painful in my ribs, and I'd rolled my sunglasses down over my eyes to hide the tears that inevitably came seeping out at the corners.

It was strange (I imagined explaining this to Izzy in my head as the subway hurtled away from the airport and into the city) how sunglasses didn't have the same abstract protection in New York that they had in Los Angeles; you couldn't put on a pair and expect everyone to automatically understand why you were wearing them. They held weight on the East Coast; they meant things about secrecy and maybe alcoholism and probably illegitimate children.

My brother was in his apartment when I rolled my suitcases up from the subway stop. He answered the door with a dishcloth over his shoulder, sandy hair a few shades darker than it had been when I'd seen him last. The little lines around his mouth were etched deeper in the skin of his cheeks and the freckles under his eyes were gone.

“Vita, you’re totally soaked,” he said as though this was something I’d done purposefully, with malintent, and purely because I was his younger sister and wanted to ruin his peace. I felt damp and inexperienced and wilted standing there on his front stoop; I didn’t like the feeling of being in a city that I didn’t understand. It made me feel incapable and childish and out of control. I tried to lift my suitcase up the last couple of steps to the threshold of the apartment, feet sliding on the damp concrete, but the handle slipped out of my fingers and the suitcase rolled down the steps, hitting each individual step and finally slapping the damp sidewalk like a wet animal. My sunglasses were covered in droplets of water but I didn’t take them off and watched, unmoving, as my brother rolled his eyes and went down to the sidewalk to pick up the suitcase. He brought it inside and gave me one of his cotton t-shirts to wear, one of the ones that came in a big pack, and asked me to eat a bowl of tomato soup he’d made himself from a cookbook. I ate the soup hunched over his dining room table, wet hair sticking to my chapstick, grateful and hungry and vaguely guilty because of my dissatisfaction with how much salt and how little sugar he’d put in the soup. I desperately, childishly wanted something sweet and toxic in my mouth, like the rosy red candy from the 7-Eleven near Izzy’s dad’s place on Catalina. My brother didn’t have anything like this in his apartment, which was all white walls and carpet so when he was in the shower later that evening I snuck out to find a 7-Eleven, the key to his apartment clanking in my pocket.

I was visiting my brother on the pretext of staying in touch with my family and because I had an interview with a publishing start-up in Brooklyn he’d lined up for me, but I was also secretly trying out another city to see if I could maybe make it out of Los Angeles. I wanted to see if I could meet someone; a straight-forward, intellectual girl with nice boots, for example.

The girl from the desert was so totally unlike me that I knew I was never going to be Izzy's type, no matter how much I would have liked this to be the case.

Izzy called me in the middle of the 7-Eleven that I found after walking in the rain for fifteen minutes. I hadn't spoken to her in almost three months, and even then it had been text messages and nothing very important.

She said, "Vita, why don't you come over and watch this new cut of this short film with me?"

I said, "How's the desert, Izzy? How's the girl?"

Izzy was silent for a few seconds and then she said, "She's fine. I'm sort of in love with her but she's kind of a faker."

The 7-Eleven was almost totally empty and smelled like damp paper and man-made meat; hotdogs and day-old strips of bacon.

"What do you mean?" I said. My ribs were beginning to ache again and I knew I should leave before I got too worked up talking on the phone. The stink of the hotdogs was making it hard to breathe.

"She dyed her hair pink because she saw it in a magazine."

"That's a valid reason," I said, "for anything, really."

"I guess, I just. I don't know. I guess it's hard because she's from Santa Monica and she's actually got money and she just wants to lie in the truck and smoke when I'm trying to get a good shot set up. I feel like a poor, desperate little bitch trying to make this film."

"Okay," I said. "I'm in New York."

Izzy was silent. "Are you coming back?" she said finally.

"I think so," I said, "maybe."

“What do you mean you think so? You’re not coming back?”

I picked up a pack of gum and slit the plastic wrapper with the nail on my thumb.

“I’m just...feeling some things out. I need to try something. I think this city is too cold for me, though, frankly.”

“Of course it is! You need to come back here before you get sick with something.”

“Are you doing alright, Izzy?”

“I feel like shit,” she said, “I think I’m depressed but it might just be the weather.”

I asked her what the weather was.

“More fucking fires,” she told me, “big fires all around the valley. There was one up by UCLA by they put it out, and the Santa Anas, of course. They’re back.”

“Stay inside,” I said.

“I can’t stay inside,” said Izzy, “I’m bored. Maybe I’ll go on a drive or something.”

The man behind the counter was watching me whisper into my cell phone. I think I was crying a little bit at that point and I put my sunglasses back on even though it was nearly dark outside.

“There’s nowhere to drive here,” I said, “in New York it’s all sidewalks. Imagine that.”

“Shit,” said Izzy, “cars are the best, though.”

I was quiet and I could hear her chewing a piece of gum through the phone. The sound made my ribs ache even more, but there was a twinge of something else there too, in the back of my throat, some annoyance, maybe; a need to hang up.

“Anyway,” I said, “maybe I’ll call you when I get back to the city.”

“Sure,” said Izzy, “yeah.”

“I should go, though,” I said.

“Okay,” said Izzy.

I brought the pack of gum up to the counter to pay. The wrapper was almost all the way peeled off at that point and the man rang it up quickly, barely glancing at me, despite his obvious curiosity moments before. I had a sudden urge to look someone in the eye so I took off my sunglasses. I knew my eyes were red but I didn't really care.

“Cold out there,” I said.

“Not really, you should get a better umbrella.” The man picked at a hangnail and gestured to the umbrellas the 7-Eleven had for sale, all of them probably just as cheap and flimsy as the one I was using. I smiled at him a little because I could recognize then how we'd both been hardened by our respective cities.

“Well,” I said, “to me it's cold, but I guess I'll probably get used to it.”

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