

Claremont Colleges

Scholarship @ Claremont

Scripps Senior Theses

Scripps Student Scholarship

2020

Assuming We Cause the World to End

Emma Ambler

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses



Part of the Fiction Commons

ASSUMING WE CAUSE THE WORLD TO END

Stories by

EMMA AMBLER

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR MANSOURI
PROFESSOR LIU**

DECEMBER 13, 2019

Helen

As Robert walked across the parking lot to work, he was thinking with fear of his own naked body. The Kansas heat had moistened the entire surface of it. The discomfort made him think of stripping down. Peeling away his belt, letting his trousers fall. He would need to leave his shoes on to protect from the hot pavement. Trying to picture his belly exposed to the sun made his brain feel like it was short-circuiting. The bliss and the horror of it. His The round melon belly with its pelt of curled hairs, and the loose flesh of his thighs hanging off the stark, uninspiring rods of his femurs. Penis like a snake baby cuddled into his testicles. What a nightmare. Worse was imagining what Helen would think if she saw him. Nude and carrying flowers for her.

The lily's petals were thick, almost flesh-like. Robert held tight to the stems, the sweat on his palms getting trapped against the wrapping, a slick, minute ecosystem of skin on plastic. He walked through the office door flowers-first, stepping his leather-clad feet in behind their blooming spray.

"Good morning!" Helen called from the front desk. Robert shuffled forward and put the flowers down.

"For you," he said. "Happy six months."

Helen frowned. "Of what?"

"Six months. Of...the baby."

"Oh! You're observant, aren't you?"

Robert shrugged. “You gave us the news at eight weeks, you said. Not exactly hard math. I’ve got a well-functioning brain, despite my age,” he smiled, showing spotty yellow roots, poorly treated with bleaching gel.

“Well, that is thoughtful.” Helen picked up the lilies, gave them a performative sniff, then put them back down.

“Anyway, my schedule, Helen.”

As he listened to Helen give the details of his day, Robert looked and looked at her. Helen’s pregnancy had made her more beautiful. Her skin glowed like a waxed car. Something in her hormones made her hair thicker, and she still kept up her appearance, her lips painted pink, despite the pains Robert imagined her experiencing. The thin, bright fabric of her blouse showcased how much her breasts had grown. They looked like blossoms. Robert tried to catch sight of them rising with her breath. It felt like the suspense of waiting for a Venus fly trap to move.

“You’ll need to spend the morning on the phones,” Helen was explaining.

“Are we behind quota?”

“No. There are concerns,” Helen said. “Not everyone is pleased with the new bill. You’ll want to catch up with them, help donors feel okay, help them understand.”

Robert’s recent bill had proven controversial. His government inbox had been unusually full, people across the nation sending mass emails in protest. One woman sent a video message, featuring herself wailing with a pillow stuffed

under her dress. At the end of the video, she birthed the pillow by yanking it from the neck of her dress and then cuddled it close, whimpering. She explained in the accompanying email that she was from California, but hoped her impassioned plea could sway the senator regardless.

“She’s not even a constituent, obviously, but I thought you’d want to see it,” Helen had explained, giggling. She vetted all his emails for him. Robert laughed along, though he found the video disturbing.

Robert had a well-developed routine on the phones. First explain the logistics of the bill, then go for the emotional appeal.

“No man should have his flesh roaming around without his knowledge. Without his consent,” Robert said to Grant Phillipson, the president of the second largest poultry company in the nation. “A man’s right to his genetic material is inalienable. I am proud to be co-sponsoring this bill, along with my colleague Senator Lawrence, in pursuit of full protection of father’s rights. No American need be inhibited by mere facts of their biology.”

The bill, called the Father’s Rights Bill, would require all pregnancies to undergo a fetal paternity test, notifying the father while the child was still in utero. Should the mother wish to terminate, the consent of the determined father would be mandatory.

“I know what the critics will say,” he told Mavis Grandhauser, heiress to Eastern Kansas Gas & Electric. “This bill is anti-woman. It’s anti-mothers. But

for God's sake, there was never a bigger mama's boy in the state of Kansas than little Bobby Fergus!"

Robert and his mother had been close. When she was dying, Robert slept in a chair beside her bed for four nights. All throughout his life, she loved to tell stories of her happy, bouncy boy, dancing in the womb.

"He would spin around like a top in there! But then such a shy, serious child," she would say. "In public he would cling to me, or crouch down between my legs. Like he wanted to climb right back in!"

Robert had his next audience in Rita Wernett, the third wife of John Wernett, the supervisor of Topeka's larging chain of bowling alleys.

"For thousands of years, men have been excluded from the process of reproduction. Women have concealed men's children from them. They have stolen the lives of those children without father's consent. But the creation of life takes two," Robert declared to Rita. "Children are life's greatest gift. To miss out on that gift due to false deception, that is a gross violation of one's humanity. It is high time that rights to our own children were shared equally, as God intended!"

As he telephoned, Robert stared at the framed pictures of his son lined up on his desk. Carrying his gaze from left to right, Robert brought Mitchell from a swaddled root vegetable into a pudgy child with serious eyes, then stretched him like taffy into a teenager, with blue robes on graduation day, long legs and acne. Then Robert would reverse the order, coaxing his son back into his mother's arms. It was his own kaleidoscope of Mitchell.

Helen came in right before lunch.

“Something’s happened,” she said, her eyes darting. “I...well. I suppose I’ll just show you.”

Helen came around to Robert’s side of the desk and leaned down beside him. As she toiled around at the keyboard, Robert inhaled the air around her. It smelled sweet and sort of creamy.

“There,” Helen said. She had pulled up an email.

Dear Robert,

We are witches. We’re being straightforward about this because we want to be as up front with you as possible. Honesty is important to the mission of our organization. You won’t take this email seriously, we assume. But you can’t say we didn’t give you all the information. If you don’t think carefully about what we have written, it will not go in your favor.

We are more powerful than you would like to imagine, and we know a lot about you. All your life, your soul has lain dormant, with a resentful little snake in its place. When you told your mother you loved her, you were lying, though you may not have even been aware this was true. The deep down truth was that you couldn’t stand your mother for what she was able to do for you, because you were so in awe of her. You were steeped in your awe and your gratitude, and to a woman no less, and this really pissed you off. She caused your life, and other women like her caused the lives of everyone you hold dear. If they had chosen differently, what you love might never have been. You might never have

been. You have never been able to surrender to this truth, which is that your body has no control. You fight it, telling anyone who'll listen about all the control you have. But you have none whatsoever. You've manufactured a false kind of power. It's very silly to watch.

We feel for you in our hearts, Robert. It must be difficult to live in so much fear. You're so frightened that you've tried to mess with the natural order, the natural balance of power. We've decided it's your last straw (Don't feel too special. All over, men are pulling on their last straws and tumbling down. Imagine the human world like a pyramid of bodies, tangled and pulsing. The whole thing is built over water, and now, at last bodies are falling off. They plop into the water, get spun around and transformed by it. Then they climb out, reborn into the new world order). By now we thought men would be done with this; such fear has been present in men since medieval times. We know. We were there. But obviously they haven't figured it out yet.

You'll need to pull the bill. By the end of the day. Otherwise, you'll be reset. Nothing bad. The women you know and trust will do it for us. They'll set you free. Take you to a kind of heaven. We heard it's just like being in the womb.

Robert read the email twice. There was no name, just an organization, Pro Choice Kansas, at the address prochoicekansas@circe.net.

"Huh," he grunted. "Well, another loony-toon. And pretty rude, I'll say. Not sure why they had to bring my mother into it."

Helen stared at him.

“Senator, this is a death threat,” she said. “We’ll need to send it on to security.”

“Pretty convoluted death threat,” Robert raised his eyebrows. “But alright. I suppose that’s protocol.”

Helen nodded and went to the door. Before she reached it, Robert called to her.

“But do we want to give this weirdo a platform?” Robert asked. He kept his voice steady. “After all, you take freaks seriously and the freaks win.”

“It’s not a platform, Senator, it’s Sam at the security desk,” she answered. “I’m sorry if you don’t like it.”

She returned within minutes to inform him that they would be increasing his security. A guard stationed outside the house now, and someone who would sit in the office all day. Just until they tracked down the sender.

That evening over chicken pot pie, Robert explained the need for new security to Lydia.

“So many lunatics out there,” Robert grumbled, after he had relayed the email incident. “It’s hard to believe we’re all one species.”

“Oh, Bob,” Lydia said, pouring more white gravy over Robert’s second helping. “You aren’t at all worried? It sounds like it was frightening. It’s alright if you were frightened.”

“I was not ‘frightened,’” Robert answered. “I doubt these people are organized enough to pull anything off. They’re too busy crafting their loony-toons emails. Telling me I don’t love my own mother...Telling *me* that! They don’t know my mother!”

“Of course not, dear,” Lydia sighed, tapping a napkin against her pinkish lips. “A clearly unstable person. It’s not your concern.”

Robert chewed grumpily on his chicken and carrots.

“Is the vote still on for next week?” Lydia asked.

“Unless Gibbons and her man-hating NARAL pushers get their way, but I doubt they will.”

Lydia made a noise of displeasure. “Man-hating doesn’t solve anything. They’ll never learn.”

In the early months of Robert’s marriage to Lydia, she was pregnant with Mitchell. He learned her body while it was with child, miraculous and bulging. When her body became her own again, it seemed thin and empty, and Robert mourned for her big belly. In those early days, they spent nearly all their free time in bed. Somehow the sex gave him the access to his son which he craved. They couldn’t reach each other, Robert and the baby, with the wall of Lydia’s body between them. But sex was a way in. Robert believed his son could sense when he was so near because once Lydia felt their son kick during sex. She laughed as she explained what was happening while Robert kept thrusting, thinking *Hello, son,*

I'm your Daddy, and the flesh of his wife melted away and it was just Robert traveling bravely through a dark tunnel to get to his baby boy, his child, his son.

When they went to bed that night, Robert whispered to Lydia that he wanted to make love. She turned to her side and nodded yes against his shoulder. They moved slowly into position, Lydia tucking a pillow against her abdomen like always. You're too skinny, Robert would tease her. You have to give me some cushioning, or I'll be shish kebabbed on your ribcage.

They turned the lights out before Robert clambered into her.

As Robert drove to work, the air was warm and thick and coming in through the open car windows. The heat was fragrant. If he didn't know better, Robert would have thought he was near the ocean.

Robert parked in the garage and started walking. When he was close enough, he saw there was a small crowd standing on the steps of the capitol. They were waving homemade signs and making a racket. Robert squinted to read them.

“MOTHER EARTH HAS LADY PARTS”

“MOTHER'S BODIES > FATHER'S BODIES”

“THIS FETUS IS MINE, YOU FUCK”

“KANSAS REPUBLICANS ARE SSSSSNAKES”

Robert was startled to notice a photograph of himself glued to one. It was just his face, cut out and blown up large, his mouth open. He looked to be in

mid-sentence. He couldn't imagine where the picture had come from; it was very unflattering.

Robert thought of the side entrance to the building. He enjoyed the sweeping steps of the front entrance, so he never used it. He wouldn't use it now. This wasn't anything, there were barely two dozen of them. Robert kept walking. Drawing closer, he could at last hear their shouting:

"Kansas Dems are here to stay, mother's rights are here to stay!"

over and over in rhythm. Robert walked towards the capitol entrance, keeping his steps light and his arms stiff at his sides, trying unconsciously to avoid being noticed. But when he was ten feet from the steps, the crowd stopped chanting. Robert's head snapped up to see the protesters were shuffling among themselves. He watched them form a corridor with their bodies, leading from the bottom of the steps all the way to the capitol's entrance. Robert would have to walk between them.

Faced with the corridor of bodies, Robert didn't hesitate. He entered swiftly, keeping his head down. The protesters began to speak again, quick and low:

Bob Fergus is a little boy,

Women are his favorite toy.

Bob Fergus wants women to suffer,

he uses their bodies as political buffers.

Bob Fergus is a villain,

He hates when women do the killing.

On and on like this. Seamlessly, they moved between the verses. The words kept changing, nonsensical couplets about how Robert was a fiend and a woman-hater. It must have required some ungodly amount of rehearsal. The effect was unnerving, but halfway up the steps, Robert chuckled. He was flattered, really, at all of this. How marvelous.

Finally reaching the top of the steps, Robert reached out for the door handle, but a hand grabbed his upper arm. He turned to face the grabber.

“What do you think--”

Then he stopped. Robert knew the woman. Her eyes were blazing between the marbled lines of her face.

“Come here, you little fuck,” she whispered fiercely beneath the din. Keeping her grasp on his arm, she used her other hand to seize his left ear, pinching it hard. “You think I ever wanted you? A young girl like me?” Still gripping his ear, she pulled his face closer to her lips. “You think you were a *gift*? HA! You were a cum-stain and a leech. A leech!”

Robert stared, breathing hard, his neck bent over. The odd positioning forced him to look only at the woman’s crumpled, elderly lips. They were the color of shrimp.

“Mother?” Robert asked in a whisper.

She kept holding tight to him her face close to his. She was looking at his face like nothing had ever made her more angry. Emotion ballooned inside

Robert, unnameable and intrusive. He couldn't stand it any longer; he jerked away and went inside. Before the door closed, he heard her join in the chant:

Death is the way,

Women's freedom today!

To lose is to gain,

There's no life without pain!

As soon as the doors shut behind him, cool silence fell. Robert's ear throbbed along with his pulse. He strode quickly, deeper into the building, to his office.

Helen was sitting at her desk like normal. It was a wonderful thing to see. She was typing away, her clacking keys pleasant and rhythmic as a heartbeat. Her blonde hair was pulled back from her pretty face. Robert noticed her bosom in the dress she was wearing; it felt nourishing to behold.

Before he said a word, Helen turned her head towards the door.

"Senator!" she said. "How lovely to see you this morning."

Robert got to the desk and rested his elbows on it. He bent his head down towards her and spoke quietly.

"Helen, I don't know what's happened to me."

Helen leaned towards him.

"What? Did someone else threaten you?"

"Yes...maybe...I don't know, I don't know what's happened..." he felt shaky on his feet. Helen stood and guided him to the waiting room couch. He leaned back, feeling dizzy.

“You must tell me what’s going on.”

Robert opened his mouth, but he found he had to keep his eyes shut in order to form words.

“There was... a crowd. Very upset, protesting the F.R.B. And then a woman, she grabbed me...”

“She grabbed you?”

Robert nodded, his eyes still shut tight. “She called me a leech.”

A tear slipped from behind its closed lid and splatted onto his sagging cheek. The sight made Helen take in breath and hold it fast.

“Who was she, Senator?” she whispered.

Robert just shook his head, and more tears came.

Helen stood carefully, putting one hand to her big belly. “I’m calling security. This cannot be allowed to happen.”

“No!” Robert moaned, opening his moist eyes.

“What do you mean, *no*?” Helen snapped, her voice rising in pitch. “You have been *assaulted*, Senator!” She looked like she might start crying along with him.

“You can’t,” Robert was forced to pause by an involuntary snuffle, which was loud and shook his chest. When it was finished, he continued. “She was just a little lady. Don’t, don’t do anything, please Helen. I’m begging.”

Helen looked at him strangely.

“Lie down, Senator,” she said. “Let yourself rest. You’ve had a shock.”

Robert obeyed, still sniffing. The air around him was growing humid, making his head sweat like the whole thing had been wrapped in damp wool. After resting for some time, Robert blinked his eyes open. Helen was looming above him. Her cheeks were bright pink. They matched her lips.

“Senator,” she whispered. “Can I get you something to drink?”

Robert hid how startled he was, and replied he would like that.

Helen left his frame of vision and went into the office kitchen. Robert closed his eyes again, but reopened them when he heard loud retching. Worried, he followed Helen. In the kitchen he found her leaned over a glass on the counter. Her body was undulating smoothly with the action of her vomiting. Quite incongruous with the violent sounds she was making, Robert saw with alarm a thin stream of water pouring down from her mouth into the glass. Her neck and spine were arched gracefully. She looked almost like a fountain. The water in the glass was shining and clear. When the cup was about to overflow, Helen stood up straight. Turning to Robert, she used one hand to wipe her mouth and the other to offer him the glass.

“Here. Your drink.” Her face was neutral and relaxed.

Robert’s throat contracted. He became very thirsty. The feeling was as sudden as if something had bitten him. He took the glass and drank. The liquid tasted clean and warm. After he finished, he sat down heavily at the kitchen table. Dizziness overtook him. He felt bloated and nauseous.

“Helen, I’m very ill,” he mumbled.

“I know,” Helen sat next to him at the table, watching him with concern in her eyes. “It’ll pass.”

Robert was suddenly overcome with a case of the wiggles. His skin felt like it had seized up, tightening over every inch of his body. He shook and danced in the chair until the sensation passed. Then he looked to Helen in alarm. She was watching him and smiling. An opaque liquid had trickled down the side of her mouth. Robert stared, but as he looked, the trickle disappeared and Helen’s expression morphed back into one of concern.

“What’s happening?” she asked. “Do you feel alright?”

Robert shook his head. “No, I feel terrible,” he folded his arms and rested his forehead down onto them. “I ought to go home.”

His stomach was lurching. The darkness was soothing. His sweating forehead was slippery against his forearms.

“Yes,” Helen said. “I’ll call you a car.”

“That’s good...thank you, Helen...” Robert said into the table. His own voice sounded strange and muffled against the little cavern of his folded arms. He tried making more sounds into his arm-chamber.

“Wee-oo wee-oo wee-oo wee-oo...”

His little siren echoed and made him giggle. Then the sound began to make him feel sicker, so he stopped, wincing.

Helen walked him out to the waiting car, holding tight to his arm. Helen opened the door to the back, and Robert laid down across the leather seats. She stuck her head in.

“Be careful with yourself,” she said, her eyes wide, and shut the door.

When the car pulled into his driveway, Robert asked the driver to escort him to his front door, as he was feeling faint. The driver did so gladly.

“It’s an honor to see your home, Senator,” the man said, holding tight to Robert’s arm. He was older, with gray hair like Robert. “Really and truly.”

The driver was so chipper, Robert thought the man might give him a good night kiss at the front step. But the driver only wished him well several more times, and went back to the car.

Once inside, Robert tugged off his loafers and made his way to the closest chair, which was in the kitchen. He felt so weak, he thought of crawling on his hands and knees, but the thought was too humiliating. So he walked on his wobbling legs and collapsed in a seat at the table, groaning.

“What was that, dear?” said Lydia. Robert’s wife entered the kitchen. She was wearing a white lace apron, embroidered in tremendous detail with roses, bumblebees and canaries. In his stupor, Robert could practically see the roses bursting, the bumblebees whizzing around her figure.

“Lydia?” Robert’s mouth was wet now. As he said his wife’s name, drool collected in the front of his teeth and spilled over onto his chin. Robert was confused; Lydia had her tennis lessons on Tuesdays. “What are you doing home?”

“I came home to take care of you!” Lydia answered cheerily. She had busied herself at the stove. “Helen told me you were sick.”

Robert was relieved; he thought something might be wrong. But it was only him. He felt happy to see her. The air felt very warm and hazy. Robert wanted to rub his face against it. Lydia began to busy herself at the stove. He watched his wife. She looked wonderful. The backs of her calves were taut and healthy-looking. Her hair was brown and lush like he hadn't seen it in years.

“Did you get your hair done?” He wanted to stand and wrap his arms around her.

She didn't answer. Her head was bent. She was stirring something in a very large bowl. Robert noted with mild interest that a pie pan the size of a mid-sized sedan was sitting on the counter. Robert's head and stomach were buzzing, though not unpleasantly.

Lydia tossed aside the spoon and dug into the bowl with her bare hands. Then she pressed the crust into the massive pan. Following this, Lydia reached behind her to untie the apron. She unzipped her dress, stepped out of her shoes, removed her jewelry. Robert stared at his naked wife standing in the middle of their kitchen.

Reaching her hands up high, she formed two claws with her pink fingernails, then she brought them swinging down to her middle. Her face contorted with effort as she dug her fingers into her lower belly, and cracked her torso apart. She spun around, and Robert beheld the interior of her. It looked like

the ragged halves of a fresh watermelon. She reached in deep with both arms, and pulled them back out, carrying his adult son Michael and his intern Lucas, one in each hand. They were both dressed for work, in suits and ties. As easily as if they were feathers, Lydia plopped them into the pie crust. They sat dumb and passive in the pie, their knees hugged to their chests.

Lydia, still naked, went to work coating the two men in her pie filling ingredients.

“Some people think you need cornstarch in a berry pie,” she said as she powdered Lucas’ nose with sugar. “But I disagree!” Robert could see that the boys had started to shiver, though they still made no move to get out. Lydia continued preparing them, narrating each step in her process. She brought out lemons, squeezing the juice over their heads, and a white bucket of fresh berries, smearing them onto their necks and smashing them into their ears. As she gaily spoke, tears started coming. They made thick trails down her supple cheeks.

“I’m a wonderful chef!” she cried. “Look at what I’ve made! Look at it!”

Robert seemed to have lost control of his body. Though he was trying, he could not move or make a sound. But then something deep inside him loosened, forcing itself out, and he yelled some nonsense and flailed his limbs.

“Darling!” Lydia cried. “What are you after?” She went to his side. Her insides were still visible, glistening and pink. Her face was splattered with red and purple berry juice.

Robert could only produce unintelligible sounds.

“Are you worried about them?” Lydia asked in a whisper. “Don’t be afraid. You won’t even remember them! They’ll be nothing to remember.”

Robert became aware of tears spilling down his face. His body was numb. Lydia stroked his cheek, making Robert cry harder. His limp body slid down a little in the chair. Lydia yanked him back up by his shirt.

The dimensions of the room began to fold and sway. The kitchen was turning pink. Robert became aware of warm water soaking the toes of his socks. The water rose slowly to his ankles. Robert stared numbly at his wife. Her face glowed in the pink light.

“Robert,” Lydia said. “Look.” She pointed into the miniature flood. Robert followed her finger, and saw something moving in the water.

It was a python, white and thick as a can of beans. It swam like a ribbon, encircling the legs of Robert’s chair, and the legs of his still-naked wife. Robert started to shake.

“Sss...ssss.....*snake!*” he uttered with tremendous effort.

Lydia took Robert’s face in her hands, and pressed her forehead to her husband’s.

“That’s right,” she muttered. “That’s a good boy.”

Robert wept as she held him. He didn’t notice Helen enter until she was sitting on the table in front of him. The water up to his ass now, his legs totally submerged.

“Thank you, Lydia,” Helen said.

Lydia stepped back from her husband. “It’s a pleasure,” she said, and busied herself again at the kitchen counter, rolling out a massive sheet of pie dough.

Helen watched her for a moment, smiling, then turned to look at Robert. Robert couldn’t believe his eyes. She was glowing. Light was emanating from her. Her skin looked almost like a stained window, the light coursing outwards from somewhere in the cavity of her body. While her flesh had the brilliant, translucent quality of pinkish glass, it was also supple. Robert knew that if he reached out a finger to graze it, it would be soft and warm.

Helen sat on the table, her legs crossed neatly. With her big belly and youthful face, she looked like a schoolgirl in trouble. The white snake latched onto Helen’s feet where they were dipped in the water, traveling liquidly up her body to rest half its length around her shoulders, the other half wrapped loosely around her waist. The kitchen wall behind her shimmered and undulated. Helen reached her arms up to find the snake. Robert looked on in horror, still unable to speak. As Helen ran her fingers back and forth along the body of the snake, she spoke.

“You’re doing just the right thing,” she said. “Feeling your fear. Letting it come to the surface.”

As she spoke, the snake made a slow rotation around her shoulders and waist. Helen watched Robert earnestly.

“Your body is a desert, but the wetness of a body like mine quenches you. One could say the fountain of you isn’t yours at all, but mine. I bring it out. I make it all possible. I cause the substance I need to spring from you, and into me. I am both pieces, an androgynous queen. But despite all that, I am grateful for you. Do not think I underestimate the male body. Of course, the farmer creates the conditions in which the cow feels safe, and loved. The farmer dotes on the cow. The cow believes itself powerful, the way the farmer gives its body in service of the cow. But the cow is mistaken.”

Robert started to quiver. His face felt like it was melting, streaked in sweat and tears. The water was up to his bellybutton, hot as a Jacuzzi. The pink light flickered on Helen’s round face as she continued:

“You know all of this, Senator. You’re well aware of the power that comes with female biology: We choose the members of the human race. I wish I could gather your scared body in my arms, tell you it’s a bad dream. But I can’t, because it’s true. It We have the power to kill when it isn’t meant to be. That’s what terrifies you, isn’t it?”

The pink walls of the kitchen looked to be caving in, but then they pushed back out to form a smooth dome.

“You’re our experiment. We want to heal you, Robert. I’ve taken the burden, the thing which has been so bothersome to you.” Helen slid her hands down the length of the great snake. The snake looked at Robert, and flicked its

tongue. “We’re going to replace it with what you really want. Lydia has volunteered her womb.”

At this, Lydia turned, placing one hand above and one below her split torso, framing her shiny pink innards like a model on a game show. Helen went on:

“Mine is of course unavailable. You’ll be reformed, totally regrown.”

Robert fought to speak.

“No! No! Not...wooo....mmman,” Robert shouted with his loose, unruly lips and tongue. His words were barely legible, but Helen seemed to understand. She reached for his face, holding it in both hands.

“Of course not,” Helen whispered. “You don’t have to be. But we’re giving you the power. I’m giving you what your heart most wants. I want you to understand us.”

Robert’s capacity to feel fear was shrinking. Behind Helen, Lydia had begun to drape the pie dough over Michael and Lucas. Their silhouettes were visible beneath it, making bizarre statues. Then the silhouettes began to shrink, until they were gone, and the pie was just a pie. Robert himself began to shrink. Helen’s voice sounded farther and farther away. Now she was wrapping her arms around his whole body, so small now, and all he could do was watch her lips move.

Mira

Mira's mother and her husband found him wandering down the interstate in the dark. They were coming back from a town meeting, had left early to beat a coming storm. His figure had been steadily walking up the side of the empty two-lane highway. Slowing to see if he was someone in need of help, they recognized him immediately. They said it was easy to lure him into their car.

"We didn't really even have to trick him," Mira's mother, Susan, told her afterwards. "We just told him we were fans, that we wanted to be of assistance."

"It helped he was probably freezing," Rick added. "Didn't even have gloves on, fucking idiot."

Once they got him in the backseat, they drove home. Rick, Mom's husband, knocked him flat from behind in the doorway from the garage into the kitchen, and tied his hands with Smuckers' leash, which hung on a hook on the garage wall.

"He was whining like a baby," said Rick. "No surprise there."

Now he was in the living room, bound thoroughly to a chair from the dining table using a combination of Smuckers' leashes and her mother's decorative scarves. One of the scarves, blue silk with red flowers, was pressed tightly to his mouth and tied in the back of his head. There was a purple dent on his forehead from where it smacked the floor. Smuckers, meanwhile, was shut upstairs. He'd refused to stop barking at their guest.

When Mira asked why his chair had been dragged in from the dining room, her mother's response was that she wanted to sit comfortably on the sofa while keeping watch. Mira gave her a weird look, to which she responded:

“What? Why the hell not!”

Soon after Mira got home, Rick marched out into the blizzard to get help from the neighbors, a half mile away.

“We can't take any chances with this fucker,” he said, yanking up his balaclava. Before leaving, he stared pointedly at the lumpy silhouette, slumped a little in the chair. Susan, Mira's mom, had tried sedating him with a combination of Sleepytime tea, some crushed Benadryl, and about five shots of the peppermint schnapps she liked to have around at Christmastime.

“I barely had to force it on him. He was groggy from the fall,” her mom said. “He doesn't drink, you know, so it seems to have hit him pretty hard.”

It did look that way. His small eyes were closed. Up close Mira could see how old he really was, wrinkled and soft, like a piece of dried fruit.

“He just liked getting spoon-fed by a woman,” Rick grumbled.

Mira stood in the living room and watched him sleeping. It felt like they had a gigantic slug tied up in their living room. She thought about the fact that he was somebody's grandfather. This didn't do much to lessen her disgust.

Although mainly bizarre, his sudden appearance in their lives did make a kind of sense. They lived in northern Vermont, in a town called Swanton about

three miles from the Canadian border, smack on an easy escape route out of the country.

“Did he say much of anything?” Mira asked her mother. Now that Rick was gone, they were side by side on the couch, whispering to each other. The set-up looked like a classroom, pupils gossiping with their heads together, their teacher sitting oblivious at the front of the room. Their guest was still out cold.

“Oh, yeah. He’s a talker,” Susan replied. “He told us some of his men stayed loyal. One agreed to drive him here in their own car, but then they thought it would be best if he continued on foot. So the GPS on the car couldn’t be traced, or something. He said that he just had to make it to the edge of Missisquoi, where he’d meet someone to take him over the border.”

“Wow,” Mira whispered. “So what’s the plan now?”

Susan paused to take a sip of her drink, hot chocolate with some of the schnapps. “Since the phones are still out, Rick radioed the sheriff. But there wasn’t an answer. which is why he’s gone down to the Johnsons’. If Sherry’s gone into labor I doubt he’ll be able to do anything for a while. But I think we’ve got him under control for the time being.”

“We can’t just drive him to the station?”

“Better to wait out the storm, Rick thought.”

Mira sat quietly for a moment, mulling over how to phrase her thoughts.

“It’s weird to think that we could do whatever we want to him.”

Susan took another big sip. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“I just mean that he’s a bad dude. We could take it on ourselves to do justice, or whatever.”

Susan looked confused. Mira rephrased: “I mean like a citizen’s arrest. Citizens deploying justice.”

“Well, that’s really what we’ve done, isn’t it? He’s all tied up, he’s not going anywhere. We’ve got him in our custody, so to speak.”

Mira nodded, but this wasn’t what she was getting at.

“No one knows we even have him.”

“That’s true.”

“What if we never told anyone?”

Susan laughed. “Rick’s on his way to tell folks right now, Mira.”

“What if we stopped him? Told him on the walkie to turn around and come back?”

“I’m not sure what that would accomplish.”

The hostage stirred a little. Susan went to him. She ladled the sedative liquid from a mixing bowl on the coffee table into a mug, propped his mouth open, then dribbled some in with a spoon.

“It would mean we could do anything we wanted. No one would know.”

Mira paused, and Susan, still feeding the hostage, said nothing, so she went on.

“We could do something. We could end it,” Mira whispered.

Susan was scraping the bottom of the bowl with the ladle. “We’ll need to make more,” she muttered.

“I hate him. He’s hideous, Mom.” Mira’s voice cracked and her throat ached as she fought not to cry. She stared at her hands angrily.

Susan sat back down and reached for her daughter’s hand. “Mira, honey. I know you’re upset about how things are going. But do you really want to put yourself in that position?”

“I don’t care!” Mira’s voice rose to a hissing whisper-shout. “He’s killed lots of people!”

“Honey, there’s plenty of bad guys ready to step into his place. It might even make things worse.”

“But don’t you think he sort of deserves it?”

She withdrew her hand from Mira and reached for her cocoa.

“Murder is wrong.”

“But he *does*, doesn’t he?” Mira was getting excited.

“No one deserves the death penalty,” her mother said slowly. She took a long drink from her mug. “And how would you suppose we commit this murder? Hit him over the head with a pan?”

Mira shrugged, glancing at the pair of kitchen knives her mother had placed on the coffee table as a cautionary measure.

“We could figure something out. It wouldn’t be that hard.”

“Mira, this is not an acceptable conversation.”

Mira sensed in her mother's tone that she was being shut down. She sighed audibly, but let it rest. A minute passed in which her stomach twisted. Words were shaking against the walls of her throat.

"But wouldn't it feel a little bit good?" she finally said, and then grit her teeth.

"For God's sake, Mira!" her mother stood up with the pretense of going to refill her drink. She didn't make it very far.

It was like Mira's mother had been physically struck. Susan grabbed onto her head and sank slowly back down onto the couch, her face tense.

"Ow....ow...." she whimpered. She pressed her palms hard into her eyes, trying to seal out any light.

"What were you getting?" Mira asked, more out of habit than compassion. "Do you need water?"

Mira's mother suffered from chronic migraines. They were debilitating, coming two or three times a week, often when her mother was upset or stressed. For this reason, they were usually Mira's fault.

"You're hurting your mother's head, Mira!"

"Mira, my head, please!"

Sometimes they were so bad her mother would weep at their onset. Sometimes this happened in public. The risk of it was high enough that Mira had begun to dislike going with her parents on outings. It was a special kind of

humiliation to witness one's mother burst into tears in the middle of ordering a chicken parmesan at Ligretto's.

Although her mother didn't answer her, Mira went to the kitchen, filled a glass and returned. She put the water on the table and sat gently on the couch.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

With visible effort, Susan lifted her head and squinted at her daughter.

"I have to go upstairs," she whispered. Mira thought she sounded furious.

"Call Rick on the walkie. Tell him to come back."

"Okay," Mira whispered in response.

With effort, her mother stood and crept upstairs, her body doubled over with pain.

Mira picked up the walkie-talkie, and radioed Rick. She explained the situation quietly, but got no answer. She did the same thing twice more, with still no answer. She leaned back into the couch. Her limbs were anxious and weak. There was nervous sweat drying on her back and making her shiver. She considered eating a snack, maybe drinking something hot. She examined their guest across the room. He still appeared to be sleeping, but how long this would last it was hard to tell. She slipped into the kitchen for a snack and to remake the sedative.

After starting in on a handful of frosted animal crackers, she knelt below the sink, opening the cabinet. It was still there, left over from Rick's rat panic after he found one sleeping in the bottom of the dog food bucket in the garage.

She shook a few into her palm, and could see the vein in her wrist pulsing. A man of his size, it would take twenty, maybe thirty pellets. But Rick had probably made it to the neighbors by then. Mira would go to prison. But she could also be a hero. Infamous. Celebrated. The situation felt so surreal, it was difficult to get ahold of her own reasoning. She had no idea what a world after this night would look like. What do you do when a t.v. villain makes his way into your living room? How does one go on with normal life in the same way? Sighing, Mira put the pellets back and returned to the living room, snack in hand.

Walking a wide circle around him, she plucked the crackers one at a time from a small pile settled in her palm. The frosting was melting, leaving behind pink streaks. As she ate, she let the cookies sit against the inside of her cheek, softening them to avoid the excessive noise of crunching. The sugar was calming. She observed him as she snacked. His face was ragged and soft, though the hint of a square jaw remained gravely standing within the pools of his flesh.

Looking at him straight on, it was like beholding the king of the aliens. Not just oblivious to his own ugliness, but proud in how he inhabited its meaty shell. There was something grotesque about just the way his head sat on his neck, the way the neck sloped down to form shoulders. Even though he was sitting, he was nearly as tall as Mira. This was unnerving. His size was part of what made him foul. Like an earthworm the size of a sofa. Looking at his puffy old man face, she felt a bizarre urge to speak to him in the same high-pitched voice her mother used to address their dog.

Mira experienced a nervous hot flash. It shot sticky sweat prickles up her back. She moved to take off her sweatshirt, then felt self-conscious. It was bizarre, stripping her clothes off in front of a strange man, in front of this strange man. But then there she stood in her thermal undershirt, her sweatshirt balled up between her hands. Her bare nipples poked against the slippery fabric. She was uncomfortable with how exposed she was, even though his eyes were closed and could not see her.

In the other room the kettle began to sputter. Mira moved to get it before it whistled. It was sitting perched above the gas flame, the bubbling water echoing against its metal chamber. After pulling back hard on the lever to release the spout, the steam began to squirt out in a thin, white stream. As she went about the tea-making, she wondered if, when he woke up, she would address him by name. The thought was laughable, almost obscene. Pretending she didn't already know it seemed like a better course of action. Maybe that would piss him off.

Mira opened the cabinet for a mug. There was the tall one printed with a botanical guide to Martha's Vineyard, the big, wide "My Stepdad is the Best" mug, the blue mug featuring a cartoon Bernie Sanders and Dwight Eisenhower grinning in a hot tub. Rick always got a real kick out of that one. She avoided all of these and chose a blank white one, in which she dropped four tea bags. Then, getting the schnapps from on top of the fridge, she filled the mug halfway, topping off the rest with the boiling water. She grasped onto the teabag strings and pulled them in and out. The alcohol smell wafted up. It burned. Mira

wondered if it could disinfect her nostrils. They must have something of him coating their insides, some dead skin cells that sloughed off and went airborne.

Thinking he would struggle if the tea scalded him, Mira slid open the freezer drawer and took a fistful of ice. The ice cubes dropped into the tea and disappeared briefly. When they resurfaced, they were bobbing up and up, like they were trying to leap over the sides of the mug. Before leaving the kitchen, she took a funnel from the drawer of miscellaneous kitchen crap.

Mira waited on the couch, holding the funnel and the mug of sedative. The hostage was unmoving. Mira's stomach felt hot and twisted. Men were something foreign to Mira. She had lived with Rick since she was twelve, but he remained an odd creature to her. His face aged so unapologetically, eyes sinking further and further into themselves and Rick doing nothing about it. His clothes never fit him quite right. Shirts stretched weirdly over his circle belly, but then the sleeves would go loose and flappy around his upper arms. Sometimes Mira would stare at Rick and feel utterly confused. They were both so ugly, this man and Rick, and neither of them seemed to care. Mira found it gross. At least when a woman refused to take care of her appearance, it was rebellious. When a man did it, it was just unpleasant for everyone around him.

The hostage smacked his lips together. Mira startled like a horse. She wanted to hesitate. She also wanted an excuse to get close to the hostage and cause him pain. She got near to him and pushed up the scarf-gag. Then she squeezed either side of his mouth open with one hand, inserting the funnel

between his wet lips. As she poured the lukewarm mixture down, his eyes remained closed, though he groaned. Despite the funnel, some of the tea dribbled out the corner of his mouth and formed a path down his jaw. She went slower, nervous to wake him. But feeling the softness of his skin under the fingers which held his mouth open was making her ill. It felt like the surface of an old peach. She'd like to scrape away the fruit-flesh, find the gnarled pit. As she imagined all the ways to obliterate a peach, her grip on him tightened. Later she would clip them, and then burn the clippings. The tea was halfway gone, still dribbling its brown stream from the mug to the funnel. She wondered if his blood would be the color of peach-juice.

While Mira was battling her own intensity, the hostage jerked his head to the side. Mira was still holding the mug, and spilled the remaining tea on his face. He swung his leg, unbound and free, and caught Mira on the knee. She fell. From her spot on the ground, she was aware that he was moving, and she scrambled to get up. By the time she did, he had knocked himself sideways, and was lying on the floor still tied to the chair.

Sliding over to his front, he began to inch-worm across the floor, still attached to the chair. The sliding door was behind the sofa, meaning he was going to pass the coffee table, on which the two knives were still sitting. As he crawled, Mira could see his hands were trying to yank apart the knots on the leash that bound his wrists together. It appeared to be loosening. Now on her feet, Mira watched him on the floor, but stayed frozen, terrified. He was lying with his face

pressed to the carpet, arching his legs and pushing his feet strangely into it, trying to stand up despite the chair. What if his hands got free? If she got nearer to him, what would he do with two free hands?

She pounced on his back. Her shirt rode up when she landed. He struggled and cried out. She could feel his hands still fumbling underneath her chest. Though she was pinned against him, hindering his progress, she was small and he was large. He could still feasibly get free. Her stomach, bared from her rumpled shirt, was pressed against his hands. The frantic scrabbling of his fingers against the leash tickled her. The knives on the coffee table were directly at eye-level. Her heart was going mad in her throat. He was trying fervently to buck her off now, using his legs to push up and down on the ground. She wraps his arms around his neck to stay.

“You little bitch!”

His voice was just like on the tv. How a snake would speak, if a snake were as vile as a man. In the commotion, the slippery fabric of her thermal kept riding up and up. Trying with all her might to keep hold of him, she had no free hands to pull it back down. When her left nipple flopped out in the midst of their grappling, there was no recovering it. In a fit of desperation, Mira seized the man’s head and used it to press herself forward. Then she shoved her breast up against his face, where she felt it find the dampness of his mouth.

This maneuver was so shocking to both of them that for a moment, they were still. They did not notice the lights of a snowplow shining in through the

living room window. But now his lips have closed around her. He began to make quiet little noises. She was focused on staying as still as possible, terrified of breaking the spell she had created. Then his fingers started moving again against her belly, but gently. She thought he was trying to stroke her. She worried that in her simmering panic, she would move away too quickly and leave her nipple behind, nestled between his teeth. *I've subdued him*, she told herself. *I've done something heroic*.

This was when she heard her mother's scream.

“MIRA!”

Her head jerked up to look, and she stumbled to her feet, yanking down her shirt. The hostage remained on the floor, stunned by what had just taken place.

Rick had returned home, and it sounded like he had brought others with them. They were conversing around the corner of the wall which separated the living room from the foyer. Mira could picture them, unstrapping their boots, shaking the snow from their hats. She imagined there were probably three, maybe four of them. She focused on this image to avoid thinking of the saliva that was slick on her nipple.

“RICK!” Susan was hysterical.

“Susan? What is it?” Rick emerged, running in from the other room. He was followed by three men. Mr. Bushman, their closest neighbor down the road, and his sons, George and Jack. They looked excited. Mira avoided their eyes,

instead focusing on the shotguns propped easily in their hands. Then she caught a movement out of the corner of her eye.

“Rick! RICK!” her mother sobbed, pointing towards her daughter. Mira looked down, and saw that he was still struggling, though slowly, to free himself. One of his hands looked like it had succeeded. Rick and the other men advanced, raising their guns.

“Go upstairs. Now!”

Mira scampered upstairs to her mother, who opened her bedroom door to her. Once inside, she snapped it shut. They stood facing each other, Smuckers lying on the floor between their feet.

“Mira,” she whispered. Her eyes were glassy with fear and the pain of her head. There was a commotion downstairs. Voices barked deeply to each other. Something crashed to the floor. She kept her eyes fixed to her mother’s.

Two weeks before that night, the president declared a national emergency after it leaked that there were whispers of a coup in Congress. The CIA was in on it, the Supreme Court, everybody. A lot of things had led them to this, some which most of the country would likely never know about. It would go down as one government secret shared with the president on the night of his inauguration, one of the sour moments that will turn them from a person into a president. But the headlines said his statements about nuclear warfare had forced the federal government to step in. And then with the scope of the national emergency, impeachment proceedings couldn’t have taken place. The emergency was

shockingly disruptive. It is remarkable what a president can do under such a declaration. Phone lines and internet access were shut down, and radio waves became enormously restricted, though some rebel stations could be discovered if you twiddled around long enough. Though news was hard to come by, from those few pop-up stations it sounded like before he fled, the president had tried having several Democratic party leaders imprisoned as enemies of the state. It was unclear if he was successful.

Mara

Mara started laying in garbage in the wintertime. If there was an ideal time of year for laying in garbage, it would be winter. The various smells get weakened by the cold. But Mara wanted the sun to come back out, to be assaulted by the putrid scent. Like a lover, she wanted to experience everything the garbage had to offer. So every Saturday, while Mara's mother thought she was doing a study group at the community college, Mara drove to the Lane County Municipal Landfill, climbed the fence, and laid her body down.

Mara believed that to lie with something, really give your body to it, was an act of love. And Mara hated garbage. Garbage was a festering wound, leaking pus all over the land and into the sea. No matter how hard she tried, Mara produced garbage every day. Everything she liked came inside garbage: beer, chocolate soy milk, lime tortilla chips. It was material evidence of her daily crimes. Car exhaust is invisible. An empty juice carton is not. But in her copy of *Pocket Wisdom for the Modern Buddhist*, it said the only way to heal wounds was through love, and Mara wanted to heal the garbage wounds of Lane County. The Buddha said she had to accept what *was*. So instead of staying angry and wanting to disappear all the garbage with her mind, Mara would accept it. Because the garbage *was*, and would be for a very long time.

Her trips to the landfill lasted an hour, sometimes two. A ritual of sorts formed over the weeks. In an effort to demonstrate her commitment, at first Mara tried really nestling into the garbage. She wanted to cuddle the garbage close, like

it was many traumatized children, and she their saintly adoptive mother. But after two injuries to the flesh (one involving scrap metal, and the other a broken Snapple bottle), Mara resigned herself to finding patches of exposed ground, and plucking a few non-hazardous objects to nestle close to her. Once settled, Mara would spread her arms and imagine everything around her bathed in turquoise light.

The trips were very romantic. Once she started trying, it was easy to see the poetry in the Lane County Municipal Landfill; countless things, all tossed aside, all formed from so many labors of love. Out of the wreckage, Mara conjured images: the factory workers making things, the crew on shipping vessels bringing things, the shoppers buying things. All laboring to care for themselves, maybe their children too. All laboring to survive. What was this grand push to keep on living? Mara assumed it must be love of life itself. Then, whatever had been built by love got all used up and placed out of sight. The dump looked to Mara like so many piles of shriveled love. During those first Saturdays, the sight of a lonesome soda bottle was enough to make Mara shake with her tears, laying there on the ground.

Sometimes Mara lost sight of the love at the dump. She fixated on all the items that looked like they had never been loved by anyone, things half-used or never used at all: unidentifiable plastic rods, a half-filled spray can of waterproofing treatment, miscellaneous cardboard, a perfectly new dresser still snugly in its bubble wrap. To Mara, these unlovable objects were unruly and

powerful, and she pictured them marching off to sea. The rods and the cardboard bobbed in the tide, the dresser rode the navy crest of a wave. Porpoises would surface and chirp their melancholy amidst the wreckage. Vast ocean marred by blips of trash, blips which would likely outlast the species which had made them. These might be some of the closest things humanity would have to immortal signs in the universe. It was sickening and it was fascinating. Sometimes it made Mara want to bring herself to orgasm, right there in the dump.

Though Mara was very distinctly human, being confronted with any facet of human society set her mind reeling. Looking at the hundreds of matching chairs in the lecture halls at the community college, she would obsess over the resources it took to make them. The thousands of gallons of water polluted by wood-varnishing chemicals, the cancerous vapors released by the process of smelting the metal into legs and converting the oil into plastic. These chairs didn't need to be made. Mara was certain there were already more than enough chairs on the planet. They just didn't all match each other. But when the college was given the choice between having matching chairs or not actively destroying the world, they shrugged and chose the matching chairs. And somehow no one inside that lecture hall was panicking about this. Only Mara, sitting all the way in the back, was wide-eyed and shivering.

For every one of these miserable objects in Lane County, Mara couldn't stand to think of how many more had to be in Benton County, or Klamath County, or Deschutes. Multiply that by twelve counties, and then that by fifty

states, and then that by two hundred and fifty nations. Then her stomach hurt too much to continue, and she would cry again, but differently than before. This math-induced crying was uglier and louder.

It was during one of these noisier crying spells that Toby first saw Mara. Toby was eighteen, and he worked in the landfill to fund his mountain biking trips. He had been sent into the garbage piles by his supervisor Ken, to find examples of all the recyclables that were ending up in the wrong places.

“We’ve got at least 0.6% lost revenue from all the glass we’re letting get tossed. Money in the garbage,” Ken had told Toby, solemnly shaking his splotchy head. Sharon, the dump’s accountant, had recently presented her annual report and the data had really opened Ken’s eyes.

“You’ve really opened my eyes, Sharon,” Ken said when she finished her presentation. His eyes had certainly been wide open, darting between Sharon’s soft, white face and her large, wool-covered breasts.

The Lane County Municipal Landfill was in the process of shutting down. The bulk of Lane County’s trash collecting needs had been outsourced to a private company overseas, so most of the staff had been let go. Those remaining were in charge of squeezing as much money as they could out of the place before it was abandoned for good. The trash compactor hadn’t been utilized in months, and the remaining deliveries had been left in loose piles on the outskirts of the property, waiting indefinitely to be processed.

Ken was a friend of Toby's uncle, so he'd kept Toby on as a favor. The pay was good and the hours were flexible, and Toby was grateful. Now it was his job to go out into the dump and collect as many intact glass bottles as he could find. Pleased to have escaped the office, Toby navigated the trash piles with a bounce in his step. As he searched he let his mind wander, spinning a ludicrous daydream:

Toby is an amateur scientist who has brilliantly cured a statewide leprosy epidemic. Toby's years at the dump give him intimate knowledge of trash, which leads him to discover a life-saving bacteria. Formed from a unique blend of partially fermented body-wash and preservatives found in most breakfast cereals, it coalesces only within the confines of a specific lead crystal, known as glass. Every glass bottle is worth 10,000 Oregonian lives. Despite the greatness of his achievement, Toby asks that the government keep his identity a secret. The governor agrees, and sends along his praises with a handwritten thank you note and several dozen cases of mint chocolate ice cream. So Toby is free to wander the dump in peace and privacy. A humble scientist among heroic garbage...

Toby was on the outskirts of the dump when he spotted a limp, sneaker-encased foot sticking out from behind an old car engine. Immediately, he panicked. He had clearly just discovered a corpse in the Lane County Municipal Landfill. Creeping forward to investigate, Toby let the glass bottles tumble from his grip. He registered snuffling sounds under the noise of the trash compactor, a few hundred yards away. Alarmed, he pictured a raccoon cozied up to the dead

girl, munching on her throat. Frowning, he stepped around the car engine, and saw Mara's contorted, tear-streaked face.

"Oh, thank God," Toby said.

Mara was so surprised that she stopped crying at once.

"What?" she said sharply.

"I thought you were dead," Toby replied. "But you're okay."

Mara sat up.

"You don't know that. You don't know why I'm crying."

"Yeah, I guess so. Sorry. I was just relieved," Toby knelt to regather his glass bottles. "Why are you crying?"

"Because of existence," Mara snapped.

"Okay."

Mara stared at him. She wiped her dripping nose with the back of her hand. Her insides felt jumpy and alert. She looked at the bottles in Toby's hands.

"Why are you picking up trash at a landfill?" Mara looked in his eyes as she spoke. They were big and brown.

"My boss said to," Toby explained. "He wants us to recycle more."

Mara was cheered by this.

"Isn't that nice," she said to the empty bottle of canola oil settled alongside her thigh. This particular Saturday, she had begun a new practice of surrounding her body in a circle of the garbage. It felt very mystical and right. She felt more bonded with the trash already.

Toby shrugged. “Well, I’m gonna get going. If you’re doing fine here.”

“That would be much appreciated.”

As Toby retreated back into the dump, he heard Mara’s sobbing resume.

The following Saturday, Mara returned to the landfill. She climbed a different section of fence than normal, not wanting the boy with the recyclables to find her. Or rather, not wanting the boy to find her in the same spot. She didn’t want him to think that she had wanted him to find her, just in case he did come across her again. In truth, she hoped that he would. The experience had been thrilling. Like being walked in on while singing fabulously loud and free in the shower because you thought the house empty. Or like being walked in on while making love, and doing spectacularly well at it. It was a shivering pleasure, accidentally exposing one’s beauty.

When Mara settled into the morning’s patch of ground, she arranged her long skirt so it would look especially haphazard, scattering handfuls of dirt into the folds of blue fabric for good measure. She writhed in the dirt and clutched a bursting kitchen trash bag to her chest. After a banana peel slipped out and stuck itself to her cheek, Mara peeled it off and set the trash bag down.

It took nearly an hour for Toby to find her. Noticing her from a few dozen yards away, he wasn’t sure he wanted to get any closer. She seemed like a big raw wound. But there were four glass bottles he could see right around her, and Toby would need to get them. Lane County had one of the highest recycling rates in the state, behind Multnomah, and it was slim pickings for intact glass. He would have

to continue onward. He made his footsteps as loud as he could and jangled the bottles already in his possession. He wanted her to hear him coming. Then she might stop crying.

Mara heard him coming. She felt a tickle in her stomach. Keeping her eyes closed, she suppressed a smile and threw herself further into the performance, pounding her heels into the ground and wailing.

Toby winced and changed tactics to a tip-toe, hoping now that he could retrieve the glass without being detected. Mara, who could no longer hear Toby, decided he was no longer coming and took a well-deserved break. She went still and silent and laid flat on her back, breathing hard. When she opened her eyes, Toby was crouched above her, his hand reaching down for a wine bottle and his wide eyes on her face.

The tickle returned to Mara's stomach.

"Oh!" she cried.

Toby collected the bottle and stood up straight, clearing his throat. With the wine bottle clutched to his chest, Mara thought he looked like he was arriving to a dinner party. Toby cleared his throat again. His eyes flicked to the glass Coke bottle next to her thigh.

"How long have you been watching me?" Mara asked. She glanced up shyly, waiting for his answer.

"Uh," Toby replied, "Not long." He dropped the wine bottle into his shopping bag. "Would you hand me that?" He pointed at the Coke bottle.

Mara gave him the bottle. When it came in contact with his palm, Mara tightened her grasp and tried looking up into his eyes. He was looking down. She coughed. He looked up. Their eyes met. His cheeks looked red. She felt him tug the bottle gently, and released it to him. Then she stretched her arm overhead and laid back down with a sigh.

Mara flapped her eyelashes. They were thick with mascara, which she didn't normally wear, except to the landfill. It felt important to look nice for the garbage.

Toby traced her outstretched arm with his gaze. It looked soft. Her blue skirt had tangled around her legs like a sheet. There was a Snickers wrapper in her long hair. Toby could see from the way they popped a little out of her black tank top that she had pretty nice boobs.

“Will you sit with me?” Mara asked.

Toby considered his options. One involved proximity to boobs. The other did not. He chose swiftly.

“Yes.”

Toby knelt alongside her torso. It took him a moment to fold his long legs beneath him. Toby had a big nose and greasy skin, but his height and broad shoulders gave him an almost-manly quality that Mara was enjoying. They were quiet, Mara just watching him and smiling, until Toby finally said something.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“Mara. What's yours?”

“Toby.”

“That’s a cute name,” Mara propped herself up on her elbows. “Toby, what do you feel when you think of apocalypse?”

“Huh?” Toby scratched his arm.

“Ah-pock-oh-lips,” Mara sounded it out. “You know, the imminent disaster that’s coming for us.”

“Oh, you mean like climate change?”

Mara nodded vigorously.

“I guess, you know, it’s pretty sad,” Toby frowned. “I don’t know, I just try to enjoy myself anyways.”

“Like mindfulness,” Mara said, nodding more. “Appreciating the fleeting present.”

Toby shrugged. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Look at you,” she whispered. “Your heart is broken. You can’t even talk about it.”

Toby just stared. Mara could sense the raw wound inside him.

“I guess, I mean...” Toby had no clue what to say. “I...it’s bad, isn’t it?”

“It’s incomprehensibly awful,” Mara said solemnly. “I can’t believe people are all just...living their lives like normal.” She made her hands dance around, demonstrating the people all living their lives like normal.

“Is that why you’re here? In the dump?”

Mara considered this. Her garbage ritual did feel like an appropriately abnormal thing to be doing given the circumstances. She nodded.

“It feels like I deserve it.” Mara didn’t know why she was opening up so much to this boy. Perhaps it was the dump itself; the sheer size of the trash piles made the place feel like a dreamland, though the dreamland of someone with an appalling imagination.

Toby frowned. “The dump’s not so bad. You make it sound like a punishment.”

Mara was irritated by this. “What’s good about it?”

“It’s kind of like...a big science experiment, I guess. There’s never been anything like it in human history.”

“But that’s the *problem*, isn’t it? It’s wrong, it’s unnatural. It’s not working how nature is supposed to.”

“What’s so great about how nature works? Nature doesn’t make lots of things I like.”

“Like what?”

“Like bicycles.. Beer. Movies. Lots of stuff.”

“But all those things brought us to now. To almost-apocalypse.”

“I guess I just think we’ll figure it out. The human race has figured its way through a lot of really bad shit in the past.”

“You’re weirdly optimistic.”

“I guess I am.”

Mara stared at Toby. He was very annoying, but she was also jealous of how stupid he was. She wanted his stupidity, just for a little while. It seemed like a calming and glittery disposition. Like a slow-turning disco ball. Like all frivolous crap, disco balls always wind up in the dump. Mara had seen at least four, in varying shapes and colors, since her rituals began.

Without thinking a second too long, Mara reached for his face and brought it down to her. His cheek was smooth in a way that made Mara a little queasy, but she pushed past it.

When they kissed, Toby's organs plummeted to his knees, sunk in the dirt. But as the kiss went on, they began slowly to rise, up, up, until it felt like they had left him completely and were floating above him like a halo. Mara became aware of the garbage. She could feel it watching them. Remembering the love it was made of.

He swung one leg over her body and kissed her harder. Mara yanked up her skirt and brought him closer. When they came together, it was sloppy and quiet. Mara made little noises like a cat to fill the silence.

As Toby worked his body into her, he wondered if his rhythm was alright. Was the weird girl enjoying herself? He wanted her to want what he was doing to her. What if he suddenly became unwelcome? Toby nervously tried to keep his presence worthy while while also acting like he knew just what to do with his big man body. He thought of talking dirty to her. He got his lips down close to her ear, but then he lost his nerve and just blew in it.

From the vantage point of the garbage, none of the awkwardness was apparent. There were only vague moving shapes of the pair of them; Mara's blue skirt, her long hair fanning out, Toby's long legs and his bare, white butt that looked rather like a plain grocery store bagel, the kind where the hole has sealed itself up into a doughy line. From a distance the two might have been in love, seized by passion even when enveloped in garbage.

When it was over, Toby stayed on top of her, breathing heavy. He kissed the side of her face before standing. As he pulled his pants up, he said:

“Thanks.”

Then he disappeared into the garbage towers of the Lane County Municipal Landfill.

Mara wriggled her skirt back down, and looked around her. The top of the chain link fence, a few dozen feet away, was visible above the garbage mounds. It looked like a slim silver crown over everything, making the trash into a kind of dull metal royalty. Mara's tears were dried up for the day. Good work had been done on that day. She had acted out humanity for humanity's ruins. Later on, she would write with great detail in her journal about the sheer poetry of the act. But now, she could feel the clouds growing heavy and full. She took a granola bar from her purse and ate the whole thing, giving each bite a thorough series of chews, before the rain came. She relished the water on her body as she clambered over the fence and skipped to her car.

When Mara returned the next Saturday, she wanted to make music for the garbage. She laid down and began to hum as loud as she could. It made her jaw buzz. She moved her humming up and down, switching up the tempo, improvising a song. Any old human song wouldn't do. It needed to be special and original, because no one had ever felt as complicated about garbage as Mara did.

Vibrations traveled outwards from her mouth and spread in concentric circles, catching the garbage around her in golden energy. Or at least, this was what she pictured. They were decaying matter turned golden, Mara and the garbage. Kin to each other. Maybe they were both something special. And maybe they weren't, lying together under the sky. Both brought here, to this ground, by forces outside their control. Mara quieted her humming, but the sensation continued. A perfect void was opening beneath her heart. It felt like nothing and like everything. Her breathing became smoother and fuller. She turned onto her side and found herself facing the mouth of a Coke can.

"I love you," she whispered into it.

Then she remembered who she was, and who the garbage was. Her breathing, smooth and full, accelerated and broke. The indescribable void which had opened up inside her chest closed up, and disappeared. She directed her gaze upward and started to cry.

"I love you," Mara whispered to the sky. "I'm so sorry."

Mara considered all the wreckage. She opened her heart up wide, bringing in everything dark and light and twisted and confusing around her. She accepted

this place for what it was and thought of how history bends itself without our permission. This place was foul and wrong. But this place was what happened.

The pieces of garbage kept humming. Through Mara's soaked eyelashes, the sky looked like it was cracking, readying itself to fall to pieces.

Jo

Driving back from one of the ugliest conversations of her life, Jo sensed she was coming apart. She sat numb and silent in the driver's seat. The wind flapped the garbage bag taped over the broken passenger side window. The interior of the car was hot. The harsh southern California sun was pouring in.

Ten miles from Maggie's house, Jo started talking to herself.

"I'm your niece!" she shouted at the windshield. "Isn't it *so nice* to finally meet me?!"

Her ribcage fluttered, her breathing haywire. She thought mildly of crashing the car again. What a power move this would be. She could actually cause words to come from the lips of a news anchor: *Emotionally unstable woman flips vehicle on the I-15*. She could make a whole new ginormous pile of debt, right out of nothing. Debt collectors would flock outside her home waving threatening letters and shouting her name. She would be like Fergie; they would all want a piece.

These thoughts upset her and made her neck ache.

Arid hills rose on either side of the freeway. They looked somehow alien to Jo. The steering wheel looked like a gadget from the future. This was not an uncommon sensation for her. She thought the strangeness came from everything always dying. Changes were just little deaths, happening over and over until the very last one. Dying things become unrecognizable, the way dying roses smell like bananas, and moldy bread changes its color, and her own face was coming to

look like a different one. And until the finale, there was shame, and there was sunshine, and there were little numbers on screens that pushed Jo into bed and made her wish for the last change to come a little sooner.

Jo knew her anxiety made sense. Doctors told her it didn't. But Jo thought everyone should be anxious. The world was peeling apart in layers. It was slow, Jo knew, but the process had started a long time ago. It was just now that it was becoming more evident, and would only become more so. The planet was boiling and shuddering with the rate of change. Almost no one believed in God anymore. Eventually money would stop meaning anything at all. This was when things would really go to hell. Jo could picture the masses running in terror through the streets.

On the passenger seat there were twelve slit envelopes, each containing bills. She had brought them along to slip into her backpack. Then maybe when she was pulling her phone out to show baby pictures or photos of her mother, one would casually spill out onto the floor.

"What's this?" Maggie would say, leaning down to pick it up. Then, reading the large number that had been circled several times in red pen, she would gasp and cry out, "Are you expected to pay this?! For heaven's sake! I'll take care of it this minute!" Then she would pull out her MasterCard and save Jo's life.

Remembering this hours-old fantasy now made Jo want to disappear. But not in any dramatic way. Jo didn't deserve to drown in the ocean, or crumble away into the wind. Jo's struggles were not so romantic or important as that. Jo

would rather be turned into a grocery store birthday cake, with balloon-shaped globs of oily frosting. Then she would like to be eaten, by a mob of fifth graders, with plastic forks on Incredibles-themed paper plates.

The gap in the dash where the radio should have been looked like a big, stupid mouth. Jo had to sell the stereo on Craigslist. It sold for forty-five dollars. Without any way to play music, Jo would hum pop songs from her childhood. When this made her too sad, she would stop.

When Jo was in the tenth grade, a perplexing decision by the Oak Grove High School drama teacher had landed her the role of Maria in *The Sound of Music*. On opening night, she waited crouched in the wings in a panic. There were a dozen bobby pins sculpting her long hair into a lumpy approximation of the Julie Andrews pixie. Never before did she remember feeling so physically horrible. When Jo stepped onstage, she lost the ability to produce sound. All through the opening number, her lips moved soundlessly against the microphone taped to her chin. Her arms flung out wide, she sailed noiselessly across the stage to the triumphant rise of the orchestra. A bright stock photo of rolling hills and sky was projected onto the wall behind her. The light gave her mound of blonde hair a bluish tint. Mr. Dimitri, the band conductor, stared up from the pit in horror. The kinder audience members gritted their teeth in sympathy, while the meaner ones, parents and students alike, smirked into the darkness. Jo, quiet as a mouse, kept on dutifully spinning. With her arms aloft, she twisted patiently around and

around. She looked expectant, like continuing on might allow for something miraculous to happen, might send her rising up, up and into the air.

It was in the midst of this adolescent horror that Jo saw God for the first time. Her head tilted way back, eyes watering from the brightness, Jo realized that God was in the stage lights. God was in the jersey fabric of her costume. It was in Mrs. Evans, who was snickering at her from the front row. God was in the flush of hot panic washing through her entire body, and in the sweat gathering in the folds of her crotch. Jo had been holding back tears. Now she let them out. There was God in them, too. Jo watched the scene like an old woman looking back on a distant memory. The old woman was laughing and laughing. Alongside her embarrassment, Jo could feel the old woman's mirth, bubbling inside her.

The meeting had been a long time in the making. Jo found Maggie's information online in the spring, and held onto it for two months before making the call. They arranged to meet. When Maggie gave Jo her address, Jo pretended to write it down, saying "Mmhm...uh-huh...okay, you said that's off the 15?" The address had been saved to her phone for weeks.

The outside of the one-story house looked dusty. The door and the walls and the window frames were all painted white. The roof tiling looked like swatches of brown sandpaper. Jo could see that the plastic blinds had been closed against the heat. One section of the blinds was tucked up behind the others at an angle. It looked forlorn, like a crooked tooth. The place was buzzing with the

noise of a distant freeway. Jo had to lean awkwardly on one of her crutches to knock on the door. The knock sounded loud as a car wreck.

“Hi, I’m Jo,” Jo stuck out her hand. “Your niece!” she added, unnecessarily.

“Hi,” said Maggie, extending her hand. “Maggie. But you know that.”

They shared a limp shake, made slippery by Jo’s sweating palm. Maggie had a small frame, and dark hair. She was Jo’s physical opposite, Jo who was tall, blonde and broad-shouldered.

“Come in,” Maggie said, and she stood to the side of the doorway.

When Jo stepped inside Maggie’s house, she thought she was in the beginnings of a panic attack. Trying to relax, she smiled at Maggie’s back retreating down the hall, trying to trick her mind into feeling normal. But her bottom lip kept tucking itself under her teeth in a stupid way. So she tried returning her mouth to a neutral shape, but it seemed her mouth couldn’t remember exactly where that was. Her lips were simultaneously floppy and stiff. Why did her cheeks feel huge? Maggie’s back still turned, Jo opened her eyes and mouth wide, trying to stretch her face muscles back to normal. She was positive she was having a stroke.

Maggie led them into the kitchen. Jo got her crutch caught on the table leg trying to pull a chair out for herself. She did an awkward, sweeping dance with the crutch to get it free, then fell into the chair. She had pulled the chair out way too far, so she then had to scoot herself up to the table. There was a lot of friction

between the chair and the linoleum and the process of getting closer to the table was very squeaky. Maggie had laid on the table two glasses of watery pink Crystal Light, and a plate with cheese and crackers. Once she finished scooting, Jo zeroed in on the snacks, trying to seem calm and hungry like a normal person.

Maggie was standing at the counter, watching the debacle that was Jo unfolding in her kitchen.

“If you are who you say you are...then you do look like him. You’ve got his bony shoulders,” Maggie said.

Jo was alarmed. No one had ever compared her to her father before; she had never met the man. Suddenly thinking she needed to respond as promptly as possible, Jo hurried to finish chewing her Velveeta and crackers. She could feel a film of cheesy paste in the back of her throat.

“Thank you,” she said. Then she promptly entered into a coughing fit. Between splutters, she managed to gulp down her Crystal Light and ask for another.

Maggie was a very regular woman. There was nothing very exciting about her; there was nothing very exciting about Jo either. They made small talk, covered the bases. Maggie was a surgical technician with grown children. Jo had recently finished a degree in sociology, and was working at a preschool. The small genetic link they shared appeared to have provided them with absolutely nothing in common. Maggie described each of her children in depth. Their lives were very boring. Jo nodded along. Maggie kept checking the time. They made it

through two glasses of Crystal Light each before Jo, realizing her minutes in this kitchen were numbered, began to panic.

“Baby pictures!” she cried suddenly.

Maggie frowned. “Sorry?”

“Baby pictures?” Jo repeated. “Of me? Since you never got to see...you know...the real thing?” Maggie had no answer. Choosing to ignore this, Jo dove for her bag and peered inside it. She could see her phone nestled at the bottom, next to the wad of envelopes.

“Hmmm....” she lied. “Where is my phone? I can’t seem to find it in here...I guess I’ll just...Do you mind?” Without waiting for a response, Jo picked up her bag and upended it over the table. The entire contents spilled out. Maggie watched her with a slight frown, but still said nothing. Three of the envelopes tumbled out to rest directly next to Maggie’s plate.

“Oh! I’m so sorry! I’ll get those in a minute.” Leaving the envelopes scattered all over Maggie’s table, Jo opened up the phone and pulled up the three baby pictures she had saved. None of them were particularly exciting. Jo handed Maggie the phone and instructed her to scroll through each picture.

“Well, that first one is my first Easter...you can probably tell from the pastels....then the second one was on my first Christmas, I think, or it might have just been some day that my mom put me in a red dress...”

Maggie looked at the pictures for a polite amount of time then pushed the phone back towards Jo.

“Well, it’s been lovely to meet you, Jo,” said Maggie, collecting the envelopes into a stack and handing them to her. “It’s always a treat to have someone new in the family. If you’re ever in town, do let me know. Or if you ever need anything, you’ve got my info, so...”

“Yes, thank you, likewise,” Jo said, clutching her envelopes. Her heart got very loud and hot. She tried for a relaxed smile. “But before I go, there is one more thing...”

“What’s that?” Maggie began clearing the dishes.

“I just...all these....I’m....very screwed.”

Maggie turned from the sink to face her.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” she said.

Jo started talking with the speed and chaos of a balloon spewing out its air. She explained everything. Jo was painfully aware of how tedious the story was; one bureaucratic tragedy after another, the least compelling kind of tragedy. About losing her school health insurance after graduation, and getting in the wreck six months ago after missing payments on her car insurance. How she broke her left foot, real bad, into smithereens, but she couldn’t pay for the physical therapy so she’d just kept using her crutches and now she was afraid to walk without them. And the bills kept coming, and they kept growing, and the DMV had fined her for driving without insurance, and she had to pay for the other guy’s car, and her student loans, and none of it was getting paid, and then the bill collectors closed in, calling at all hours. They told her she would go to jail if she

didn't get it together soon. Once, a man called in the middle of the night and told her she didn't deserve to be alive. Jo thought maybe she would talk her way into Maggie's heart, but the longer Jo talked the more it looked like Maggie wanted to hit her.

Maggie's jaw had tensed up. When Jo finally stopped talking, Maggie turned away to face the sink.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Maggie said again, this time at the kitchen wall. She turned on the tap, filling their glasses, then poured them back out. "I can't say I'm surprised."

Jo's breathing shortened. "What do you mean?"

Maggie turned back around.

"You call me up right out of the blue, after twenty years of never wanting to know me? Don't tell me that doesn't sound fishy to you," Maggie leaned on the sink. Her voice got louder, like she was calling to Jo from across a great distance. "And why would I give money to a sad little stranger who showed up on my doorstep? Because she says she's my brother's daughter? When he's never even met you? Tell me that sounds like someone I should trust."

Jo fumbled for her crutches.

"You're right....I'm sorry for bothering you," Jo squeaked, trying to stand up and almost knocking over her chair again.

“I don’t want to see you here again.” Maggie said. She went to the sink, her back turned, and began to do the washing as if Jo had already left. Jo collected her things and was at the front door when she heard a yell.

“Move faster, you stupid bitch!”

A plate sailed through the kitchen door, landed on the carpet, and broke quietly at her feet. Jo stared at the three pieces it made. The white porcelain was thick and cheap. Tears welled up in her eyes. She could feel the afternoon slipping out of her fingers like a shred of burning paper. This afternoon that could have saved her. This formidable place, the foreign family that had grown in her mind since she was small. The romance of it; long lost relatives who finally see some missing piece of themselves in you. The way their eyes might look at her and see beauty or talent like Jo had never even dreamed of. By trying to take it for herself, Jo had ruined her last hope. She had trod on it, stomped it dead, like a big, stupid idiot with big, stupid idiot feet.

Now Jo was pulling into her parking spot. She unspooled her legs from the car and walked unsteadily to her apartment. Her body felt old and cramped. She decided she was going to watch movies until her head hurt. She wondered if it was possible to die from watching too many movies.

As she made her way up the cement walk, Jo could see God again. There was God in the dry, sparkling sidewalk, and in the spiky plastic head of the sprinkler. She could see God in her doorknob, and in the place where the rest of her bumper should have been, she saw God too. God was in the damage of the

vehicle, and in the empty space. As she walked up the steps to her door, Jo bowed her head.

Jo shed down to her underwear before laying on top of her sheets. There was no air-conditioning in the building. The heat settled in her armpits and her crotch. Light streamed in the window and onto her bare belly. She placed her laptop beside her, playing episodes of a sitcom that had been canceled years ago. She knew all the jokes already, having seen them many times. But suddenly she found herself laughing. She laughed harder than she had since she was in puberty, giggling with her friends over the absurd things their bodies were doing to them. Jo laughed until she was weeping, over and over in a cycle. The sun angled further into her bedroom, until it was stretched right over Jo's face, and all she could do was turn her head away from the brilliance.

