

Dark Visitations
by Alison Armstrong

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Dedication

Dedicated to my beloved Nicki, my stepbrother Joe, whose photographs inspired the cover, to my mother, grandparents, and all my family members, living or dead, human or animal, whose life and love have nurtured me. To Michael Easton, for his inspiration and encouragement, and to all the other creative artists (Patti Smith, Leonard Cohen, David Bowie, David Lynch, among others) whose work has enriched my soul.

Summer Sacrifice

*The fear within the fascination,
The danger within the seduction,
The razor within the caramel apple,
I shape myself to feed my longing.
Paring away, paring away
Flesh to bone,
Bone to stone.*

During the last frenzied days of summer, my willful sacrifice took place. Exhilarated from the debut performance of my song, “Bone to Stone” at the Bowery Brujas, I left the nightclub purged of fear and regret.

The late summer night air hummed with the sounds of insects desperate to mate and destined to die. Although nearly drowned out by the relentless roar of traffic, their serenades persisted as soft, hissing enticements.

“Come, Alley,” they seemed to urge. *“Take flight with me. Before the winter, while the time is ripe.”*

A screech of brakes blasted my ears. A shadow crossed the swollen moon as I stepped off the curb and met my fate. Struck by a speeding car, my head split open by mandibles of chrome, I bid farewell to my mortal life and awaited my rebirth.

Over a year has passed since my resurrection and transformation, each year of my former existence growing more distant, less real. Released from human ties, I write this account of visions and events to remind myself what it was like to be part of a doomed hominid species, and to preserve with words moments lost in the amnesiac-inducing ravages of time. Only in remembrance, perhaps, do moments gain a mystical luster and mortal life a tragic nobility.

Between Worlds

Like my birth, twenty-seven mortal years ago, my Awakening began in a solipsistic limbo and culminated with a bloody craving.

Between worlds, I floated in cocooned darkness, only the most tenuous of threads connecting me to life. My eyes and lips sealed within layers of cottony softness, I drifted in and out of memories, dreams, unseen noises, and sensations. Sometimes I heard pulsings and wheezings interrupted by strident beeps. Sometimes, from underneath my protective cocoon, I felt what seemed to be hands touching me while voices murmured from above, low and somber. Although my lips were silent, my mind cried out, *“Hear me, awaken me, bring me back to life.”*

Pieces of the person I used to be, moments of her life, emerged from the depths beyond my shrouded eyes:

She begins with a scream, sound and movement erupting, red womb walls squeezing, pushing her through a tight, wet tunnel. Pain slashes like a razor against her skin, and white light sears her eyes.

She buries her trauma with sleep, the blank, wordless hibernation of infancy, not recalling, until years later, what was to be her earliest memory.

A flutter of black wings awakens her from hibernation, ushering in her first verbal thoughts as she sits on the living room floor in front of the fireplace, playing with alphabet blocks while her mom and grandparents, nearby, watch TV. With clumsy hands, she places one wooden block on top of the other, entranced by the cryptic, colorful symbols she does not yet understand. She feels protected and safe, enclosed in her sheltered world as if it were a Christmas snow globe, impervious to anything from beyond its airtight dome. Suddenly, however, the hermetic seal is broken when a black bird emerges from the fireplace. Her precarious tower of alphabet blocks wobbles as the bird swoops and circles around the room.

“Bird!” her mother exclaims, giving this ebony-feathered presence a name.

“Bird,” her toddler self repeats. She hears her own voice echo inside her head. This is the sound of her thoughts, which, once heard, will very rarely be silent. Planted within her, the seed of language evolves into an isolating awareness she sometimes longs to escape.

Imprinted by the black bird, she is initiated into the mystery of words. Adept in their magic, she quickly learns their power and their peril. Through them, she can create her own worlds, yet in them, she can also be trapped.

With unspoken words, I tried to summon my freedom from this immobile body. Vapor clouds of thoughts flowed from me like those in cartoons. I imagined them drifting in the air, mist-carried messages praying for deliverance or rebirth.

I felt a jolting vibration as a mind, somewhere nearby, received and understood them. A whoosh of cool air swept over me, as if flapped by large, graceful wings.

A silken presence touched me, feather-light but insistent, caressing my throat gently, as if to release my stifled cries. Something soft and moist pressed against my neck, rubbing, then penetrating, sharp as a needle, drawing from me warm, throbbing pulses of blood. I felt what seemed to be lips sucking and hands ripping the gauze wrappings covering my mouth.

A briny, sweet substance trickled onto my lips. Awakened into my new life, I cried out in hunger and release.

Strange Forest

“Once there was a forest with strange animals in it,” she writes in her notebook, words eagerly stumbling across lined paper, worlds forming from fairytale scaffolds and her dreams. She writes without knowing or caring where the magic will take her, this child I once was.

This child and her scrawled pencil writings with misshapen illustrations are becoming fainter and even less decipherable but stubbornly resist erasure. This little girl who wanted to live in that forest with those animals still haunts me, even though my connection to her and my former life diminishes with time.

Branches of memory droop, festering fruit so heavy they weaken her connection to the source. A forest of moments, enchanted once, exudes an eerie innocence. In this forest of my childhood imagination, Hero, a collicie deformed by a botched surgery and abandoned by his owners, provides refuge to his family of beasts mistreated by humans. A blind horse with a glass eye, and a kitten with her feet on backwards, among other animals in Hero’s misfit family, are like Mary Shelley’s monster, patchwork entities. Created and pieced together from scraps of stories told by my mother and grandmother, heard on the news, or seen in movies, my characters represent distorted interpretations of tales involving injuries, birth defects, bizarre illnesses, and other disturbing incidents. Scarred by trauma, they find shelter in my fantasies of the fatherly Hero and his tree-shrouded paradise.

Unlike Hero, my own father is absent. When I was younger, about toddler age, I used to think that I was born fatherless, an anomaly no more unbelievable at the time than to think of being abandoned by a father when I was but a shrimp-like homunculus, blissfully ensnared in an amniotic balloon. When I later discovered I did have a dad, I asked why he had left me, and Grandma told me he had mysteriously vanished before I was born. “Lost in a forest perhaps,” she said, the morbid fairytale trope illogically assuring. It was better to think of him wandering, searching for

Mommy and me than to think of him as someone who, I later realized, had never wanted me.

The years of missing an absent daddy are long gone. I'm too grown up to need a father, too jaded to need a hero. I only need the One who, delivering me from mortal bonds, feeds my starving, feral soul.

As I look back on my brief temporal existence, I realize that I was destined to cast it all aside, abandoning it, like my father abandoned me. In my loneliness and alienation, I created stories of misfit animals, and with my sorcerous imagination, summoned unearthly creatures, some beautiful and seductive, some terrifying and malignant. Free from the fatal forward-moving momentum of time, I revisit the experiences and otherworldly encounters shaping my mortal life and foreshadowing my immortal rebirth.

Otherworldly Visitations

Before my stories of the Strange Forest and its collie savior, Hero, could be birthed, before even deciphering the magic of written language, I experienced my first visitations from an otherworldly realm. I kept them secret from my family and most people throughout my previous existence, wanting to preserve the cryptic potency of these personal experiences and knowing that few would believe me anyway. The grown-ups around me would likely have dismissed these visitations as nightmares precipitated by a traumatic move from my grandparents' home in Michigan to an apartment in Virginia and the sudden arrival of a stepfather, Sonny, whom my mom married shortly before the three of us relocated. I knew that the entities I encountered during the brief time I was in Virginia were much more than intangible creations of my lonely, homesick consciousness, but I hid this truth along with the physical evidence they left behind.

Looking back on the time I lived in that place, far away from my grandparents and the home I loved, I find most of my memories, except for the paranormal encounters, evasive, retreating like children playing hide and seek in dusty closets. I recall fleeting impressions—sticky brown and yellow linoleum floors, odors of bug spray and molasses, monochrome tan brick houses with sun-withered crewcut lawns. The memories of the Tooth Fairy and her gruesome consort, Morbidy Graham, however, are as palpable as the warmth of freshly splattered blood against my flesh and the sweet taste of a life-weary victim's last gasps.

The Tooth Fairy

Alone in my new room in my new home, far from almost everyone I loved, I tried to sleep. Tossing and turning, my loose tooth throbbing, I listened as my mom and newly acquired stepfather bickered in the kitchen.

“She’ll get used to it soon,” I heard my mom say to my stepfather, her voice weary and tinged with sadness. She called him “Sonny” but wanted me to call him “Daddy,” even though I had only met him a few weeks ago and, unlike the other kids I knew, never even had a daddy. He and everything else about this new place in this far-away state made me lonesome.

“Nightmares are common with children of her age,” my mom added, though Sonny, as usual, did not reply.

I heard the noise of a chair scraping against the kitchen linoleum, then Sonny’s plodding footsteps, and a door creaking open.

“Be back later. No need to stay up,” Sonny muttered and slammed the door.

Soon afterward, the light in the kitchen turned off and another door closed.

Strange, unsettling clicks and murmurs crept into the gaps where human words had left. Even though Mom and Sonny’s bedroom was just across the hall from mine, I felt as though I were alone, unprotected from terrifying things no one else could hear or see.

Cowering under my sweat-damp sheet, I lay awake as June bugs, driven to madness by the humid summons of the night, rattled against my window’s ill-fitting screens, shellac beetle shells, oracles of restless dreams.

My head was pounding, and my jaw was sore. Back and forth, I rubbed my tongue against a loose tooth, feeling the tooth wobble on the filament connecting it to its cushioning bed.

Around my room, swirling dots began their nightmare dance, mutating into kaleidoscopic forms—glistening minnows grasping at hooks in a black lake, ghostly mushrooms emerging from rancid depths, popcorn kernel-shaped teeth pulsating on fraying roots. The forms swayed, moving in time with my deepening breaths.

I drifted into a memory of a recent trip to the carnival, the mirror maze clown, the dismal bellowing foghorns, and my cousin Amy's tooth erupting in bloody lava over a cone of pink cotton candy. The Tooth Fairy came later that night, Amy had told me the next day, and left a quarter under her pillow. The Tooth Fairy, she said, knew when any child lost a tooth. Like God or Santa, it knew everything that happened when you were alone.

As I waggled my tooth with my tongue, I heard the frenzied, clicking orchestra of June bugs grow softer as if hushed by an omnipotent conductor. All sounds flattened to a subtle rolling hiss, like ocean waves slurping over white moonlit beaches. The transmuting dots whirled slowly, blending, billowing into a long diaphanous scarf. The scarf floated towards me, its lacy edges tickling my nose and scalp like the tingly-bristled tongue of a cat.

I shivered. Enveloped by the scarf, I felt graceful fingers stroke my hair, drift over my face, and gently caress my body.

Something was lying on my legs, something light as a birthday wish blown out in smoke, yet suffocating in its soft pressure. I was drowning, my throat choked with briny tears. I was falling into a deep hole where everything was as quiet as the pause between my breaths and the whispering of worms.

The scarf embracing me slowly grew outlines—twisted vines of long shadowy hair, fog gray eyes—a pale, wondrous wraith-like being from a magical forest where ancient trees hummed archaic lullabies. Her slender body glowed with the powder of moths' wings, naked under her scarf except for a belt of silver coins that shimmered like luminous tears and a necklace of glistening white beads. The necklace

clinked softly, like far away wind chimes as she gently rubbed my jaw. It was a long-ago sound of being rocked and sung to, of being loved and safe.

I breathed in her perfume, a fragrance of lilacs, ripening apples, and honey. Enveloped in her scent, I felt myself whirling on a spiral path of pink and blue jellybeans.

She danced on the path, and as her feet touched each jellybean, it became a pastel sugar skull. At the end of her dance, the spiral of candy skulls complete, she picked up a pink skull and offered it to me.

I opened my mouth to receive her offering, but as I bit into the gritty sugared treat, I tasted something salty and felt a sticky caramel-like ooze tug at my wobbly tooth. Suddenly, the woman thrust her bony fingers into my mouth, wrapped them around the tooth, and ripped it off its bloody, fraying thread.

From her belt, the woman removed a silver coin and placed it under my pillow. Around her neck the white beads glistened, teeth of children linked together in a circle of loss and transformation.

She left me with a hole, a bleeding socket, a raw hunger I didn't know how to fill.

I never told my mom anything about my experience that night, and when my mom asked me what happened to my missing tooth, I told her it must have fallen off the bed when I was sleeping. For a while, she tried to find it, wanting to keep it as a memento of my childhood, but it, of course, was never found. Once in the possession of the Tooth Fairy, the long-lost incisor would remain on her necklace along with the teeth of the other children she visited, a token of sacrifice and initiation into an otherworldly realm. I hid the Tooth Fairy's coin in a hidden compartment of my ballerina jewelry box, one of the few possessions I have kept to this day.

After my experience with the entity I knew as The Tooth Fairy, I realized that the "Tooth Fairy" my cousin Amy had told me about was vastly different than the eerily beautiful being I had encountered that

night. Later, after I lost my second tooth and saw my mom take the tooth from underneath my pillow, putting a quarter in its place while I pretended to be asleep, I understood that the fake Tooth Fairy described by Amy, as well as other people I knew, was just a story told to children. Like Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, it was a fantasy perpetuated from generation to generation, with grownups enacting the part of these imaginary characters so that they could relive their nostalgic illusion of childhood wonder. It was a myth, defanged of wildness and danger, a sanitized paradise devoid of menace.

Morbidy Graham

Stuck in that hot apartment with my mom and occasionally Sonny, I relieved my boredom by playing with my mish-mash menagerie of plastic animals, toy soldiers, and a miniature metal pick-up truck. As the TV blared around me, cartoon characters yelping, laughing, and tormenting each other, I presided over my pretend domain.

I sat on the linoleum floor, raging at the pick-up truck. No matter how many times I tried to stuff my horses and cows into its shovel-like back, there were always some of the diminutive farm creatures that wouldn't fit in. The playtime storyline demanded that they all ride in the truck at once, so they could arrive *en masse* at their new home in the kitchen. I squeezed a dappled horse's legs, attempting to sandwich it between the chubby brown cow and the white stallion, but the damn toy resisted my manipulations.

Furiously, I yanked them all out of the truck and tossed them across the room. The brown-yellow floor reminded me of vomit and that scrambled-up feeling I would get when I was frustrated. Its sticky surface, smelling of gasoline and burnt eggs, chafed against my bare knees as Mom walked by the couch, spraying stinky amber liquid from a canister.

I watched as she picked up a chipped blue vase on the coffee table by the sofa and smacked a waddling brown insect. "Got you!" she yelled triumphantly and, grabbing a napkin, retrieved her still-squirming quarry.

"The spray will kill more of these roaches," she explained as I examined the dying bug.

I had never seen one like this before when we were at Grandma's house. Now, in this new place, almost everything was unfamiliar and scary. I missed Grandma, Grandpa, and Lulu, the large calico cat that helped me play with my toys. I missed the cave-like shelter of our stone house and its fireplace from which the black bird once flew.

The stench of the spray made me feel the same way I sometimes did when I first went to bed—a sensation of spinning and falling, like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz swirling in a tornado or Alice in Wonderland plunging down a long, tunneling rabbit hole. Closing my eyes, I wished I could whirl away towards somewhere else.

I heard the toilet flush as Mom sent the roach whirling to its wonderland. Soon after that, she sent me to mine, tucking me into the clammy sheets like a swaddled mummy as a lurching maelstrom swallowed me in the darkness. Specks of red, yellow, and green buzzed past my eyes, supernova splotches forming a galaxy of spiraling, mutating wormlike shapes. Even when I closed my eyes, the shapes remained, creeping underneath my eyelids, undeterred by the flimsy folds of flesh. Like the June bugs that recklessly splattered themselves against the worn-out window screens, these manic motes defied protective barriers.

I felt the slimy tickle of the vermiform invaders as they glided across the slippery surface of my eyes. Some, opting instead for larger, moister caverns, probed the waxy craters of my ears, mucous-lined labyrinths of my nostrils, or spit-filled cistern of my mouth. I tasted the bitter trail of poison as the invaders slipped between the flaccid folds of my lips, slithered past the bony barricades of my teeth, then slid down my throat.

The poison possessed me, permeating everything I saw, heard, smelled, felt, and tasted. Poison like the undercooked chicken our landlady, Mrs. Crammell, cooked for us one night, and we feared to eat. Poison like her rancid, rotten tooth breath Poison like the fear she inspired when she glowered at me and our new kitten, Tabby. Poison like the bottles of medicine in the bathroom cabinet, mysterious potions marked with a skull and crossbones to warn the unwary. Poison like the skeletal visitor lying against my legs, its cold, hollow bones a reminder of sickness and forever sleep.

“I am your friend,” the skeleton’s voice crackled softly, like a dry, withered leaf.

Its eye sockets were black tunnels leading into unfathomable depths. If I stared into them for too long, I feared I would be lost in those treacherous pits, never to see my mom, grandparents, and Lulu again.

It bent its skull head close to my right ear. “My bones know your bones,” it murmured, “and soon you will know me better. Sometimes, I have a bit more flesh, sometimes I wear different costumes. However, you will always recognize me.”

Its fingers, yellow-white as tarnished ivory, touched my hair, and it whispered its name, “Morbidity Graham.”

“That’s the name you will know me by,” it said. “But I have many others. My names are aliases that change from person to person, from time to time. They are disguises, masks we shed and replace.”

Slowly getting up from the bed, it stood in front of me and gave me a gnarled gray fingernail from its left hand. “There are more where that came from,” it promised, “and more visits from me, too.”

As I wrapped my fingers around Morbidity’s gruesome gift, the taste of poison surged into my mouth. I watched the skeleton begin to transform into an emaciated old man with yellowish-gray hair. He wore a black tuxedo, like an emcee or a magician, and with the wave of a bone-shaped wand, caused a swirl of brown liquid, like dirty toilet water, to gush from my mouth.

“Bye, bye,” Morbidity cackled as I awakened in a pool of puke, my head still swirling with the poisonous residue, the fingernail clenched tightly in my fist.

Words, Bullies, and Dead Baby Birds

I thought at first that the phantom visitors were ghosts tied to that awful apartment in Virginia and that once I returned to my grandparents' home in Michigan, there would be no more otherworldly encounters. That was not the case. The entities, I realized, had attached themselves to me, not to any particular location.

Although I yearned to see the Tooth Fairy again, it was Morbidity, unfortunately, who often spoke to me. Whispering to me of the blooming and withering of flesh, the terror and allure of self-sacrifice, he promised he would visit when the time was right or when I unconsciously summoned him.

In the meantime, I had discovered a new form of magic, the sorcery of words. An enthusiastic elementary school student, I loved learning the sounds of words and the symbols representing them. I loved the way that the words conjured images in my head—animals, landscapes, and even imaginary characters' thoughts. I especially loved using words to create my own sanctuary.

Retreating into this magical realm of my creation, I began writing my stories of the Strange Forest and its misfit creatures. Immersing myself in their world helped me escape the alienation I felt amongst other children who weren't my friends or cousins.

I often wished I could live amongst those animals in the forest or be like the beautiful witch in the movie, *The Three Lives of Thomasina*, healing wounded woodland creatures, communicating with them, spirit to spirit. Maybe I hoped to be healed also, protected from the bullies who often chased me home from school as well as from the sinister visitations of Morbidity Graham.

Living in a fatherless household with my mother and grandparents marked me as different from most of my peers, therefore a target of mockery and suspicion. The more I retreated into my sanctum of magical words and visions, the more I was taunted. In their eyes perhaps I

was a witch. But, unlike the beautiful, gentle witch in *Thomasina*, living in peaceful solitude with her animal friends, I was harassed by juvenile vigilantes as if I were some kind of societal threat.

The most memorable of these bullying attacks took place when I was in fifth grade. As I was walking home from school that day, a trio of girls my age who lived in my neighborhood began following me. The ringleader, Darla, suddenly ran ahead of the rest, barring my path.

“Where do you think you’re going, Loser?” she demanded, grinning at me with her gap-toothed sneer while her minions giggled conspiratorially.

I looked down at the ground, pretending to ignore her challenge.

On the sidewalk by my feet lay a dead baby bird. Pinkish-gray and featherless, its bleary eyes half-closed, it reminded me of pictures of a fetus I had seen in an encyclopedia at school. Like the human fetus, it was a weird, curled up, bulb-headed, incomplete version of its intended form. This baby bird, however, would never become more than an egg-shattered embryo rotting on the sidewalk. Its yellow beak gaped open, as if begging for food or screaming in terror, and its bud-like wings clung tightly to its side, never to experience the freedom of flight.

Sickened by the sight on the sidewalk below me, I almost forgot the threat facing me, but Darla did not forget. Instead, glancing down at the pavement, she smiled, having devised a new plan to torment me.

“Hey, guys,” she called to the other two girls in her gang. “How about we take this thing off the sidewalk?” She then turned to me. “I know the perfect place for it.”

While her cohorts grabbed me from behind, Darla reached down, scooping up the baby bird’s corpse. She dangled it in front of me, as if it were a limp piece of pasta, and tried to shove it down my shirt.

Struggling against my tormentors, I managed to kick Darla in the knee and break free from the other two. As I ran all the way home, my mind racing along with my feet, I kept envisioning that cold, limp, fetal

bird lying against the pavement and the cruelly grinning girls who used its lifeless body as a weapon.

I hoped that, instead of rotting or being treated as a malicious prop, it would become food for a hungry cat or hawk, absorbed into a living creature and given, in a sense, new life. I don't know what became of it, though. The next time I passed by where it had been, there was only a smear of pulp, yolk, and blood. Soon that also would disappear, erased by rain, tread upon by shoes. My memories of it, even now, however, persist.

That night I was visited again by Morbidy Graham. Snuggling against my pillow, the cool cloth pressed against my face, I imagined I was disappearing into the folds of the fabric.

Like Alice in Wonderland, I was becoming smaller, and the folds were like subterranean rooms in a cavernous chamber. The room I was in had gray curtains, a gray rug with a matching sofa, and a small gray-stained wooden table. From an adjoining room that appeared to be a kitchen, Morbidy entered, carrying a tray with a small silver teapot, a dainty china cup, and a silver tureen.

"Be careful, it's hot," he whispered, his old man voice wavering as he poured the tea.

As I sat on the sofa and sipped the reddish-brown tea, I drifted into its soothing vapor. The tea had a warm autumnal bitterness that tickled the back of my tongue, awakening my appetite. By the time Morbidy uncovered the tureen, hunger stirred within me, gnawing and relentless as a caged animal.

A buttery, slightly pungent aroma enticed me. On a dew-sprinkled garnish of parsley and red grapes lay a large golden-brown puff pastry, fragrant with thyme and rosemary. Ravenously, I dipped my fork into the delicate crust and placed the first morsel into my mouth.

Savoring the subtly sweet carrots, tender peas, and rich golden broth, I clenched my jaw as something warm and juicy exploded on my tongue and something sharp punctured the inside of my cheek. In the depths of my

mouth, unseen horrors detonated, slippery, fetid clots of phlegm and rubbery, gagging sinews coiled around my teeth.

Gagging, I opened my mouth and spat out the disgusting delicacy I had unwittingly sampled. On my plate was a pinkish-gray mass that had been concealed inside the soggy, saliva-drenched pastry crust. A yellow beak gaped open, and one half-chewed eye stared at me with mournful re-creation. A tiny bone the size of a needle jutted from a featherless wing.

Forcing my eyes to gaze away from the plate, I floated upwards, past the caverns, past the folds, and back into the cool, white softness of the pillow. I raised my head and saw my Felix the Cat blanket and stuffed toys.

Although, at first, I was reassured by these familiar objects, a sensation of menace seeped like muggy night sweat as I looked at them more closely, noticing disquieting changes. Felix's normally genial smile was tinged with cruelty, and his bag of tricks glowed a sulfurous yellow. My teddy bear, endearingly bedraggled, glared at me from his shelf above my bed, as if remembering years of neglect.

A stuffed poodle, my newest addition, was the most menacing. As the gleam of headlights from cars outside streaked across the walls of my room, I saw his black button eyes shimmer like a depthless lake reflecting the full moon's cold radiance. No longer a cuddly, inanimate toy, he was imbued with divine vengeance. His black-stitched mouth twisted in a crucified smile, and his gray fur, illumined by the passing lights, radiated a greenish halo of sacred dread. This flop-eared god looked down upon me from the dresser beside my bed, passing judgment and determining my fate.

I thought of all the people I knew, each one of them destined to die in some manner, whether through a long, agonizing illness, such as my grandmother's sister Evelyn, or something sudden and gruesome. Either way, the final act was the same. Like the sidewalk-smashed baby bird, we would all end up alone, abandoned to our fate. We were all impermanent creations to be eventually cast aside like neglected toys.

Did God, invincible, omniscient, and omnipotent, watch over His playthings? I wondered about all the prayers sent every day. Were they ever answered, or were they in a pile somewhere like the letters supposedly sent to Santa Claus? Did God hear Aunt Evelyn's urgent pleas to be healed from her cancer or at least saved from the eternal damnation she feared?

I used to envision God as a cosmic cartoon character with a dome-shaped head like Elmer Fudd's but endowed with unlimited knowledge and possessing powers far more deadly than Elmer's rabbit-hunting gun. Like the animated characters I watched on TV, this God was able to withstand any pummeling or gory mutilations imaginable in a sadistic cartoon universe. He could be squashed and impaled, blown up with dynamite, and catapulted off cliffs. Yet He always would spring back, as good as new, while all around Him, the maimed writhed in hospital beds with pumps for lungs and bags for bladders, or some slowly decayed from the inside out, eaten up by cancer in its many hideous guises.

I wondered when the people I loved would lay amongst the fallen. Who would be next in line? Evelyn? My cat, my dog, Grandpa, Grandma, Mom, or me? There was no way to know, no way to protect them or myself from the forces that lay beyond this fragile mortal realm and our fallible, treacherous flesh.

What happens to them when their body has passed away? Are they in Heaven somewhere, sleeping like Snow White, waiting for their resurrection kiss? Are they drifting in a bodiless bardo, tormented by phantoms of their guilty imagination? Are there different types of afterlife, chosen or imposed, including an option of eternal oblivion? Does eternity even exist?

My thoughts spiraled, galaxies forming, dissolving, then recreating, a black hole, like a pupil of God, expanding, then contracting. In the blink of an eye, everything, even the so-called immortals, could die.

These thoughts consumed all hope of sleep for the remainder of the night. When the alarm rang, I remembered that I, just a speck in the whirling dust of the universe, still existed. School, unfortunately, also still existed, and I had to confront the turmoil of another school day.

Mirror Maze

A few months after the baby bird incident, I was visited again by Morbidy. Emboldened now and growing stronger with each encounter, Morbidy no longer waited until I was alone in bed to make an appearance. Instead, he could apparently visit any time he wished, and on this occasion, he came to me during the afternoon while I was visiting Lake Michigan with my mom.

I awoke that day with a feeling of excitement and nervous expectation. Since the trip to the lake took several hours, Mom and I left early in the morning, before the crimson sunrise began to fade in the searing sunlight.

By the time we arrived at the beach, the skull-white sun was scorching its way through the clouds, like a vulturous eye scouring the sky for signs of the dying or damned. I felt its blistering light penetrate my scalp and envisioned it sizzling throughout my body, my greasy flesh slowly burning off my bones, my soul laid bare, all my nasty, scrawling thoughts exposed to an all-seeing, all-knowing God.

You could try to erase them, try to be pure, but if there were any grubby sin smudges staining your soul, you would not be saved, my grandmother's sister Evelyn had once told me. I remembered the terror in her voice as she spoke those words, the infectious terror she transmitted to me. Her face yellow and emaciated from cancer and chemotherapy, she lingered on. While she was suffering alone in her apartment, we, a hundred-something miles away, lounged by the lake, but the same merciless sun hovered above us all, a scavenger devouring prayer.

Pudgy children in the water and bronzed brittle moms on the beach shouted back and forth. "You have to get out of that water, Bobby." "No, just a little bit longer. I'll get out in a few minutes." "No, you won't, little man. You're coming in this instant!" Somewhere in the distance, a foghorn droned, desolate and weary.

As the day dragged on, the oppressive sun slowly withdrew into the curtain of clouds, peeking out momentarily, poached egg pale, then retreating. The clouds, now a dirty gray, appeared soggy, heavy as wet burlap. A storm was brewing, and swimmers began trudging back to shore.

While the waves thrashed against the sand and parents rounded up their straggling kids, I thought of the two teenagers who drowned last year. There was a storm, and they were too close to the end of a pier. Swiped off the edge by a gigantic wave, they drifted in the turbulent lake, limp, lifeless bodies bobbing like lumps of salted pork in a churning broth until they were eventually pulled ashore, bellies bloated with seaweed slime.

Since we could not resume swimming that day, Mom and I decided to visit the amusement park a little way down the beach. The park, built in the early 20th century, evoked an aura of macabre merriment with its displays of wickedly smiling jesters and serpentine contortionists luring young and old to thrilling delights.

Engulfed by the familiar aroma of rancid popcorn, burnt sugar, and mustard-slathered hotdogs, we paid our entrance fee and were allowed through the park's wrought iron gates. Although I wanted to begin with a merry-go-round ride, I reluctantly agreed to try Mom's favorite part of the park, the House of Mirrors.

Guarding the House of Mirrors, a mechanical pink clown rocked back and forth, laughing with robotic glee. I hated the sound of that mocking laughter, hated the garish reflections of light bouncing off the mirrors, but determined to conquer my revulsion, I went along with Mom's plan for us to each go our separate ways through the maze and see who completed it first.

After a short while, stumbling through the self-replicating corridors, I became hopelessly lost in the prison of reflections, moving aimlessly towards an illusion of escape as the clown kept laughing. Its cackles rose and fell in siren waves, ringing against the glass, continually

echoing and multiplying with ear-stinging, nerve-shattering shrieks. Frantically, I searched for a way out, but every corner was blocked by a scowling twin.

I imagined myself trapped in a nightmarish eternity as a never-found child, forever lurking in this crystal cage where every image of me was absorbed, digested, and spewed out into a series of distorted clones, squashed or attenuated, compressed or stretched as if subjected to some Inquisitional torture. Every day, as I languished in my transparent lair, more people would come, but never my mother, grandparents, or anyone who would rescue me, and as I would hide from the neon-illuminated strangers with their rouged, sneering lips and listen to the foghorn bellow distant summons, I would continue waiting for someone who loved me. But no one would remember, and no one would come. Hiding behind the mirrors, I would survive by eating the bits of food left behind by the gorging procession of thrill-seekers drawn into the gleaming web. I would scavenge caramel apple cores, popcorn kernels, and melting snow cones. The salty droplets of strangers' saliva would tingle on my tongue, my only physical connection to the human world. Eventually, perhaps, I would cease to be human, no longer caring whether I was found. My name and previous life forgotten, I would preoccupy myself with my own reflection as it jumped out from unexpected angles, wide and gravity weighted or skinny and sky-reaching. I would become a hologram ghost embedded in glass, unchanged by time. These walls, which bent and glared and shifted their corners to trick and trap, would be my home as I, the ageless child, never growing, never satiated, listened to the reverberating hysteria of stumbling mortals crashing through the light.

Captive to my horror-fraught fantasy, I was so disoriented that I almost didn't see my mom when she finally came to rescue me from the maze. Chiding me gently for my fear, she pulled me to safety.

As the clouds multiplied and the last few swimmers ambled out of the water, we walked back to the car. My skin tingled in the cool

wind, and the soft pin prick of a raindrop tapped my forehead. Soon its fellows splashed furiously against the windshield. The whish-whop of windshield wipers created a lulling sense of safety, like the mesmerizing rhythm of a slow-ticking metronome, but I struggled to resist the impulse to sleep, fearing danger if I did not remain vigilant.

Road signs flashed by. Trees melted into puddles of reflected light. Utility poles, giant Medusas with serpentine wires of hair, whispered cryptic messages. Thousands of conversations traveled via these wires—conspiracies, confessions, prayers.

The headlights gawked at the grisly remains of dogs and cats, possums and skunks flung against the straight black road, ironed out as flat as cookie dough with a rolling pin. Nothing could put them back together again. Their features grimaced, billboards proclaiming pain with clenched zipper teeth, screams of red rickrack cracked in rigid surprise. Their feet frozen in marionette dance, they joined the still-life collage of soda cans, twisted hubcaps, and mangled tire strips.

A thickening fog dripped, draping itself like a dingy, wilted doily on the wind-thrashed branches and transforming the trees into shadowy scarecrows with long, raking fingers. The utility poles, still sizzling with conspiracies and prayers, began to drown in the sticky syrup of gray.

Sounds buzzed and sputtered like a radio that kept drifting from one station to another, queasy easy-listening violins battling against screeching electric guitars. Gradually the frequencies narrowed down to one, the sound of my voice whispering my thoughts inside my head. Like the Wizard in *The Wizard of Oz*, the voice seemed to be coming from some small, curtained control room, pulling levers and pretending omnipotence. It was a “what-if” magician, coaxing maimed rabbits from smooth satin hats. It had to keep seething and babbling or it would burst into smoke, leaving behind the too-large cape and borrowed white gloves.

This was the voice in my nightmares, the foreboding announcement from the sponsor. This was my prelude into the dreams of Morbidy Graham. He had many disguises, this familiar yet evasive stranger.

Illuminated by the jaundiced neon gleam of a road sign, he stood alongside the highway like an ominous hitchhiker soliciting his victim's final ride. With fleshless fingers, he waved to me, a hello or a farewell, I could not tell. Someone would be dying soon, I sensed.

Voices trapped in the wires hissed of regret, fear, despair. I wondered if, as Evelyn claimed, God was listening to every voice, or if He, or She, or It had lost interest in all the hubbub.

Nadia

My closest companions throughout my childhood and adolescence were my cousin Amy and my best friend Nadia. Whereas most of my peers regarded me as an outcast, Amy and Nadia made me feel as if we belonged to our own special club, outsiders and creative co-conspirators in exile from those who shunned us.

Often on weekends Nadia and I would have sleepovers where, in her bedroom or mine, we could immerse ourselves in our private worlds, which were as magical and delightfully macabre as the Strange Forest stories I had written. With the unashamed innocence of childhood, we also talked about our bodies, their mystifying, sometimes scary and unpleasant sensations, as well as their slimy, seeping, and smelly discharges or excretions. Sometimes we experimented with different sensations, such as daring each other to taste an extremely spicy or stinky food (chili peppers, Limburger cheese) or tickling each other to the point of painful giggling.

One night, we discovered a new sensation as we lay in the darkness, watching the multicolored phosphene dots congregate into shapes—objects, animals, chains, and mutant forms—then describing to each other what we saw.

“A train!” I whispered, keeping my voice low to not awaken the slumbering grown-ups in another room.

“I see a toilet!” she giggled, her tiny, breathy gasps threatening to disturb the fragile quiet.

I could barely suppress a giggle as I, too, began to see the floating, fluorescent-bright receptacle of waste.

As if to tease me into breaking the parental rule of bedtime silence, Nadia began to tickle me. Her tickles, however, were not the poking, joking kind we always used to give each other, nor were they the playful little taps a gray-haired auntie would give to an adored tot. No, this

kind was gentle, enticing, like the Tooth Fairy's but guilelessly affectionate rather than dangerous or possessive.

Nadia's fingers, cold from the air-conditioned room, gradually got warmer as she rubbed my tummy. With soft, circular motions, as if she were stroking a kitten, she traced a path around my belly button, then paused. "My turn now," she whispered, bringing her face close to mine. Her breath, still scented with buttery popcorn from our bedtime snack, lingered over my lips so that I could almost taste the sweet and salty flavor.

Tentatively, I touched her stomach. Her smooth, soft skin felt like my own, reminding me of everything we shared, our past, our unknown future, our soon-to-come puberty. One day, our bodies would be different, changing little by little each day, each year. I wished we could stay the way we were now forever. The longer my fingers stroked her tummy, the sadder I became, and the more I noticed a newfound sense of shame creep over me.

I drew my hand away from her just as her mom knocked on the door.

"You girls better get to sleep soon," she gently scolded. "It's getting very late."

"OK, Mom," Nadia mumbled, and we both started giggling.

We heard slippered footsteps scuttle down the hallway and her parents' bedroom door squeak close.

For a while, to relieve a sudden feeling of awkwardness, we whispered about inconsequential things as if nothing had happened between us. Unspoken, however, was a pledge to keep the tickling a secret and never to do it again.

Eventually, sleep overcame our resistance. Night seeped into our closed eyelids, making way for the inner melodrama of dreams to begin.

Halloween

As the sweltering summer gave way to cool, crisp mornings and russet foliage, the season of skeletons and flesh-eating ghouls awakened mysterious sensations within me.

My body felt tense and tight, as if filled with coils and balloons. Twinges vibrated from my stomach to my abdomen, transmitting signals I couldn't understand. spurts of giddy excitement or panic subsided into intervals of lethargy.

My mind, as well as my body, warred within itself. The sound of my own thoughts echoed, like a disembodied voice speaking in a cave, empty words spilling out into hollowed-out spaces. Like Morbidity Graham, the voice was indifferent, even at times inimical, towards my well-being, as if it were an alien being, a bully living inside my own brain yet disconnected from my body and my emotions.

"I" and "me" battled, "I," the tormentor, the sadistic scientist, and "me," the laboratory animal to be tested and vivisected. "I" tormented myself with hideous speculations, "what if" scenarios designed to disrupt spontaneous joy by inflicting anxiety and guilt.

When triggered by some negative experience in my life or a horrific event in the news, the unpleasant thoughts could become lodged in my mind, like a chicken bone in the mouth of a dog, impaling and suffocating. Unlike the chicken bone, however, they could not be forcibly removed. Instead, they had to be supplanted with other thoughts and diversions, such as writing stories.

Writing, playing the piano, listening to music, and cuddling with Wolfgang, my gentle black and white cat, provided solace during my gloomiest times. Although I often hated being human, I found consolation by means of these human creations. They were among the few gifts redeeming my mortal species.

In addition to writing and playing the piano, I retreated from my terrifying intrusive thoughts by watching movies about animals and

otherworldly creatures. I yearned to be a fanged beast, fierce enough to protect myself and those I loved. Trapped in human form with a human consciousness, I especially identified with semi-human “monsters” such as shape-shifters and vampires. They, like myself, had experienced the anguish of mortal awareness as well as the ecstasy of music, the magic of words, imagery, and symbols. They knew what it was like to feel as I felt. They, not the people who persecuted them, were my kin and allies.

As Halloween approached and these supernatural horror movies proliferated on TV, I immersed myself in the world of *Dracula*, *The Wolf Man*, and *Cat People*, fantasizing that I, too, was living amongst them, a night creature roaming free and fearless, eyes gleaming, fangs glistening. I eagerly awaited Halloween, the one time I could partially live out my fantasies.

Halloween’s arrival, however, brought nothing but disappointment. The long black dress my mom had bought me at a vintage store trailed on the floor, collecting cat hair, and the matching black velvet cape reeked of mothballs. Swooning from the noxious naphthalene odor, I put in my ill-fitting plastic vampire fangs, and waited for Nadia to arrive so that together we could enjoy the long-anticipated evening of make-believe revelry.

As I walked with Nadia amongst the sodden piles of rain-soaked leaves, the jack-o-lanterns that used to glimmer with mischievous delight were now vindictively mocking. Pumpkin faces twisted in lopsided leers, strands of seed slime oozing like mucous from their hollowed-out nasal cavities. The stench of rot, putrid sweet, emanated from every porch-lit doorway.

Following behind a group of parent-accompanied toddlers, we watched our neighbors greet their tiny goblin guests with tender smiles and hand them fistfuls of candy. However, when we approached their doorstep, they glared at us with disapproval.

“Aren’t you too old to go trick or treating?” my nearest neighbor, Mrs. Patterson, sneered, then begrudgingly tossed us each a tiny package of licorice.

Some, perhaps seeing us in the distance, turned off their porchlight before we could get there. The message, spoken or not, was clear—we sixth-graders were, in their eyes, too old to enjoy one of our favorite childhood pleasures, too old to be cute and appealing to most grown-ups. Not only was Halloween ruined for us, but so was most of our childhood.

When Nadia and I got back to my house, I ripped off my cape, threw my cat hair-covered dress into the laundry hamper, and yanked out my disappointingly fake fangs. My nights of pretend prowling for sugary, cavity-inducing treats had ended. I didn’t know that, years later, my nights of prowling would resume, but for a much more precious source of sustenance.

Thanksgiving

With Halloween's passing, the skeletons and other symbolic reminders of death were replaced by imagery of plump, stuffing-filled turkeys and gluttonous family gatherings. It was time to send the dead back to their cold, lonely graves and bury our still-living bones with layers of winter-insulating fat.

We feast to survive as well as forget our impending demise. The Thanksgiving of my sixth-grade year, however, I found it difficult to banish my visceral awareness of mortality, intensified by Evelyn's terminal illness.

Unlike previous years, Evelyn would be absent from our Thanksgiving celebration because of her chemotherapy treatments at the hospital. While she battled the treacherous cells within her, I struggled to cope with the erratic, untrustworthy impulses besieging my body.

Like a puppet flailing against its strings, I sought to control the indifferent biological processes governing puberty, reproduction, and death. No longer could I trust the flesh enclosing me or the enticements it offered. Soon I would be a blossoming young woman, womb-spilling bloody strands that could have nurtured life. Someday, I would be a decaying vessel, feast for necrophages. From ripening to reaping, I was an object to be transformed without my will, created to play a part in a drama over which I had no control.

Despite my fear of the future and my lack of enthusiasm towards holiday celebrations, I went through the motions associated with Thanksgiving. I knew I was pretending, not a fun kind of pretending, like Halloween used to be, but a boring, dismal grown-up pretending that imitated, yet depleted joy. To conceal the pain, I had to hide a part of myself, stow it away somewhere until it starved. While it cowered, emaciated and afraid, its imposter appeared to flourish, sated but unfulfilled.

The day before the holiday, the kids in my elementary school performed our required roles in the annual Thanksgiving assembly. As we shuffled into the school auditorium, the teachers arranged their pupils into more or less orderly lines, and the principal, Mrs. Dawson, who at the time seemed ancient but was probably only forty, started plinking off-tune keys on an old upright piano. A teacher beside her solemnly raised his hands, signaling the beginning of the Thanksgiving song “We Gather Together.”

Tiredly, unenthused by the plodding, Puritan-inspired melody, the students sang along. One by one, directed by the teacher of each class, the children trudged up to a large box decorated with construction paper turkey feathers and deposited their offerings. When it was my turn, I walked towards the box, cradling my cans of creamed corn and jellied cranberries, then, at a cue from my teacher, plopped them into the cardboard receptacle.

As one container was filled, another one was brought into the center of the room, and the ritual continued amidst giggles and shushing teachers until the final can was deposited in the last overladen box. The ceremony concluded, we were herded back into our classrooms to purposelessly fidget for a few minutes until the dismissal bell signaled our release for the four-day weekend.

That evening at home, my fidgeting continued. Restlessly, my thoughts turned to past Thanksgivings—the reassuring murmur of familiar voices retelling stories of family lore while enticing aromas of sage and cinnamon wafted from the kitchen, dispelling the autumnal chill. Like a herd of cattle, we gathered together for warmth and comfort, contentedly chewing as skeletal trees, flayed of foliage, waved wind-tossed branches.

When I finally got to sleep, I dreamed of pumpkins rotting on porches, their shells caved in like smashed skulls, their insides blackened with mold. From one of the pumpkins, a candle glowed amidst the decomposing ruins, refusing to be dimmed. As I went towards it

to look more closely, I saw a name etched in the glowing red candle—“Evelyn.” With futile valor, the candle burned despite the melting wax that surrounded it. Walking away from the still-struggling flame, I noticed that another pumpkin nearby also housed a burning candle, but I didn’t want to see if it, too, had a name, and if so, whose name it was.

I awoke the next morning with a heavy, sodden sensation in my stomach and a musty, dead leaf taste in my mouth. Even after I drank my orange juice, the taste lingered, eventually fading by the time our guests—my cousins, aunts, and uncles—arrived.

To accommodate all the guests, my mom and grandfather hastily set up a card table in the living room, where all the preteens, including myself, would dine. The grownups and my oldest cousin, Jennifer, who had recently turned fifteen, would be eating at the dining room table.

Only a few months older than I, Amy envied Jennifer’s special status as an honorary adult, and wanted to be seated at the dining room table too. However, due to lack of space at that table, and to avoid conflicts with the other cousins on the cusp of adolescence, Amy, still a preteen, sat with us at the card table. For the moment, we were still considered children by our adult relatives. I, unlike Amy, was glad to remain a child and wished I didn’t have to grow up. I wanted Amy and me to stay children forever, never having our bodies ripen to maturity and then gradually grow old. I didn’t want to stop playing, stop pretending, and I certainly didn’t want to worry about having children of my own.

As the grownups at their table chatted about their kids, jobs, and other things that bored me, I tried to forget about most of their conversations except for the occasionally humorous or intriguing anecdotes from their past. I focused, instead, on the much more relevant, relatable conversations at our preteen table. Giggling and sometimes accidentally spewing mouthfuls of food as we goofed around with each other, the older ones amongst us were perhaps aware, at some level, that these delightfully silly moments would not last much longer. I tried to put

such realizations aside and enjoy the meal as well as my time with my cousins.

Although the dead leaf taste had faded, vestiges of it remained, distorting flavors. The turkey had a rank, unpleasant tang to it, and its chalky dry morsels stuck in my throat like pieces of cardboard, even when smothered in clotted gray gravy. The jellied cranberries, a childhood favorite because of their sugary tartness and playful jiggle, now reminded me of congealed blood, dark and stagnant as my dreaded future.

Long after we preteens had finished eating, the grownups dawdled with their meals, then continued gabbing for an hour or so until they had worked up an appetite for dessert. Bored by the persistent prattle, the younger kids at our table went outside in the front yard to play, while Amy and I, wanting to make the most of our time together, retreated to my room.

As the aunts, uncles, and other cousins began to leave, Amy and I ventured out of my bedroom to say goodbye. Dishes stained crimson and orangish-brown, smeary with the residue of grease and starch, were stacked in precarious heaps alongside the kitchen sink while Grandma, wiping her soapy hands upon her food-splattered apron, left the kitchen to see her family once more before they returned to their homes. Smothering in the steamy odors of her kitchen domain, she had missed out on almost all the mealtime conversations and barely had a chance to see everyone before they departed with their plastic containers of leftovers.

Once all the guests had gone, the rest of the evening was ours. As Amy lay on the creaky cot beside my bed, we talked and made up silly songs. One of them, a parody of "We Gather Together," featured a hungry family waiting for a delivery truck to bring them the cast-off Thanksgiving bounty donated by us schoolchildren. With the innocent insensitivity of children sheltered in our middle-class homes, never ex-

periencing true hunger or other worldly woes, we laughed at our lyrics about the feast of canned peas and gravy.

We both sensed that before another year went by, we would be irrevocably transformed. Our childhood was dwindling. The adult table, laden with temptations, sadness, and regret, promising happiness yet eventually bestowing death, awaited us, and we would “gather together” no more. Our laughter was perhaps, in a way, a farewell celebration of our childhood, its freedom from responsibility and its blissful ignorance of the world’s vast repertoire of suffering.

Years later, I began to understand the seemingly infinite intensity, variety, and scope of pain that could exist, not only for me and my loved ones, but also for the mortals whose blood I consume. I have no regret, however, for the life I have chosen or for the anguish-afflicted lives I have taken. Unlike humans, who feast even when they are not hungry, gorging themselves past limits of satiety to fulfill some inner void, I do what I must, driven by an unquenchable need to survive that is much stronger, more primal than any mortal desire or temptation. It is a summons from deep within, a hunger of body, mind, and spirit. I also hear the summons of those who need me to end their agony and inconsolable despair. In their cries of suffering, I feel again the human parts of myself I have cast aside. In extinguishing their pain, I reawaken my own.

Christmas Curses

After Thanksgiving, Evelyn's health continued to deteriorate. Hope that she would be miraculously cured, or fear that she would be damned for some forgotten, unappeased sin goaded her to endure increasing agony as she fought for survival.

We were all nervous about seeing Evelyn after her latest chemotherapy session because of the havoc it wreaked upon her body and her emotions. Would she experience a brief remission that would refuel her hopes, only to callously destroy them later? Or would she languish, every moment, every memory a macabre reminder of the life she is slowly leaving behind?

With mouth-clenched forbearance, Grandma prepared for Evelyn's visit, wanting to make sure everything went smoothly despite the stress over her sister's dismal prognosis and the mandatory merriment associated with the holiday. Before her illness, we had always griped about Evelyn's habitual lateness while we waited at the dinner table. Now, however, we grimly practiced patience as tensions simmered and the turkey in the oven began to burn.

When she arrived, looking even thinner and yellower than before, I lost any semblance of Yuletide joy. What use was there to pretend to be cheerful, when everyone here knew it was futile? The lights on the Christmas tree flaunted their festive allure, as fake as the plastic tree they covered and the mannequin smiles we displayed.

A thick, lumpy mound of mashed potatoes smothered with pasty gravy lay untouched on my plate as dishes of cranberry jelly, candied yams, and grayish canned peas were passed around the table. I managed to choke down a morsel of dry turkey, then moisten my poultry-parched lips with a gulp of iced tea. Grandpa used a chunk of bread to sop up the gravy.

"Did you wash this fork?" he asked Grandma, trying to prevent a reluctant pea from rolling off his plate. "See that?" He held the fork in

his hand as if it were a murderous weapon. "I could cut my tongue on it. Can't you see straight?"

Grandma slammed down a clean fork in front of him, then listlessly helped herself to more gravy.

A few drops of iced tea from my glass splattered onto the Christmas-tree-green tablecloth. I hid my spill, my suppressed anger under my Santa Claus plate.

Holidays brought out the worst in my grandparents and their relationship. Sooner or later, one or both of them would probably stomp off into another room while the rest of us tried to maintain the pretense of holiday cheer.

My jaws chewed mechanically at a piece of raw celery as Evelyn started to talk about the new church she had recently joined, one of many she had enthusiastically embraced throughout the years. None so far had appeased her spiritual hunger, but this one, she vowed, would give her the faith she craved during her struggle against death.

Worried that Evelyn's desperate zeal might further upset the precarious peace of our Christmas celebration, Grandma tried to shift the conversation to a less contentious topic. "Have you visited our brother's house recently?" she asked.

"I was there a few months ago," Evelyn said. "A week or so after a teenaged girl in his neighborhood was killed by a drunk driver."

"Oh, how sad," Grandma exclaimed with a worried frown.

"Yes," Evelyn sighed. "So young. We never know when our time will come. As my priest, Father Johnson, says, we can't escape death; but if we put our faith in God, we need not fear it."

"Right," Grandma muttered noncommittally, then passed the yams around again. "Have some more, there's plenty!"

"Yes, please help yourself!" Grandpa grumpily chimed in, handing the plate to Evelyn. "I can barely chew this tough turkey she overcooked as usual."

Passing food around the table was my grandparents' favorite distraction during mealtime tensions. I could tell how tense a conversation was by the number of times a bowl made its circuit around the table. Try as they might to be on their best behavior, my grandparents couldn't resist the urge to argue.

"That young girl is in God's hands now," Evelyn continued, oblivious to Grandma's attempts to divert us with food. "May her soul dwell peacefully in His care, no fears, no troubles until Resurrection Day, when all the saved are given eternal bodies that will never die or suffer again."

"How long does she have to wait before everyone gets their new bodies?" I asked, suddenly interested in the thought of a new, immortal body since my current one was headed towards a transformation I hoped to prevent.

"I'm not sure," Evelyn admitted. "But if she is baptized, then she will be bathed in grace and joy forever."

"But what if she wasn't baptized?" I persisted despite my grandmother's warning glare to stop asking so many questions.

"Well, then, she will either end up in Limbo or in Hell," Evelyn replied.

Mom and Grandma glanced warily at Evelyn while Grandpa stared at his nearly spotless plate. Almost every droplet of gravy had been wiped clean by his bread.

Tears prickled like thorns at the corners of my eyes before dripping down my cheeks. Although I had recently found out that, unlike my cousins, I hadn't been baptized, I didn't until now understand the significance of baptism. It had seemed to me merely a minor difference that set me apart from other people I knew, not nearly as crucial as lacking a father. I didn't realize that, all this time, I had been considered damned in God's eyes, destined for Hell. My tears couldn't save me, not even, according to Evelyn, prayers or good deeds; only a few drops of pastor-dispensed water could protect me from my infernal fate.

Terrified at the thought that I might die at any minute and spend the rest of eternity with mass murderers, I began sobbing.

“See what you have done!” Grandma snapped at her sister. “If Alley and her mother decide she should be baptized, they will do it. I would kindly appreciate it if you kept your religious opinions to yourself from now on.”

Getting up from the table and grabbing the bowl of stuffing, Grandma headed to the kitchen. When she returned, she took away the plate of turkey. I heard her running water in the sink and noisily scraping plates.

Evelyn folded her cloth napkin, pushed away her seat, then walked to the door. “Goodbye!” she said sadly. “I can sense I’m not welcome here today. God willing, I will see you again someday, in this world of the next.”

As she opened the door, she lingered before stepping out into the bleak, snowless chill. There was no white Christmas this year, no splendid winter landscape for her to mark her last Yuletide on Earth, only the slushy remnants of last week’s ice storm and the biting cold wind to gnaw through her bones. She glanced at us, then raised her withered yellow fingers to wave goodbye.

A sullen silence followed her departure. Grandpa set aside his scraped-clean plate, got up from his chair, and shuffled off to his bedroom. Mom lit a cigarette, letting the smoke fill the cheerless space where happier memories were formed.

I stared at the stain on the ceiling, an ancient blot of catsup commemorating an argument that took place long before I was born. It, like my stigma of sin, endured.

My tears spilled, unrestrained. I tasted their salt, like blood, against my lips. Soon, my mom had confided, blood would spill, unwilling, from a hidden darkness.

Sickened by the abysmal feast and frightened of the future, I could sense some dreadful gestation stirring within me, impatient to be set free.

Spring Secrets

Growing up in Michigan, I hated the long expanse of winter that dragged on, dreary, icy, slushy, and miserable. Sometimes, there was a frantic surge of hope, as warmer temperatures awakened the lacy green buds on trees and thoughts of summer vacation. However, inevitably, the chill returned, and hopes were dashed until the fragrant spring season briefly flourished.

During the approximately month-long interval between frigid winter and sweltering summer, my emotions were more erratic than usual. I felt stirrings in my belly, twinges of nausea and restless anticipation, like I used to experience when I was waiting to go on a thrilling carnival ride. My sensations of fear, excitement, and yearning seemed to be given voice in the nighttime serenades of mating cats. There was something savage and relentless within the cats and me, something waiting to burst forth, like a thorn-tipped flower nourished by blood.

During this tumultuous season of my sixth-grade year, our teacher, Mrs. Rees, told us girls that gym class for the day was canceled. Only the boys would be going to the gym that day. Instead of climbing on ropes or doing exhausting push-ups, we would be “*treated to a special movie, just for girls.*” As the lights dimmed and the curious whispers subsided, the movie began.

“*Mysteries will soon be revealed,*” the narrator in the movie gently promised as the flickering black and white numbers on the crackling screen gave way to a lush pastoral landscape. A girl, perhaps about twelve years old, was sitting in an ethereally green meadow dotted with daisies swaying in a gentle breeze. Fat bumblebees flew sluggishly from blossom to blossom as the girl began plucking petals.

“He loves me, he loves me not,” she whispered until the last petal, “he loves me,” was left between her fingers. The fuzzy gold head of the daisy lay at her feet, the pollen-dusted core a useless part of her amorous incantations.

As the girl stood up and began to walk away, the violin-basted music was interrupted by a female narrator. "This girl, perhaps like yourself, is experiencing first love," the woman crooned in a soft, smooth voice seemingly incapable of malice or any aggressive impulse. "Love is a marvelous thing. And there are many other marvelous things that will come your way on your journey to becoming young ladies." While the woman spoke, the movie showed the girl walking down a well-worn path to a small yellow house with immaculately trimmed hedges and window boxes bright with flowers.

Once at home, the girl looked at herself in her bedroom mirror and brushed her long, wavy hair. "You are getting older, taller, and some of you may have noticed other changes as well," the woman went on as the girl admired her supple young body. Underneath her white blouse were the discreet undulations of budding breasts, prickling under the chafing binds of their cloth harness, the bra, the manacle, the mask.

"The secrets of young love, the wonderful joys of growing up will soon be yours to experience," the narrator promised, her voice swathed in layers of antiseptic gauze, sterile and suffocating. *Less savory mysteries*, the female voice insinuated, loomed in the near future. We in the darkened sixth-grade classroom knew what they were. There was a reason the boys were excluded from watching this film. There was a reason they were in the gym, unselfconsciously reveling in their familiar, still trustworthy bodies, running and jumping, unconstrained by the unwelcome changes we would soon experience.

We were stuck here in the stifling female bond of blood. There was a secret too raw to be concealed by simpering euphemisms, a dark, unsightly wound to be hidden and denied. Bandage the seeping hole, stifle the flow, and gag your disgust with a clenched ladylike smile. Don't bleed in public, don't spit, just stew in your own juices. All it takes is a kiss from a prince to make the pulpy mess holy and fruitful. All you have to do is wait.

The Torrent

As I lay in bed, restless and depressed, I thought of the cartoon at school, that silly little lesson of passive waiting. I envisioned the girl now, slightly older, perhaps sixteen. She was dancing with a young man in a chandelier-lit ballroom swarming with couples entangled like elegant pretzels.

As they danced, her white gown floated like discarded daisy petals, her body the glowing center, the source of sticky nectar, not as sweet as the layers of perfume portend. Her polished, depilated body shone like a candle, attracting all the probing bugs, letting their wings and antennae fondle her until they sizzled with desperate urges. Her slippers glided across the checkered linoleum floor, white shoes on a black square, his black shoes on white.

She delighted in the camouflage, white covering the dark, the throbbing hole beneath her gown, and clutched him to her like a shield to protect her from her own emanations, the under-the-bed monsters she hid from, pretending not to see. Tucked deep inside her body, the uterus grasped its egg with rubbery frog-like hands. It had its own agenda, which had nothing to do with glittering ballrooms or fresh-scrubbed young faces. It waited for the signal to release its sperm-covered lure and to squirt its squid ink, sticky, red, and pungent.

The chandelier lights sparkled over the cologne-drenched dancers as a darkness started creeping down her leg. She looked down at her white slippers, speckled a rusty red.

The wetness seeped through her wedding cake undergarments, sticky red icing spilling to the floor. It was like something springing loose inside her, a tight coil released. She was the conduit of a centrifugal flood, gushing unharmed as her partner began to slip, his black-shoed feet gliding chaotically, unpropelled by will, across the floor. He clung to her now, trying to gain control of his leg, but she, eyes shut, was dancing, no longer seeing or feeling him. He was an accessory, a

mere prop, a softly muscled platform for her dancing, stabbing feet. Her dainty, blood-soaked slippers pirouetted over his fallen, drowning body. All the couples were engulfed in the throbbing tide, the headless, twitching rhythm of the flux.

Treacherous Transformations

“The Torrent has come,” Nadia confided, a month or so after the movie was shown and the rest of the school year had ended. We were having one of our usual summer sleepovers at my house, and Nadia was reading from her diary. Having recently turned thirteen, she discovered, to her dismay, that her first period had arrived shortly after her birthday. “Mother Nature’s horrible belated birthday present,” she noted.

We had promised each other to chronicle every gruesome detail of our pubertal journey, no matter how gross, and Nadia’s description of that miserable menstrual surprise did a great job of that. “Like a slimy ball of red snot,” she commented, “Sticky as glue, and the pain was like being twisted from the inside by big, clumsy hands. You know how it feels when you are kneading dough? It was like I was the dough.”

As she read to me her impressions of the “marvelous miracle” the movie at school had claimed would transform us into budding young womanhood, I sensed that I, too, would soon experience this cursed metamorphosis. I had hoped we both would be spared that horrid hormonal turmoil and its putrid discharges.

Despite her body’s betrayal, however, Nadia assured me that nothing would change our future plans. We dreamed of our life together as rock stars or poets. The bloody chain linking us to all our female ancestors, we resolved, didn’t have to shackle our dreams. We could resist the treachery of our female flesh.

The treachery of flesh takes many forms throughout mortal life, from the bloody insurrection occurring at puberty, to the slow, insidious sabotages of disease and senescence that lead to death. While I was approaching the so-called “flowering” phase of life, Aunt Evelyn had been enduring the final flaying phase.

Estranged from each other for a few weeks following the argument at Christmas, Grandma and Evelyn reconnected shortly after New Year’s. During that time, from winter to spring to summer, Evelyn’s ill-

ness rapidly progressed and was nearing the finish line. We all knew that she would die soon, but in our now-frequent get-togethers at dinner, we all continued to pretend otherwise, avoiding any discussion of illness, death, or religion.

Even the day Grandma found out her sister had died, she kept her emotions tightly locked inside. I don't remember seeing her cry or vent her grief in front of anyone. Stoically, with my mom's help, she made the funeral arrangements and notified other family members. I was excluded from any of these discussions and was discouraged from attending the funeral, which I didn't want to be at anyway.

As planned, on the day of the funeral, Grandpa stayed home with me and a few of my cousins whose parents were attending the ceremony. My memories of this day, like almost everything connected with Evelyn's death, were a blur. All I vividly remember is the frightening experience I had.

The night after the funeral, Aunt Evelyn visited me. Nightmare, vision, or ghost, she appeared as a yellow-tinged translucent form floating above my bed. Like a helium balloon, she kept bobbing, hovering, and drifting upwards, unmoored by the weight of flesh or the pull of gravity.

"I left things unsaid," she whispered, her voice ragged and weary. "And they ate me alive—the cancerous secrets turning inward to feast on silence. Secrets I even tried to hide from myself. Too late to shed them now. They remain with me, ghosts within a ghost."

She fluttered near me, moth-like, and I felt a soft, dusty powder touch my face, then she vanished.

That brief farewell was as enigmatic as my memories of her throughout my childhood. Whatever secrets she had, I would never know. I wondered what she had thought about when she was alone, what she feared, what she desired. Although she was a familiar presence at family gatherings, she was ultimately a stranger to me, and probably also to her own sister.

I realized that even the people I loved most, my grandparents and mom, had secrets locked within themselves. Everyone was, in a sense, a prisoner and jailer to their thoughts. When they died, what happened to all those intricately woven but impenetrable inner worlds? Did their spirits live on like moths in a closet, feasting on threads of memory, or did they exist in our loved ones' remembrances, eroding as time progressed until they were as threadbare as an old woolen sweater?

I thought of my grandmother's mother, Stella, who died when I was a toddler, and the only recollection I have of her. I remember her sitting on a wooden rocking chair at Grandma's house, crocheting, while our cat, Lulu, lay at her feet. In my memory, that is all she will ever do. Trapped in that one moment, she exists as a brief impression in my mind, limited to one repeating image.

I wished I could somehow penetrate the thoughts of people I knew before they died, see the secrets they suppressed as well as the moments of ecstasy and wonder they may have almost forgotten in their times of suffering. I never imagined, however, that my wish would one day come true and that I would partake of people's dying moments, drinking in their essence and perpetuating, in my immortal blood, their undying legacy.

Summoning

Evelyn's ghostly visitation left me with a gnawing feeling at the pit of my stomach, like some monstrous revenant trying to scratch its way out of a dirt-hardened grave. Throughout the day, the sensation persisted, subsiding, then increasing in waves, as if I were on the verge of giving birth. At dinner, thinking the gnawing feeling may be due to hunger, I forced myself to eat.

Above the table, the chandelier loomed, its scythe-shaped prisms casting eerie reflections upon the ivory-chipped walls, while the hard-backed chair chafed my spine with its cold wooden bars, imprisoning me in its snare. I felt like the prisoner in Poe's story "The Pit and the Pendulum," slowly awaiting evisceration.

On my plate, the scallops lay, little white clumps smelling of seaweed. As I shoved a forkful of the rubbery mollusks into my mouth, I tasted a slight sweetness overlaying the pungent brine. It was strange to eat creatures I saw only in pictures, never in their living flesh, so to speak. But they weren't really flesh at all, nor bone, just something flaccid, as swollen and spongy as a tumor must be.

While the scallops on my plate huddled between the mashed potatoes and creamed corn to escape my fork, my grandparents had begun another of their almost daily mealtime quarrels.

"These mashed potatoes are as dry as cardboard," Grandpa muttered. His fork scratched against porcelain as he shoved the sawdust-textured spuds onto one side of the plate and glowered at Grandma.

"I used those instant ones you bought on sale yesterday," she said, her eyes downcast. "Those were the only potatoes we had in the house."

"Always some excuse for not learning how to cook." Still glaring at her, he reached for his glass of water and took a large gulp.

"I can only cook with what you buy," she replied, meeting his gaze. "Everything is always sale, sale, sale with you. You'd think we were still

living in the Depression, having to survive on chicken gizzards and canned peas.”

“Well, sorry I’m not made of money like that guy you keep telling me you almost married. Guess you should have married him, saved both of us a lot of grief.” He reached across the table for a dinner roll and used it to sop up the runny creamed corn remaining on his plate.

“Well, maybe I should have.” She pouted. “I often wonder what life would be like if I hadn’t made the mistake of falling in love with you.” She stabbed at one of the scallops, her mouth tightly clenched.

“What good does it do to wonder how our lives would be different?” Grandpa scoffed, looking down at his plate scraped clean of everything but the mashed potato mound in the corner. “Nothing can be changed now.”

He rubbed his jaw, fingering the scar from the cancer surgery he had when I was a toddler. “Nobody gets what they really want in this life. I didn’t want this cancer, nor the radiation therapy that destroyed my sense of taste and smell. You didn’t get everything you wanted, so what? Boo hoo.”

“I didn’t ask for this kind of treatment either,” Grandma said, her voice cracking. “Do you think I wanted to end up waiting on you hand and foot, always hearing you complain about my cooking or cleaning? You were hardly ever at home when our kids were growing up, but now you’re the expert on household chores? I’m tired of being treated like your doormat!”

Wiping her eyes, she got up from her chair, grabbed her plate, and walked stiffly into the kitchen. I could hear utensils clattering and cupboard doors slamming.

Slumped forward in his chair, his elbows on the table, Grandpa cradled his head in his hands. He sighed and remained silent for a while as Grandma banged and rattled things around in the kitchen. Then, easing himself up from his seat, he looked at Mom and me. “I’ll be out

of her way someday soon enough, just like her sister,” he said softly, his thick-lensed glasses blurry with tears. “Then she’ll be happy.”

Walking over to me, he patted my head. “I’m going to bed now. Sweet dreams, honey.”

Torn in the middle between warring grandparents and my mom, who, like myself, tried to remain neutral, I felt the gnawing sensation intensify. Something inside me wriggled and constricted, struggling for release.

As the hours slouched towards evening, the symptoms would ebb, then resurge. Too restless to go to bed early, I lay on the dilapidated brown couch in the living room with my mom, watching an old black and white movie featuring long-dead actors. The couch, shredded by cat claws, evoked memories of the felines who had lived here, most of them long departed to kitty heaven or wherever they go when they leave us still in our bodies. Lacking concepts of limbo and damnation, they are spared the punishing guilt and shame of their human companions. They are granted an innocence and grace we will never regain.

Bored with the movie, a comedy about a rich married couple on a ramshackle farm, I opened up my diary to write. While I tried to ignore the raucous cackle of the TV and find the right words to express my jumbled-up feelings, the thing within me squirmed furiously, as if wanting to be spewed out onto the pristine pages.

The lamp behind the couch peered over my shoulder, framing me in its blinding predatory gleam. I fumbled for words, as my mind momentarily went blank, erased by a light which seemed to reverberate, drum-like, throughout my body.

Shielding my eyes, I reached up towards the lamp and clicked its dimming switch. The light, softened to an amber glow, enveloped the room, giving everything the slightly sallow tint of a sepia photograph.

I gazed at the ship painting above the fireplace. There for as long as I can remember, probably even there before I was born, it was an integral part of my earliest and fondest childhood memories. All these

years, that white-masted galleon had surged through an iron-gray sea, never stopping, even though there was no land in sight and it never reached its destination, wherever that may be.

If I stared just right and then unfocused my eyes, I could feel the ship stalwartly plowing through the turbulent waves, rocking and swaying. Watching the ship's dizzying movement made objects in the room sway also. The lamp, the bookshelves, and even the few scrawled words I managed to write lurched and reeled, sliding from side to side while my already queasy stomach churned like a whirlpool of stagnant mollusk-tasting liquids.

The bitter, sea-salt taste bubbled up my throat, choking out any other impulse except the need to puke.

I barely made it to the bathroom and didn't quite manage to put the seat up before I started vomiting. The pale, puffy, bloated scallops floated like turgid bodies dredged up from a sepia lake before I flushed them out of sight, but the aftertaste of them lingered.

Lying in bed, I waited for the spasms to subside. I huddled in my Felix the Cat blanket, my childhood shelter. However, I would never be able to keep my childhood from ending nor protect myself from all the dangers my mom and grandparents had deceptively promised they could shield me from. Like a snake shedding its too-tight skin, I would slowly cast aside my prepubescent form, reshaped by an unwanted transformation. I could feel my body splitting open, torn apart until my old self gradually withered away and my new form, like a sanguinary bud, burst forth from its corpse.

To try to relax and, hopefully, sleep, I visualized sheep jumping over a fence. Taking a deep breath and closing my eyes, I pictured a green field, such as the ones I had seen in photos of England, with fluffy white sheep watched over by a vigilant collie. Herded by the collie, who resembled Hero in my childhood books, the sheep approached the gate and gracefully jumped over it.

Suddenly, however, there was a savage growl and a loud shriek of pain. One of the flock lay in a writhing woolen heap as the collie, fangs bared, mouth dripping with blood-tinged foam, stood over his dying, mutilated victim. Lunging rabidly at the sheep, the collie seized another, then another, of the terrified flock. As he slashed and devoured his passive prey, the flock kept pressing together until they had no air to bleat or breathe.

What had started out as a bucolic sleep-inducing visualization had turned into a scene of pastoral panic and monstrous fury. The protector of the flock, my Hero to the vulnerable, had become a rabid beast, a murderer.

As if roused by my anti-Hero's rage, the pangs in my abdomen and throbbing in my head increased. Staggering into the bathroom again, I opened the medicine cabinet to look for an aspirin. Emerald and sapphire bottles with hard-to-pronounce labels beckoned, each with a power that could heal or destroy.

Many of the bottles contained substances whose uses I was not familiar with. What magic, I wondered, lurked within these unknown containers, and what would it do? I envisioned myself opening one of the mystery bottles, taking out a tiny white, yellow, or pink pill, and letting it slide down my throat. Then I would wait minutes or hours to see what effects it would have. Would I fall effortlessly into a peaceful sleep, like Sleeping Beauty, or would my belly swell with poisonous acids as I retched myself into a purgatory of pain?

As I stared at those bottles, I seemed to see Morbidly Graham's skeletal face, his arms folded crossbones-fashion, a doom-dealing genie dispensing temptations.

I turned away from his leering grimace and settled on a reassuringly familiar bottle containing an over-the-counter analgesic I had often taken when needed. As the pill made its way towards my stomach, a deep pang shivered through me, like an old, love-lost ballad. A spasm released, and something warm trickled.

The Torrent had come, leaving its scarlet sign upon my underwear and a defiant rage within me.

Vampire Visions

That night of my unfragrant flowering, as the blood gushed like sap down my legs, I staunched the flow as best as I could with one of my mom's sanitary napkins I found in the bathroom closet, then, waiting until the lights in the rest of the house were turned off, went into the living room and switched on the TV. Since it was a weekend night and I frequently would stay up late on Saturdays to watch movies, no one minded if I had the TV on after everyone had gone to bed. Flipping the channels, I caught the beginning of an old horror film I had watched a few times before.

Flickering light from the TV slashed away at the darkness, rousing dormant reveries. Shrouded in a red plaid blanket, my cat Wolfgang by my side, I watched, transfixed, as a thin, white hand slithered out from a dusty coffin. It crawled, spider-like, across the coffin lid, then lifted it up. The ancient wood creaked, dust floating out into the moonlit crypt, and the vampire emerged. Stepping out of the coffin, he spread out his cape, then tucked it back around his body like the wings of a resting bat. Eyes glowing, cat-like, he seemed to stare directly at the television screen separating us, summoning me.

As the light of his eyes illuminated the vale of mist, I imagined the vampire guiding me to him.

A sleepwalker, a puppet with invisible strings, I moved towards him. But unlike a puppet, I knew what I wanted and proceeded of my own volition. He awaited me on the other side of the mist, a realm beyond life and death, dream and waking.

No longer bound by the black and white confines of 1930s celluloid and the TV, he assumed the elusive form of my fantasies—seductive and fierce, with graceful, feral beauty. His image shimmered, a ripple in water, a mirage that entices, then evaporates.

Opening my eyes, I discovered that the movie had ended, and a schmaltzy old musical was now on instead. Although I had slept

through the rest of the film, I knew, from past viewings, what had taken place. It had concluded, as most of the old horror movies from this period had ended, with vigilante villagers celebrating after the unearthly menace was ceremoniously slain. I hated those endings, that sanctimonious crap that made humans out to be the virtuous ones, even though mortal people often did far worse things than these fictional vampires and other monsters did, and for far less valid reasons than mere survival. At least, having been spared that disappointing, predictable ending, I could invent my own fantasy conclusion.

Someday, I convinced myself, my otherworldly lover would come, responding to my summons, awakening me from my unfulfilling mortal hibernation. His kiss would be as bloody as my dreaded monthly curse; however, his would be a gift I welcomed.

Groggily, I turned off the TV and went back to bed, yet, now in my cozy haven, I wasn't ready for sleep. I kept thinking about my fantasy, wanting it to be real.

Eyes closed, I conjured up the vision of my vampire. From the mist, a slender form, clad in black, emerged, the face indistinct except for the glimmering eyes, which were the color of a turbulent ocean. Even though the mist concealed the vampire's features, I knew he was beautiful, a male counterpart of the lithe, seductive Tooth Fairy.

As I concentrated on my vision, my hands wandered, guided by my desire. Unearthly trembles and theremin trills escalated down my spine, as, alone in the dark, I stroked with fingers I pretended were his, my inner thighs and budding breasts. I had never done that before, but Nadia had told me she had discovered secret pleasures this kind of touch had given her. The caresses I gave myself were soft, gentle, and sensual like those of the Tooth Fairy long ago, yet whereas the Tooth Fairy's reminded me of lullabies, these were more like whispers of yearning. The whispers grew more urgent, the arousal more intense. I felt as if I were falling into a deep cavern, descending faster and faster, losing control with every moment of my descent.

Excitement turned to fear. What would happen to me when I reached the bottom of this descent, fully surrendering to the powerful sensations I had been told might await? As fear then turned to guilt, I forced myself to stop. My fingers and my whole body now felt dirty. I wondered if I were already damned.

Puberty

As I lay there, suffocated by guilt, sorrow, and loneliness, a painting I had seen in a book at my cousin Amy's house resurfaced in my memories. In the painting, "Puberty," by Edvard Munch, a naked young woman sits huddled on a bed, her hands clasped modestly below her waist, her eyes frightened. Behind her, a shadow looms like a dark, ominous wing. Her body has begun to transform, her arms still gangly as a preteen girl, yet her small breasts already growing rounder. Her sad, scared face shows that this change is an unwelcome surprise, an end to the child she once was. Alone, she is exposed to all as if she were on display in a hospital ward or a creature in a zoo, a captive object, but her eyes seem to gaze inward, contemplating her inner self, the part she wishes to protect from external scrutiny.

Fascinated by the painting, Amy and I both kept staring at it, returning to that page again and again throughout the day. Never before had we seen an artist depict so unflinchingly an inner torment we, even at our young age, had experienced at moments in our nightmares and dread-filled imaginings.

As months passed, the "curse," aptly named, had become a part of my life, a part I tried to conceal from almost everyone except Amy and Nadia. With every intrusion of this uninvited guest, I was reminded of my biologically predetermined role as a receptacle for future babies, a vessel vulnerable to impregnation and rape, all the while being subjected to monthly torture. More than ever, I was alienated from my body, my gender, my human mortality.

Although some young women I knew in school had embraced their newfound womanhood, either because they hoped to one day become a mother or because they saw in their monthly cycles an empowering magic attuned to Nature, I regarded it as an embarrassing and depressing reminder of my body's mutiny against my wishes. Even worse, it emphasized to me that, as a woman, I was associated with all of the

misogynistic myths used for centuries to deprive women of equal rights and make them feel inferior to men. Anger seethed within me, towards men, towards society, towards everything reinforcing my feelings of vulnerability, passivity, and powerlessness.

To give my anger a voice, I played the piano and wrote rage-filled, doom-laden lyrics. Since Nadia shared my disgust for our monthly menace, we often worked together on our songs, with her on bass, guitar, or keyboard and me on vocals, sometimes also guitar. Modeling our personae, in part, on punk, glam, and Goth performers such as Patti Smith, David Bowie, and Siouxsie Sioux, we strove to project an image of ferocity, androgyny, and foreboding.

School, family matters, and other draining aspects of mundane life swallowed up most of our time, but Nadia and I practiced together whenever we could. At school, I often scribbled lyrics while pretending to take notes for class. Then, when I got home, I would work on melodies to accompany what I had written.

The stolid upright piano had seen better days, its yellowing keys, like a derelict's tobacco-stained teeth, revealing decades of neglect prior to its arrival at my grandparents' house. As my fingers glided over the chipped, uneven keyboard, a scent of cinnamon mixed with dust emanated from the old wooden hammers and their ragged velvet pads. Melodies trapped from previous eras solemnly throbbled through that cavernous heart of the ancient instrument.

Wolfgang, my black and white cat, sat on the floor by the pedals, as if transfixed by the melancholy evocation of moonlight and waves. Playing "Moonlight Sonata," I let my mind, as well as my fingers, drift in a reverie inspired by the music. Echoes of doom dredged up primeval creatures unlit by the garish sun, creatures of dreams alluring yet deadly, beautiful yet monstrous. Above these oneiric phantoms, the lovely legato melody soared with a feverish crescendo, then descended slowly, inexorably towards the insatiable depths and the sucking mouths that feed on hope.

Like that fragile melody, I too was drawn to the murky darkness and the pallid night-awakened creatures whose incessant cravings, immune to death, infested and addicted. Seductive, lethal as a poisoned candy apple, the Tooth Fairy had imprinted me with her enticing caress. I yearned for a dangerous savior who, like her, consumed and sustained. He would wait for me in vibrating silence after the last chord and my last mortal word.

Memento Mori

My vampire fantasies, my songs of rage, and my close friendship with Nadia sustained me during my bleak adolescence. At moments I almost felt the spontaneous happiness I had taken for granted during early childhood, but then, a sudden, terrifying thought would poison my joy. I would remember Aunt Evelyn, her damnation theology, and the cancer that slowly consumed her. I would hear again her wavering voice, merging with Morbidity's dry leaf whispers in a skeletal recitation of fleshly woes.

After Evelyn's death, Grandma had locked in her grief. Her mouth tightly clenched, she had refused to let out a sob if anyone else was present. When Grandpa was, like her sister, diagnosed with cancer, she retreated even further inside her stoic fortress.

I had become so engrossed in my own inner battles that I was at first oblivious to the subtle changes taking place with everyone else in our house shortly before Grandpa's diagnosis. I didn't notice that Grandpa spent even more time in his bedroom, sometimes not bothering to eat meals with us anymore. When he wasn't in his bedroom or going to flea markets for items he could re-sell, he would be having hushed conversations on the phone with people who didn't seem to be friends or his antique business associates.

I had heard about his former experience with jaw cancer and the radiation therapy, which had saved his life but destroyed his sense of smell. Although that had happened many years ago, when I was a toddler, it was still often a cause of his grumpiness at mealtimes, a way for him to direct his anger towards Grandma's cooking even though he couldn't taste anything anyway. Now, due to his frequent absence, mealtimes, though quarrel-free, were disturbingly quiet.

One day, after I returned home from school, my thoughts focused on a dreaded geometry test, Grandma told me that Grandpa was in the hospital. "Cancer again," she explained, "along with severe emphysema.

Your mom's with him now, talking with his doctor about possible treatments. They should be home soon, and then we can find out how to deal with his illness."

She stood, grim-mouthed, at the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, a glass of lemonade in one hand, then walked over to the table and placed the glass in front of me.

Slowly, I sipped on the lemonade, letting its tart sweetness trickle down my parched throat as a suffocating numbness seeped into me, drop by drop. I wished I could stay numb like this, in a suspended half-sleep, until I would awaken and realize this moment had all been a dream.

There were no magic words to make it disappear like a banished nightmare. There was no such cure for me or for Grandpa.

For over a year, the vigil continued. Often, when I tried to sleep, I would hear Grandpa coughing. Despite his dire diagnosis, his body resisted defeat, trying to eliminate its invaders, each mucus-moist cough an expulsion, each wheeze a curse of weary defiance. His resistance was weakening, though, and I could hear, in his late-night sighs, the hiss of disgust at this body that would eventually fail him.

The grave inside Grandpa deepened each day as his flesh gradually gave way to hollows and bones. I could see his vertebrae protruding like sharpened prehistoric weapons and his eye sockets opening towards unfathomable darkness. Only the dead and undead have seen the secrets the skeleton's grinning mouth refuses to disclose. The still-living mortals must wait for that revelation. Until then, the vigil resumed.

During the day, when Grandpa wasn't in bed, he sat in the living room on his recliner beside a tall wrought iron lamp with a maroon velvet shade. From his nostrils, a long, coiling plastic tube connected him to an electric oxygen machine. Often, while seated there, he prayed or else hummed unidentifiable melodies. His voice keened like a monotone harmonica, and his hands clawed the air like puppets trying to wrest control of their strings. For a moment the frenzied groping paused, and

Grandpa cocked his head, perhaps listening to a sound only he could hear. Suspended between realms of memory and eternity, he could do nothing but wait and suffer until his earthly agony had ended.

What did he think of as he sat in that chair or lay alone in his room? Did he relive events of his childhood? Did he cry for his mama to chase away the creeping night things that stalked him? Or did he cling to the few remaining moments in which the suffering subsided, and he became peacefully aware of Rosie, our old dog curled up beside him, her warm muzzle tickling his cold, gray feet? She was there for him when no one else could help him, when even God, apparently oblivious to his prayers, left him dangling in his lonely limbo.

Soon everything, including these brief interludes of comfort, would be taken away. Even his memories would belong to someone else, filed away in drawers, recorded on tapes, transplanted, transported.

At night, when I wasn't kept awake by Grandpa's coughs, I often drifted into dreams about revenant beings. Morbidly and his ghoulish cohorts would escort me on gruesome journeys through corpse-cached alleyways, or the Tooth Fairy and her alluring consorts would guide me towards lurid delights.

One night, in my bedroom, I sensed a faint fluttering movement stirring the air around me. Too tired to get up and turn on the light, I opened the drawer of my bedside cabinet and fumbled for the flashlight I stored there for emergencies.

Shining the flashlight into the darkness, I saw a moth flying near my partly open closet door. Enticed by luminance, the moth flew towards the light and was surrounded by its halo. Its flapping wings reminded me of Grandpa's frail, white hands flailing beside the lamp when he sat in his recliner. His fingers would clench as if grasping the eidetic ghosts of memories or clutching the hand of a fleeing seraph that left him shrouded in shadowed solitude.

I wondered if there were other moths lurking in the closets yet tempted to enter the aureole, mate within its circular glow, then, lay

eggs inside the sheltering cluster of clothes. Cocooned in cached and cast-off clothes, generations might thrive, mutating amongst the woolen threads until, with powdery wings, they took nocturnal flight.

Rivals

Rage and despair clawed within me as I battled the blossoming of my body while Grandpa passively surrendered to the slow withering of his.

To distract myself from the sounds of Grandpa's liquid coughs, I plugged in my headphones and listened to music while writing lyrics for future songs. Sometimes when it was warmer outside, I would open my bedroom window at night and listen to the crickets and other creatures serenading would-be mates. I especially liked to hear the amorous yowls of cats gathering in gangs to declare their desire and challenge any male contender to the estrus-frenzied feline soliciting them. As the toms crooned their bawdy love songs to their queen, she screeched encouragement, goading them into fiercely shrieking battles.

I imagined their savage brawling, fangs tearing, claws gouging, blood and severed body parts strewn as offerings on their feral Aphrodite's altar. After a brief silence, in which the defeated toms would lay wounded or stumble off in retreat, there would be a spine-tingling screech as the queen, haunches raised, let the spiked shaft of her victorious lover fill her with his scorching seed.

Listening to them, I temporarily forgot about my mortal humanity and its imprisoning constraints. My mind would drift, untethered to my body. Floating in a current of pulsating energy, I would travel, taking feline form as either the lusty queen or her tumescent tom. I would feel velvety fur caress me, needle-sharp teeth penetrate me, and a flood of prickling warmth pervade me. Enveloped in bliss, I surrendered to sleep, not wanting to awaken.

With the strident ringing of an alarm, however, another school day would begin. Classes filled with boring teachers and taunting students, then home, dinner, hours of nerve-wracking homework, and nights of Grandpa's coughing would replay themselves. That was the regimen of my life, a rhythm as rigid and unvarying as a continually clicking

metronome. I yearned to break free from this routine and my unfulfilling existence.

Sometimes despair and rage were so inundating that I couldn't summon the energy to write or play the piano. Instead, I would focus those poisonous emotions inward as weapons against my body.

One of my weapons I discovered by accident when I was shaving my legs. For many months after the downy hairs on my legs and armpits began proliferating, I ignored Mom's insistence that I start shaving them and watched inattentively when she showed me how to use the razor. On a whim, however, I decided one day to follow her advice.

Placing the razor against my lathered leg, I felt the blade struggle at first to sever the hair, but eventually, a path was cleared through the soft fuzz. A drop of blood startled me, temporarily halting my assault. It bubbled up from some invisible crack and shimmied down my ankle. Dowsing the wound with water, I watched red swirls gurgle down the shower drain. After smothering the flow with a bandage, I noticed a few unconquerable simian hairs still remained on my shiny, spindly, scabby legs. Feral outlaws, they refused depilating domesticity.

As I learned from this first shaving experience, the razor provided a handy, easily accessible tool to express my fury. When newly sharp, it could swiftly and satisfyingly inflict gouging marks upon my body. A few slashes would be just enough to create a cathartic release of blood and tension. The remaining scar, lasting sometimes a week or more, would be my trophy, hidden from all eyes except my own. It was my treasure, my savage solace.

Watching Grandpa get thinner and sicker as he grew closer to death inflamed my alienating anger. Soon he would be free of his burdensome flesh and all its demands—to eat, to sleep, to shit, to painfully breathe. He was nearing perfection, skin and fat giving way to the incorruptible hardness of bone, while I was enmired in my blooming, trickling, traitorously transforming body. I started to see him as a rival, envying his skinniness, perceiving it as a sign of ethereality and purity.

The nausea that preceded my first period, that smell of stagnant sea life, that churning from the abdominal abyss was repeated every month, reinforcing my disgust towards my mortal female form. Eventually, the nausea became pervasive, strangling my appetite.

After I took a few bites of something that used to be one of my favorite foods, my stomach would clench, and the smell and taste of whatever was on my plate would repulse me. I would sit there, dawdling with my fork for a while so my family wouldn't suspect I had stopped eating. Then, when Mom or Grandma was finished with the meal, I would take my plate into the kitchen and quickly throw away the fork-mangled carnage. Mingled in the trash with the rest of the family's scraps, wasted food couldn't be identified, and my secret, I hoped, would remain undiscovered.

Each day, as bones revealed their outlines beneath my flesh, I felt I were growing closer to Grandpa, but as I tried, vicariously, to mirror his flesh-flaying transfiguration, I realized he would soon be the victor of my contest, leaving me behind to wallow in my misery. His destination and its unspeakable revelations could not, as yet anyway, be shared with me. Bone to bone, we hugged each other, the space separating us a vale of hungry ghosts. No matter how close we got, there would always be this desolate, lonely space.

What started out as a contest to prove my love soon became an obsession. The protruding bones were a shield, crossed spears sharpened as weapons. They were dagger-tipped barriers keeping everyone out except the ones I invited.

Vigil

At the beginning of another frigid winter, Grandpa was taken to the hospital for the last time. Christmas lights glimmered along the way, their seductive glimmer reflected in the cascade of self-annihilating snowflakes. Such lights always used to blanket me with the fairy tale flannel of happily-ever-afters. Like the love-lit amber eyes of our dog Rosie, like bonfires nestled in encompassing darkness, they promised warmth and protection. Now, however, I could see beyond their sparkly illusion of joyful renewal, see the dying evergreen tree they smothered. Uprooted from its life source, its sweet-scented needles desiccating, it languished beneath their electric radiance, to be tossed aside when the Christmas season was over, or it could no longer conceal the signs of death.

The lights, leering with holiday cheer, mockingly guided our way into the waiting room. As Mom lingered outside to finish her cigarette and Grandma settled into a green vinyl chair, I slouched on a gray fabric sofa near the overhead TV set.

Beside the couch stood a white plastic table littered with magazines and children's books. A paper coffee cup, half-full of brown liquid mixed with someone's anxious spittle, perched precariously on the table's edge as if left behind in panic.

The TV struggled to command the attention of the few people bidding their time there. Since it was two days before Christmas, commercials proliferated with holiday imagery—sledding, snow-suited teddy bears, manic gift-juggling shoppers, and giggling, gift-unwrapping toddlers. Piped-in secular Christmas songs and an overburdened artificial tree crowned with a winking, torso-less Santa completed the drearily festive atmosphere.

Tearing myself away from the annoying lure of the TV, I turned to the magazines. While Grandma was striking up a conversation with a middle-aged woman next to her, and Mom, having finished her ciga-

rette, sat on the couch beside me, I leafed through a *Ladies' Home Journal*, skimming past photos of spongy elf-shaped cakes, wiggly green and red gelatin desserts, and toothless babies with rubbery wrinkled faces.

Bored with the magazine, I pawed through the others on the table. Amongst the *Good Housekeeping*s and *Newsweek*s was a familiar book of children's Bible stories lying with pious slyness under a small pile of *Highlights For Children* issues. Remembering a story in that book that had scared me as a young child, I flipped through the pages. There it was, all these years later, just as I remembered it—a tale about a little boy who had been hit by a car and taken to the hospital. As the child lay in his hospital bed, swaddled in bandages and entombed in plaster casts, an older kid in the bed next to his told the suffering, badly injured boy that Christ comes to the hospital every night and the people who are too sick He carries off to heaven. All you had to do, the older boy advised, was raise your hand as you do in school, and Christ would know you wanted to die. Since the boy in the accident was unable to do this, the other child somehow propped up the injured boy's hand. The next day, the nurse visiting the room saw the lifeless body with one hand still limply propped in the air.

This story had triggered many frightful bedtimes for me when I was younger. Afraid that I might accidentally raise my hand in the night and then Christ would carry me off, I often slept on my hands, clutching them tightly against my body so they wouldn't make any unwanted gestures when I was asleep.

Closing the book, I glanced at the large wall clock—8:00 p.m.—Grandma, Mom, and I had been waiting two hours to see Grandpa. When I blinked slowly and tried to relax, splotches of color like a Jackson Pollock painting stained my inner canvas. I wished I could disappear inside that splattered canvas, not have to see the same old commercials and magazines and hastily abandoned coffee cups, not have to witness Grandpa's weakly struggling body resist its inevitable demise.

As I, eyes closed, focused on the soothingly swirling colors behind my eyelids, my mom suddenly nudged me back into jittery awareness. A nurse had told us we could visit Grandpa now.

Following the nurse through the meandering corridors that led to Grandpa's room, I noticed a stretcher with tightly strapped white sheets parked beside a hallway door. Although it appeared empty, I wondered if it was actually one of the Concealed Cadaver Transport carts I had read about. If so, somewhere beneath the sheeted platform was a hidden second platform on which the body lay on its way to the morgue. In the hospital death must be masked at all costs, its grisly identity given the appearance of the ordinary. The sheet-smothered dead faces, the bleaching of the grim reaper's messy traces—such was the subterfuge of the riderless cart.

After passing a few more suspiciously empty carts, we came to Grandpa's room. Outside his door was posted a chart filled with indecipherable measurements, intake/outtake ratios, and various scrawled signatures. Inside, the subject of these officious calculations lay on his bed, his TV blaring the same holiday commercials I had already heard countless times in the waiting room.

Slowly, he raised his head as we entered the room. I didn't know what to say, so I relied on the predictable formulas of hospital conversation and asked him how he was doing.

"O.K.," he muttered sleepily. "I'll be all right."

I wanted to say something more, but in this atmosphere of sterile gauze and rubber gloves, words were shielded from meaning for fear of contagion. No germ-filled human emotion dare infect the sanitary illusion of medical omnipotence. None dare challenge the almighty power of our Surgeon Father, who wields the sacred scalpel.

In a few minutes, Grandpa closed his eyes, and we sat, watching him sleep. A cross hovered over his bed. Like the caduceus, it was a twisting impalement, a hissing of pain and triumphant release. Christ writhed, a worm on a hook, God-bait, waiting to sprout wings and

swoop down from that cross to carry the moaning, hand-raising souls off to heaven.

While I sat beside Grandpa, I thought back to my own experience in a hospital, my tonsillectomy when I was six years old. I remembered the cross, just like Grandpa's, over my bed. Most of all, I remembered the visions I saw when I was given anesthesia.

As I breathed slowly and counted backwards, I heard my voice bounce hollowly off distant white corridors like a deflating rubber ball. 10...9...a ghostly sleeper in a pastel blue backless gown, I breathed colorful images upon a barren field...8...7.. neon-green grass soft and fragrant ...6...5... golden honey-scented summer flowers...4...3...2... scab-red autumn leaves and rotting harvest apples oozing brown worm nectar...1. ...The colors melted together in a murky molasses river. An aroma of sugary syrup filled my nostrils, and a high-pitched shriek, like a teakettle, blasted in my ears as I began spinning in circles beside the river. My feet whirled faster and faster, trees and flowers spiraling around me in a frantic galactic orbit. When I suddenly stopped spinning and collapsed onto the grass, my galaxy continued to revolve around me. Above me, swollen white clouds drifted in the pale blue sky, ballooning into the shapes of pompous giants and bloated, gaseous dragons. In a rowboat gliding past the riverbank, a cartoon mouse, sporting trademark white gloves, dangled a fishing pole. Oblivious to the shrieking danger that lurked behind the clouds, he didn't notice a pair of majestic wings suddenly swooping down from the sky.

Too late, the anthropomorphized rodent, no longer cartoon invulnerable, squealed for help as the massive silvery white wings smothered his screams and carried him upwards.

For a while, the river and clouds were motionless. No breeze stirred. My breath seemed to stop.

Then, with a roar like a speeding train, there was a blast of air as the giant wings reappeared and began surging towards me.

Luminous as the sun, the celestial predator—all wings, talons, and glowing domed skull—smothered me with its ether-fragrant feathers. Up-

wards, then, its wings soared, carrying me past icy clouds lying in rows like vacant hospital beds. Suddenly, dropped through the clouds, I was falling, the chill air cutting into my gasping lungs, my heart racing as quickly as my gravity-doomed descent. I closed my eyes, blacked out my inner world.

When I awakened, I was lying on a cold, white-sheeted bed. My mouth tasted like scorched milk, and my pillows were sticky with black, clotted blood.

I wondered what visions, if any, Grandpa had, as he drifted between worlds. Did he dream of a miraculous cure or a release from suffering? His eyelids fluttered as a nurse entered the room to give him medication and run some more routine tests. It was time for us to leave.

When Grandpa came home from the hospital, all illusions of healing had been extinguished. Even Rosie, his faithful companion, appeared to sense his approaching death and was so distraught that she began having seizures. Only a few days after Grandpa's return, her seizures became so severe that we had a vet come to the house and put her to sleep.

Her eyes rolled up, white curtains over white walls, as the vet threw her lifeless body over his shoulder. A few minutes before her death, I had kissed her, smelled her kibble dog food breath, and caressed her soft, warm fur for the last time. She was still our dog then, the familiar, loving presence throughout most of my childhood and adolescence, but draped over the vet's shoulder, she had become a thing, and I couldn't bear to look at her. I didn't want to see the lolling tongue, for then it would all seem like a sick, cartoonish joke, stiff legs, x-eyes, and tongue sticking out. I wanted to laugh myself sick because the tears were so deep down I couldn't reach them to cry. Roll over and laugh. No, I'd rather play dead instead.

"Here, honey, take this half of a sleeping pill," Mom had said after the vet had left. "Take the pill and off to bed."

The sun won't rise in the dead dog's eyes. Morning wouldn't wipe away the spot where she died, by the door to Grandpa's room. And now

Grandpa lay with his night light on, not reading but just staying awake until the birds started to sing again and the lonely, nighttime vigil was broken.

As Grandpa's illness progressed to the point that we could not help him out of bed or move him for fear of breaking his fragile bones and causing him even more agony, Grandma decided that he should be taken to a hospice despite his insistence on staying at home. While Grandma and Mom waited in the living room for the hospice attendants to bring him to his final residence, I sat with Grandpa in his room.

His cheeks were sunken, deflated of hope, his clouded eyes devoid of light. I couldn't think of anything reassuring to say, for words had lost their magic. Even my words of love sounded hollow, like an echo in a lifeless, meaningless universe.

Nothing seemed real anymore. As I listened to the usual noises outside his open bedroom window—a dog's bark, children's laughter—they sounded mechanical, counterfeit, no more real than the Mirror Maze clown's robotic giggle or the mirrors' glimmering illusion of escape.

Maybe what Mark Twain wrote in that story we had recently read in English class, "The Mysterious Stranger," was true. Maybe nothing existed except a solipsistic thought that, creating an imaginary universe, suddenly realized none of it, not even itself, was real.

Clinging to an elusive sense of physical reality, I grasped Grandpa's hand. His cold blue fingers clutched mine like a vice, as if he, too, were sinking into an unwaking dream. But I could not stop him from drowning. I could only try to keep myself from fading into oblivion.

When my mom suddenly entered the room to say that the attendants had come for Grandpa, his hands gripped mine one last time. Then, tearing away from my grasp, he raised his hands towards the ceiling as if beseeching some presence only he could see.

Sobbing, I left the room, feeling like a traitor who, in letting them take Grandpa away, had betrayed his trust. He had already lost Rosie, and now, he had lost everything he loved.

That night, after he had gone to the hospice, I dreamed of his hands. Thin, white, and slimy as spaghetti strands, they flung themselves against the maroon lampshade by his chair. Only his hands were visible to me. The rest of him was shrouded in shadow, as if already engulfed by the abyss. Was he trying to send a message before he was completely swallowed by darkness, or were his hand motions merely the mindless reflex motions of a body already dead?

The next morning, the hospice called us to say that Grandpa had died. He had only lasted one night at the hospice. All hope lost, separated from his family, his home, everything he loved, he had stopped fighting death. His hands, like a white flag, had signaled his surrender.

Funeral Farewells

Sheltered as a child from any funerals, I had never seen a dead person or a coffin in real life. Although I had seen some of my pets after they died and had placed wildflowers on their graves in the backyard, I had little experience with human mourning rituals except for what I had seen in movies, primarily Gothic films. I imagined that a funeral would be solemn and majestic, accompanied by classical organ music playing a requiem mass as people quietly sobbed or mournfully wailed. I had no idea how surreal and dissociating being at a loved one's visitation and funeral could be.

As befitting our family tradition, Grandpa's coffin was closed. Grandma would often say she had a horror of anyone looking at her after she died, so she applied that same reasoning to every funeral she had to plan. I don't know what Grandpa would have wanted. However, since he was so ill, he probably, for once, would have agreed with her decision.

The visitation room was much different than I had expected. I had envisioned it filled with dark wood, antiques, and velvet furnishings like a Victorian house. Instead, it looked like a hotel suite, officiously comfortable, designed to serve the practical needs of consumers without risking an emotional connection to them. In the center of the room, shrouded with flowers, stood the coffin.

As Mom, Grandma, and I, the first visitors to arrive, walked towards the polished mahogany receptacle, my mom told me to remember Grandpa as he was before his illness and picture him that way, peacefully enclosed within his forever bed. However, I couldn't think of anything except the cloying fragrance of the flowers suffusing the air with their asphyxiating anesthesia as if to numb our pain and sorrow. Like the body, terrifying to imagine in its present state, I couldn't breathe.

Collapsing on the carpeted floor, desperate for air, I gasped. I sobbed in grief and terror.

My mom soon stifled my dramatic outburst. Tugging gently at my arm, she urged me to my feet and helped me to a nearby chair.

“Sshhh,” she murmured, handing me a tissue. “I know it’s hard, being at a funeral for the first time. But we all need to stay strong for your grandma’s sake.”

She sat beside me, holding my hand, then led me to a room without any coffins, where I waited, alone, for my hysterics to subside.

When I returned to the visitation room, relatives and friends had begun to arrive. Walking through the open door, I noticed some of Grandpa’s old acquaintances in the back row, reminiscing about early bird specials at a now-defunct local diner.

“And you got all that for only \$10.99,” Ernie boasted, “including the best apple pie I ever had. Damn, I miss that place.”

Carl, beside him, nodded in agreement. “They don’t have places like that anymore,” he added.

As I passed by them to get to the front row where the rest of the immediate family were seated, my ears buzzed with blurred snippets of various conversations.

“I didn’t know that baby chicks can’t swim, so I put them in the water along with the ducklings. That was my earliest memory of life on our parents’ farm.”

“Remember that suet pudding he made Mom prepare for him? No one else could stand the stuff, but he insisted on having it for holidays.”

Old family stories, some I had heard countless times before, mingled with anecdotes of amusing incidents at work, favorite recipes, speculations about TV show characters, and gossip regarding mutual friends. If it weren’t for the coffin in the room, this would seem like a typical family get-together, a holiday feast with a corpse as its centerpiece. This was not what I had expected a visitation to be, not the atmosphere I had wanted as a remembrance for Grandpa. Where was the

dirge-like organ music? Where were the people draped in black, the sobs and wails, the cathartic, melodramatic displays of grief? I felt appalled, isolated in my mourning, as if I alone could not conceal my pain with these conversational diversions.

At the funeral, the next day, I felt even more alienated. With a sense of borderline hysteria, I watched as members from Grandpa's Lodge performed a ritual probably meant to symbolize the passage of the soul to an ethereal realm but, to me, it appeared as a satirical pantomime. I felt a nauseating sense of absurdity, a tickling inside like a suppressed giggle or gagging reflex. Glancing at my cousin Amy, next to me, I saw her give a crooked smile or grimace in acknowledgement, as if she also experienced something similar.

Keep the evidence, never to be seen, inside that wooden box. Cover it with white roses and wreaths of pastel flowers, bury it forever.

The grief, however, cannot be buried for long. It can only be masked, left to fester beneath a façade of dour acceptance. Sorrow alternates with rage. Anger seethes, fighting to dispel the dismal clutches of apathetic despair.

Maenad Muses

Plugging my electric guitar into the small amp, I strummed a few minor chords and then began singing to Nadia the lyrics to my latest composition:

*They want to make you sick
They want to feed you chemicals,
Chopped entrails and plastic.
They stuff you like a fatted steer
So complacent you have no fear
As you eat
As you die,
Just another slab of meat.*

I snarled and spat out the lyrics with a sneer of disgust as Nadia smiled in approval. We exchanged a complicit glance, and I suspected that she shared at least one of my secret fixations.

As she plugged in her bass, I caught a glimpse of her skinny arm and the long rick-rack scar traversing it. Noticing my stare, she scowled in embarrassment.

“I have one like that,” I said, rolling up my sleeve to reveal a similar mark. “More, too.”

“When did you start doing it?” she asked.

“Right around the time puberty began,” I explained. “Might as well bleed by intention than by some reproductive curse. Helps channel my anger.”

“Same here,” she said. “Guess we really are blood sisters, after all.” She plucked at her bass, repeating the same note over and over, increasing the tempo and volume. It was like a growl building up to a fierce scream.

I joined in, tearing into my guitar, creating with Nadia a sorcerous dissonance I hoped would shatter the constraints of time and flesh. I envisioned panes of glass, like those in the mirror maze, cracking into

jagged shards, mirage selves bleeding and laughing as they watch their glimmering prison collapse around them.

We decided to call ourselves *The Neurasthenics* because, like the people (usually young women,) diagnosed with neurasthenia during the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, Nadia and I were both thin, introspective, anxious, moody, and depressed. The name, to us, conjured images of the female characters Carmilla (in Sheridan Le Fanu's novella) and the first-person narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's psychological horror story "The Yellow Wallpaper," both described as having neurasthenic symptoms. We felt a kinship to these two characters, the vampire and the mad woman, both experiencing fierce impulses, both regarded as threats to patriarchal systems of control. Both Nadia and I, like these characters, were obsessive. Whereas they warred against the forces that sought to extinguish their passions, we waged our battles from within, tearing at our mortal female flesh, appeasing a sanguine hunger that could never be sated.

Our shared obsessions and the creative catharsis of our collaboration helped us both survive the dismal, alienating years of junior and senior high. Determined to preserve our fierce bond, we decided to attend the same university, the one in our hometown, and lived at home to save our money for our future music career in New York City.

Although I had hoped college would offer the liberating, exciting experiences depicted in movies about university students, it was as dispiriting and stressful as high school had been. Since I lived off campus and had always been a loner, I was just as isolated and emotionally distant from my peers as ever. Even the literature courses I thought I would love somehow ended up being boring and irrelevant. Listening to pompous professors pontificating about prissy Eighteenth-Century debutantes and misogynistic Baroque poets, writing endless papers on books I loathed, and performing all the preposterous struggles required

to attain a degree and then find a job made me feel as if I were trapped inside an echoing cave filled with the voices of long-dead pedants and their sighing, long-suffering students. Occasionally, after enduring a particularly tedious lecture or completing a lengthy assignment, I would reward myself by viewing a vampire film and living through these undead characters the fantasies suffocated during daytime drudgery.

My favorite vampire film was Abel Ferrara's *The Addiction*. Unlike other movies I had seen depicting college life, it was the only one that mirrored the realities of my academic experience as well as my pessimism regarding human existence. Towards the end of that film, graduate student Kathleen, a vampire, celebrates completing her PhD in philosophy with a bloody feast of carnage. Having assimilated centuries of dreary philosophical tomes regarding the nature of evil, having probed the darkest corners of human depravity to attain the precious jewel of her Doctorate, Kathleen finally understands the connection between vampirism and the perverse complicity of the victims who, like herself, lacked the will to resist their contagion. Accompanied by the vampire who transformed her, along with her own victims, she throws a party in which she invites her professors and other members of the academic elite to commemorate her newly attained degree. In the midst of her speech to her guests, however, she and the other vampires suddenly start attacking the humans around them. Like rabid Dionysian gods, she and her fanged cohorts drain their victims in a gluttonous orgy, symbolically laying waste to human civilization and its hypocritical illusions of morality.

When Kathleen, after all her hellish struggles, finally attains her PhD, her restless hunger continues. Even her violent massacre fails to bring her the release she craves. Although she gorges herself nearly to the point of death, she still feels empty inside, damned, tainted by sins that may never be forgiven.

As I watched *The Addiction*, I closely identified with Kathleen, her gloomy, self-destructive obsessions, her insatiable hunger for fulfillment, and her cynicism towards academia. Despite being an honors student, I hated the perpetual stress of assignments and the emotional punishment I would inflict upon myself if I did not maintain an excellent grade on them all. Failure or even the hint of dissatisfaction with my work would demand a token sacrifice—depriving myself of a meal to devote even more time for study or cutting myself slightly until a small trickle of blood started to flow. A deviation from my standards of perfection, I believed, was a sign I would never succeed as a musician, never amount to anything at all. I felt as if I were on a trial that would determine the quality of my life and possibly even my afterlife. Sometimes, when I tried to sleep, I would hear Aunt Evelyn's cancer-ridden voice, joined by a hostile Greek chorus, tell me that I was damned and unworthy of love. "Even your father abandoned you," she and her excoriating sibyls reminded me. "You are misbegotten, cursed, destined to eternal strife."

Struggling to resist the hypnotic hatred of these voices, I tried to envision the Tooth Fairy lulling me to sleep with her soporific candies and her seductive dance along the sugar skull cobblestones. Eyes closed, like a darkened stage before the play begins, I called to her, as I did long ago, with my blood and my pain. My fingers clawed at a freshly made scar, tearing at the razor-track ridges until a small rivulet of blood seeped from the opened wound.

As I breathed slowly, I listened to the subtle pause between my breaths, that gap of silence and surrender that would entice her. The sound of waves signaled her arrival. Through my fluttering eyelids, a soft silver light flickered.

Entranced by that light, I sleepwalked towards her as she stood on the fluctuating border between sand and sea. The full moon hovered over the water, casting its rippling glow upon the waves, which gently pulled me closer to her embrace.

Blood trickled down my arm, staining the virginal innocence of my white nightgown. Like a bride of Dracula, I proudly displayed my scars of passion.

As I slowly glided closer to my otherworldly queen, I noticed a mist-shrouded presence behind her. From the thick grey mist, two eyes glimmered, icy blue with glints of fiery red.

“He will be your Awakener, your lover,” the Tooth Fairy murmured. “You cannot fully see him yet, but you will know him when he comes to you, know him as you know me and my perverse cousin, whom you call Morbidy Graham. Do not fear, for your Awakener is as beautiful as Morbidy is terrifying. You will welcome your lover, become one with him, blood to blood.”

I was close enough to touch her, feel the cold marble-like smoothness of her hand against mine. Reaching out my bleeding arm, I offered my sanguine sacrifice to her and my fog-veiled future bridegroom.

Darkness descended upon me as sharp teeth and parched tongues partook of my gift. Swooning into a deathlike sleep, I heard the unseen one whisper a name I would much later remember but would never reveal, the secret name of my Awakener.

Tormented Tenants

Apart from my fantasies and creative collaboration with Nadia, my last few years in Michigan were a bleak, frustrating time of waiting until I could save enough money to start a new life in New York City, home of CBGBs, the Chelsea Hotel, and American punk rock.

With the death of my cat, Wolfgang, a faithful companion during my adolescence and confidant to my darkest moods, I felt adrift from my previous life and the comfort he, more than most people I knew, provided. Unlike humans, he had no artifice or duplicity, no need for words to express love. Often, when I was disgusted by the treachery and hypocrisy of those I had trusted, he reminded me of the primal joy I had as a young child before self-consciousness, shame, and guilt stifled my capacity for pleasure. He was the last of my beloved pets to leave me, the last to be interred in the backyard burial ground with his feline and canine predecessors.

Wolfgang's death signaled an era of death and stagnation for me. Having completed my undergraduate degree, I worked at the university library while living at home to take care of my ailing grandmother and help with expenses. Mom had become engaged to Hank, a slightly older man who, unlike my dad, was dependable, attentive to her needs, and wanted to share his life with her. She moved away from our house to live with him in a cozy, lakeside cottage close enough to Grandma to visit her often. Since our house was rather large and property taxes were getting progressively higher, Grandma decided to rent out Grandpa's old bedroom to supplement our income.

Grandpa's ghost, however, did not seem pleased with his room being occupied by strangers. Although there were no obvious signs of his ghostly presence, an unsettling gloom pervaded the place where he had spent most of his dying days before passing away at the hospice. Each of the renters we had only stayed a short time, and their occupancy was marked by turmoil.

The first renter, a young woman named Libby, I felt an affinity with as soon as we met. A grad student at the local university, she was studying psychology, with a focus on Jungian therapy. In one of our conversations, shortly after she moved in, she and I discussed Jung's theories regarding synchronicity and the influence of archetypes upon our destiny. Like myself, she sometimes had vivid nightmares in which beings who were not quite human spoke to her. Some seemed benevolent, almost like angels, but others were mischievous, malevolent, or tormented. Her nightmares increased, she told me, beginning her first night here, and were more distressing than any she had previously experienced.

"The room speaks to me," Libby confided. "I sense its discontent, its feelings of betrayal. In the night, I heard a mournful sound, like a cold wind blowing through leafless trees. It makes me feel unwanted, lonely, as if I am a trespasser. I think it is warning me to leave before it is too late and the angry presence becomes too overwhelming."

A few nights after she told me this, Libby announced that she would be leaving at the end of the month. I was sad to see her go and hoped to see her again someday, but I understood why she wanted to leave.

The next renter, Tammy, arrived shortly after Libby's departure. The night she appeared, I was watching a horror movie about shaman shapeshifters when she knocked on our door. Tall, large-boned, and angular, she wore a skimpy pink dress with a lace collar that seemed designed for someone much more diminutive and less imposing than herself. Her strong-jawed face was coated with heavy layers of pancake makeup, through which her deep-set kohl-lined eyes peered out like a mummy's from its garishly painted sarcophagus.

Even from her first conversation with us, she drew us into a web of intrigue with tales of her former military exploits, the accident that damaged her larynx, her psychic abilities, as well as future plans to start her own cosmetic and astral healing company. Fascinated, yet appre-

hensive, Grandma and I listened to her intricately crafted oral resume. Soldier one minute, beauty consultant and psychic the next, Tammy was a conglomeration of contradictions. It was as if she had two or more personalities battling inside her, each with its own secrets. Although we were skeptical about her confusing, at times self-aggrandizing, narrative, her mesmerizing personality, along with her eagerness to rent the room, won us over, and she made arrangements to move in.

Her first night as a renter, she offered to do an aura reading for me. As I gazed into her eyes, I felt as if I were peering into dark, sunken pits containing buried relics, cast-off carapaces of Earth's earliest insects, bones of proto-hominids, and the fading hieroglyphics of ancient storytellers. I also saw within that pit an image of myself— wrapped in layers of gauze, connected to tubes, my mouth a gaping hole mutely crying for help.

Pulling myself away from her gaze, I listened as she told me what she saw.

“Yellow surrounds you, sickly yellow like festering wounds, a swarm of cats surrounds you, yellow eyes glowing.”

She shuddered as if the thought of cats frightened her.

Unfortunately, I found out later during one of our discussions that she loathed cats. The discussion began innocently enough with a conversation about birds. She mentioned that she had a friendly robin that used to visit her when she was a child. The robin would sit on the bird feeder by her window and sing to her sometimes in the early morning. One day, however, when she went outside, she saw the decapitated head of her beloved robin and a cat gnawing hungrily at its still-twitching body. Interrupted in the midst of its meal, the cat ran away, eluding her attempts at capture. From that moment on, she told me, she associated cats with cruelty and carnage. “They are vermin,” she snarled, “overpopulating and murdering innocent creatures.”

She then complained about the stray cats hanging around in our backyard. These cats, descendants of ones Grandpa used to feed, lived

in the dilapidated garage, giving birth to their kittens and eating the dry cat food Grandma brought to them every night. Too wary to be tricked into a crate so that we could have them taken to a vet and neutered, they remained far enough away that we could not bring them inside or touch them. We kept hoping that one day we would be successful in our attempts at trap, neuter, and release.

“So do people,” I replied. “And we often do it for sport. Cats and other predators, unlike humans, kill to survive. We have other options.”

Suddenly enraged, she launched into a tirade about the “feline scourge” that would soon take over the world. The only way to prevent this from happening, she ranted, would be to administer a “gentle genocidal solution.”: “One little shot, then bye-bye hunger and cold and suffering.”

Astonished by her violent temper, I felt deceived and betrayed. She had seen the stray cats in our yard numerous times before, including the day she moved in, yet she had never mentioned she hated cats. Although I was furious at her, I suppressed my anger for fear that she would perhaps retaliate against us or the cats. Sneering and stomping out of the living room, I retreated to my bed.

The next day, Grandma and I agreed that Tammy should be urged to leave. When we informed her she would need to move by the end of the month, she didn’t protest. Instead, her anger seethed, simmering slowly, then erupting in bursts of malice usually triggered by the garage cats or her paranoid suspicion that we were stealing her food. Very possessive of the items she stored in our refrigerator, she would accuse us of using her mustard. To keep it safe from unauthorized use, she wrote her name on the jar with a magic marker, accompanied by a drawing of a skull and crossbones. “Tammy’s, do not touch,” the jar, half-empty and clotted with boogerish clumps, warned, as if anyone besides Tammy would dare to sample her grayish-yellow, coagulated condiment.

Before the end of the month she was scheduled to leave, Tammy announced that one of her cosmetician buddies had begged to be her

roommate. Quickly packing up her beauty and prophecy supplies, along with her assortment of frilly pastel dresses, she dumped them in her rusted orange truck and began her trek to her new destination. As she backed down our long, curving driveway, the cats outside assembled to watch her leave, waving their tails as if to say “good riddance.”

The day after her abrupt departure, I smelled a noxious odor. Following a frantic search for dead mice, rotting cat food, or some other hidden source of putrescence, I looked in Tammy’s former room and discovered the jar of mustard stashed under her bed. She had either tried to conceal it from trespassers, or she had forgotten she placed it there during one of her late-night ham sandwich snacks. After I threw the skull-guarded jar away, the stench, a mixture of formaldehyde and decay, lingered, a reminder of our treacherous, mummy-masked tenant.

The troubling memories of her remain. Even now, she appears sometimes in my nightmares and occasionally visits me in spectral form. Ghost, tulpa, malevolent thought form wreaking havoc, whatever she may be, she lives on as a parasitic chimera—combat veteran, cosmetic maven, psychic, and psychopath. In her own way, she may be as immortal as I am, fighting with her shadow throughout eternity.

Departures

“Glacial Gruel”

*We eat our gruel,
Impotently spit and drool
Because there's nothing we can do.
It's getting wetter
With our too-late tears,
Seas of freeze-dried fears
Breaking free.
Glacial bones
Of long-dead beasts,
Like dreams
Once fanged and fierce,
Accuse apathy.*

In the early morning, before dawn's fiery glow warns me to stay safely indoors, I often awaken to the sound of pigeons cooing outside our hotel window. Oblivious to the rumble and rattle of subways speeding by beneath them at all hours, they lack our human sense of urgency, culpability, and mortality. Blissfully unaware of their inevitable death and the possible extinction of life on Earth, they go about their daily existence, guided by instincts that have helped them thrive long before humanity evolved into the self-conscious, self-conflicted predators and planetary scourges we have become.

Although I am no longer human, I cannot escape the pain and guilt of my former humanity or its residual anguish. I cannot take refuge in the numbing solace that many mortals and immortals find in apathy. Torn between my vampire/animal instincts for survival and my human memories of love, pain, and loss, I, like my Awakener, experience the sorrow as well as the ecstasy of our hybrid immortality.

When I wrote the song “Glacial Gruel,” I had no idea what my future would hold. Clinging to dreams of beginning my music career

in New York City helped me cope with the grim realities confronted while Grandma was dying of dementia. More than ever, I wanted to retreat into my fantasy world of shadowy shapeshifters and feral, fanged immortals. I yearned to break free of the relentless, often debilitating, and degrading, progression towards death all mortal beings are forced to take but only humans can consciously anticipate. I also longed to escape my sense of guilt over humanity's destructive impact on the planet and all its life forms, to become somehow other than human and thereby, I believed, less complicit in the destruction.

Shortly after the departure of Tammy, Grandma's gradually declining health took an abrupt turn for the worse. She could no longer feel safe with a stranger renting a room in our house, and she soon became a danger to herself if left unattended. Although she and I both tried to make excuses for her frequent lapses in memory and her increasingly impulsive buying sprees, her dementia eventually became impossible to ignore.

For several months, Grandma had been ordering from catalogs items she already had and forgetting to turn off appliances, including the stove. Fearing for her safety when I was away from the house, I had to remove the control buttons from the stove so that she wasn't able to turn it on. To prevent her from writing checks on things she didn't need and couldn't afford, I even had to hide her purse. Grandma, of course, resented these intrusions into her privacy, and the more my mom and I had to intervene in her personal matters, the more she angrily protested. Her symptoms worsened to the point that she often didn't recognize my mom or me. In addition, her physical mobility diminished until she couldn't move or get out of bed without assistance.

It was time, Mom and I decided, to find an affordable nursing home providing the care Grandma needed yet close enough that we could visit her often. After consulting with her siblings, Kevin, Steve,

and Margaret, Mom made arrangements to bring Grandma to a nearby facility. Since she wanted to make Grandma's move as non-traumatic as possible, they decided that Kevin would accompany Mom and Grandma to the nursing home while I was at work. The fewer people involved, they explained, the less stressful for everyone, especially since Grandma still regarded me as a child needing protection.

The day they brought Grandma to the care home, it was difficult for me to focus on my repetitive, unchallenging job at the library. The towering shelves of books and the heavily laden carts of items waiting to be shelved overwhelmed me. There always were more books than there were spaces for them. Old books shedding cinnamon-scented dust were being crowded out by new ones with flashy covers and freshly printed pages. While some of the elderly tomes were sent to the archives to be preserved for research, others, deemed redundant or no longer relevant, were used for book sales or discarded. Within their pages, the thoughts and observations of the authors languished or were obliterated. Always the new pushed out the old, the same relentless rhythm perpetuating eternally.

After work the following day, I went with Mom to visit Grandma at the nursing home. Having never been to this type of facility before, I had envisioned it to be similar to the sanitariums featured in old films—sedate, efficiently managed, antiseptic places to rest, be nurtured, and protected. I had certainly not anticipated the noise, odor, and anarchy I saw in this place. The grimy halls, sickly stench, and loud, angry voices reminded me of my worst memories from junior high, only this was like a junior high for troubled, neglected, physically challenged, and unstable students who would probably never leave except in a body bag. Cranky grannies in wheelchairs drag-raced down the halls, while crotchety gramps ranted and brandished canes at passersby. As in junior high, there were, I soon noticed, cliques consisting of bullies, victims, outcasts, and sycophants. Also, as in junior high, the smell of boiled cabbage, onion soup, and vomit seemed to pervade every-

thing. Add to that the odors of piss, shit, and pus, and you have the signature nursing home potpourri.

Visiting Grandma, I was inundated with the putrid smells, the oppressive heat blasting from every dreary nook and cranny of the facility, as well as the pugnacious residents that tried to knock me over with their wheelchairs and walkers.

Grandma, perhaps fortunately, didn't appear to notice the stench and chaos surrounding her, nor did she seem to mind the suffocating, skin-searing heat, or her continually screaming and whining roommate. At times she smiled at us and mumbled a few words about the pudding or ice cream she wanted for lunch.

When the nurse came in to help Grandma get dressed, we stopped for a few minutes in the activity room. While we were there, an old woman with long, grey, matted hair and a stern, hawkish profile began pointing a finger at Mom.

"You," the woman growled. "You're on my shitlist. I've got my eyes on you, so beware!"

The woman then turned to a rosy-cheeked woman with white hair and a plump, genial face. "She's to blame for all of this, I know," she told her amiable-appearing companion.

"Let her go to Hell then," her dumpling-faced friend giggled. "We don't want her here anyway."

Too stunned to speak, my mom glanced at me warily.

"Guess the nurse is probably done dressing Grandma now," I said softly, not wanting to provoke the angry prophetess of doom and her sweetly smiling accomplice.

Getting up from our chairs, we left the activity area and headed back to the noisy but less frightening solace of Grandma's room.

Our visit with her the following week was even more foreboding. Instead of her placid, pudding-loving conversation and gentle smile, Grandma stared at us with terror in her eyes. Like the ominous woman in the activity room, Grandma was shaking her finger and pointing.

However, Grandma appeared to be pointing at something on the opposite side of the room, by the empty bed of her former roommate.

“Go!” she wailed, her voice like the howl of a fireworks-frightened dog unable to escape the source of its distress.

Her body twitched, and her eyes opened wide, as if confronted by something horrific only she could see. Within the faded brown irises of her eyes, I glimpsed a skeletal figure. Morbidity? Grandpa, as he was on his last day at home? Her departed roommate screeching from the grave?

That figure, I sensed, would be taking her away soon, and she wasn't yet ready to leave.

Ready or not, death claimed her a day later. I don't know what her last moments were like because death took her, as it did Grandpa, when we were not there. Its calling card, an anguished or peaceful corpse, was left for nursing room staff to see, and then they, in turn, relayed the news to us. We never even saw her lifeless body because, as Grandma had requested, her coffin was closed during the visitation and funeral.

The gatherings at the funeral home were like reruns of Grandpa's, old family stories, conversations about food and work, and anything else the people there could think of to throw words into the grave, cover it with dirt, and try to fill the emptiness of loss. It was a futile and meaningless distraction from a pain much deeper than any words could ease or temporarily conceal.

I was angry at the words, the hushed voices, nervous giggles, and sob-suppressing sighs, all the banal banter and clutched-at clichés meant to mitigate infectious displays of raw, savage grief. I was angry at the numbness that lurked in the corners of my rage, the cold, deadening anodyne that would leave me empty of any emotion.

Long after the funeral had concluded, long after her grave had been covered with soil, flowers, and compassionate platitudes, my pain, the pain of all who had loved Grandma, would continue.

The words, I realized later, though useless as grief-fillers, may have helped us to survive despite that never-ending pain. They may have offered a metaphorical lifeline bridging the pit of silence and nothingness her death and its reminders of our mortality represented. Meager scaffolds over the abyss, the words, even inane ones about prices and groceries and TV sitcoms, offered a way to cross that gap which threatened to annihilate us.

I understand now, as a bestower of death, the enduring anguish loss inflicts upon the soul. As words fall, like withered leaves, from the dying person, the pain hidden behind the words erupts with the last precious droplets of blood, pain, hot and throbbing, pain bursting in a searing light beyond which I cannot go. The pain at last is released, but for me, it may never leave.

New York City

*The narrator in my head won't stop yapping,
And all the while, my energy is sapping,
Years sliding away in a gelatin goo
As days drag by in black leaden shoes,
Tinnitic whispers taunt me with dread
Of cancer or dementia or veins lethargically bled
Dry as the sand on a Michigan beach
Where once a bright future seemed just beyond reach.*

Grandma's death provided the ruthless push I needed to leave Michigan. I couldn't bear to live in the same town that had shaped and haunted my memories. I felt as if my life were rapidly ticking away, each second wasted a listless surrender to senescence, an abdication of my passion to begin my music career. Mom had already begun a new phase of her life, having recently married her fiancé, and seemed content at last, her loneliness finally banished. I didn't have to worry about her anymore. There was no need for me to stay in the college town of my birth, where music opportunities were scarce. Having saved enough money from my job at the library to pay a few months' rent in New York City, I told Nadia my plans, and she agreed to join me in NYC once I had found a place for us to live. Although Mom was sad to hear that I would be leaving soon, she promised to call and write often, urging me to do the same.

Fortunately, a temporary solution to my NYC housing problem arrived when an online friend, Tatiana, told me she was looking for someone to share rent with her for a few weeks. She had a small spare room I could sleep in and was, in her words, "well-connected" with the NYC arts scene.

Since we had several friends in common in addition to similar tastes in music, I agreed to stay with her for a short time until I found an apartment for Nadia and me. Once I had arranged my flight, we

made plans for her to meet me at the airport and then drive me back to her place.

When Tatiana greeted me at LaGuardia airport, a spark of static jumped from her outstretched arm to mine. Ours would be a volatile relationship, I sensed, one that would either ignite creativity or mutual destruction. She would be the catalyst to set in motion whatever would happen next.

On the drive back to her apartment, she eagerly recounted the highlights as well as the low points of her personal life and professional career. Unlike myself, Tatiana was involved in a relationship with a man. An “open” relationship, she emphasized, to differentiate it from a typical, emotionally dependent, monogamous one. Her part-time boyfriend, one of three, lived in the same apartment building as she did, so he was usually available on short notice whenever she wanted his company. Her primary relationship, she explained, would always be her art. Except for her painting, everything else for her was mainly a source of inspiration, physical satisfaction, or a waste of time.

While she drove, she talked rapidly, her eyes darting back and forth from me to the road. Her conversation jumped focus, veering from a discussion of female empowering imagery to the euphoria of her first heroin fix and the genius of Diane Arbus. Although her body was softly rounded, her hazel eyes glinted like a freshly forged knife. As she reiterated a few times on our way to her apartment, she was confident in her body and its sensual power, not needing anyone else’s approval to feel good about herself.

When we arrived, miraculously unharmed after her distracted, high-speed drive, I sank down into a velvet-cushioned chair. No sooner had I breathed a long sigh of relief than I felt a slight tickle of something brush against my thigh. From beneath the crevice of the coffee-stained cushion, two rust-colored antennae trembled inquisitively. Sec-

onds later, a bloated, brittle-shelled bug scurried to a distant corner of the apartment. Getting up from the chair, I moved to the futon, doubling as a couch, in the opposite direction from the furtive insect's destination.

The sound of clanging dishes, accentuated by a smattering of "fuck you" and similar curses, provided a soundtrack to Tatiana's meal preparation in the kitchen. A few minutes later, Tatiana returned, carrying a plate of fettucine, and set it before me on the table beside the futon.

"Microwaved from last night's dinner," she explained. "I thought you might be hungry after your flight, and I didn't have time to fix anything new. Hope you like it."

Before I could reply, she went back into the kitchen, and returned with a heaping plate of pasta for herself. Pushing aside a curry-smeared take-out box and a paper cup containing the curdled dregs of an abandoned latte, she made room on the table for her meal.

Warily, still rather nauseated by the insect encounter, I took a small forkful of the cream-oozing noodles, but the stench of rancid milk from the latte, mixed with the odor of ginger and garlic emanating from the curry container, extinguished my appetite. While Tatiana chatted about her art projects, I pretended to pick away at the cream-soaked pasta. Then, when she headed to the bathroom, I brought my barely-touched dinner into the kitchen and tossed it into the garbage.

On the sink, unwashed dishes towered in perilous stacks alongside take-out boxes containing rotting remnants of chili and guacamole. Inside a bowl, a large roach writhed, its legs stuck in thick brown syrup. Eventually, it would either manage to escape or relinquish its exhausting struggle and be entombed like an insect in amber, embedded within the sweet source of its own destruction. I was too sickened and tired to care about its fate or even hasten its demise. Let it die there amidst the pyramid of filthy plates and decaying food. Let everything just rot.

Returning to the living room, I settled back on the futon while Tatiana, joined by a skinny, hungrily mewling black cat, continued to eat.

Although I was eager to get some sleep, Tatiana, in between forkfuls of food for herself and the cat, excitedly chatted about her work.

"I'm doing a series of nude portraits for a SoHo show," she told me. "The show, next month, will feature women's bodies of various types and ages, each woman chosen to represent an archetype or mythic figure. One, for instance, will be a goddess of love, one a goddess of fertility, etc."

She paused as the cat pawed at her fork, nearly scratching Tatiana on the mouth. "Now, now, Sylvia, you've had enough," she chided, gently shooing her cat away, then continued to discuss her project.

"You would be perfect as a goddess of death," she said. "Do you want to pose for me? I can't afford to pay you, but it could be a good way for you to meet some of my friends in the arts community when I show them my paintings next week. What do you think?"

With her mention of the arts community and her choice of goddess, my weariness gave way to a surge of excitement. I looked forward to being her model, her muse, her femme fatale icon.

Enthusiastically, I agreed to pose for her portrait the next evening. In the meantime, having finally finished her dinner, Tatiana discussed with me her plans for props. A friend of hers, she explained, a taxidermist, had offered to provide animal skulls when needed, and Tatiana already had lots of other props, such as swords and fake blood, from previous projects.

When we eventually dragged ourselves to bed, after hours of talking about favorite artists, musicians, writers, and films, I was so energized by our conversations that it took a long time to get to sleep.

My mind reeled with imagery of the goddess Kali, standing triumphant with a man's bleeding severed head dangling from her gore-splattered grasp. As the blood dripped down her body, her shimmering midnight skin, smooth as polished obsidian, slowly assumed a greenish iridescence, and her long, agile hands resembled the clawing forelegs of a predatory insect. Murderer of lust, love, and earthly passions, she

was a mantis, a maenad growing stronger with each life she took. She looked at me with the glittering eyes of an annihilating star, bringing destruction and the promise of rebirth.

Exposure

As I took off my clothes, the February chill reminded me of doldrum days back home when sullied snow towered in hulking mounds and hopes of spring languished, ghostlike, amidst the exhaust-stained sludge. The harsh overhead light in Tatiana's makeshift studio stung my eyes, holding me captive under its glare, making me feel even more vulnerable and exposed. Being naked for Tatiana seemed different than it was for a doctor, less clinical but just as subject to detached, impersonal scrutiny. To bolster my confidence, I thought of my rock and roll heroine, Patti Smith, and her boyfriend-muse-photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, as they were in the 1970s. I recalled, in particular, the photo of Patti, exquisitely immortalized by her lover. Nude, crouched in a fetal position, her delicate hands grasping a radiator as the light cast prison bar stripes on her slender, androgynous body, she momentarily allowed her defiant bravado to slip away, surrendering to the harsh caress of her soulmate's camera lens. Imprisoned in the flashing light, the image of her as a rebellious yet vulnerable young woman would endure, unchanged, inviolate, while the physical aspect of her was subjected to the merciless tyranny of time.

I imagined my naked painting someday joining Patti's photo and other artworks on the walls of a museum, alongside the wraithlike phantoms of Edvard Munch and the spidery chimeras of Alfred Kubin, an artifact frozen in that amber instant, like Dorian Gray's portrait, never aging, never fading. Even better than that pictorial immortality, however, would be an actual physical immortality, like Dorian himself had before he rashly destroyed the image bearing his blemishes of sin and age that had preserved his youthful, innocent appearance.

Having set up her easel and paints, Tatiana explained her concept for the portrait. Then, walking towards me, she began arranging my limbs into the pose she envisioned. She moved them effortlessly, as if they were lightweight pieces of driftwood. Beneath my feet, she placed

two skeletons, one of a rabbit, the other of a hawk. Raising my right hand, Tatiana placed in its claw-like grasp a deer skull that, along with the skeletons, had been provided by her taxidermist friend earlier that day.

Motionless, I stood in the position she had placed me, arms and legs passively expectant, a puppet awaiting the pulling of strings. My blunt fingernails were sheathed in fake crimson talons, as if bloodied from a kill, and the skull felt cold and hollow in my hands. The chill of death permeated my whole body, draining it of warmth and volition. Shivering, I waited while she stood at her easel, her eyes intent, as if she were pondering and perhaps reconsidering her composition. Moments dragged by, seconds sluggishly coalescing into minutes as she contemplated, painted, and repainted.

When Tatiana finally told me I could move, my legs and arms were stiff, leaden as blocks of ice, and my eyelids felt almost as heavy as my limbs. Collapsing on the leather chair beside me, I watched Tatiana putting away her paints, then I drifted into a dream.

I dreamed I was in a firelit cave. Around the fire danced a skeletal stag, standing upright like a man. On the walls of the cave, images shimmered, tiny, stick-like figures that appeared to be humans pursuing plump, ochre ponies and enormous, sharp-antlered deer. The dancing stag, like those in the cave paintings, was huge, his fleshless head crowned by dagger-pronged antlers. As I watched him gyrate sensuously by the fire, the flickering flames illuminated the empty eye sockets of his skull. Caves within the cave, labyrinths concealing deadly secrets, they beckoned me to enter their sinister yet enticing depths. *Enter at your peril*, they whispered amidst the sizzling, crackling blaze that gave them light and voice.

A flame touched my naked body but did not burn me. As the flame swirled around me, I became one with it, a wisp of orange fire floating upwards, towards the stag dancer's cold, yellowed skull. Wriggling my

fiery form through one of the eye sockets, I crouched in its dark shelter and began venturing deep within.

Through cerebral catacombs, I traveled, exploring the ghostly imprints of thoughts and impulses, which, like the ancient cave paintings, were all that remained of a once-living consciousness. The further I went, the more twisted, narrow, and suffocating the skull case passages became. My flame form was smothering, growing dimmer. If I did not find my way out, I would be extinguished.

Suddenly, a chanting voice, strangely similar to my own, led me upwards, towards its source. The voice grew louder, skull jaws opening and closing, the hole widening. Through the mouth, I emerged, a wisp of fading smoke that slowly regained human form.

When I awakened, around noon the next day, I noticed that Tatiana had already left for work and the pitifully yowling cat, Sylvia, had rotting food in her dish. Tossing the slimy, mephitic mass into a trash bag, I closed the leaking bag as tightly as I could. I then opened a can of tuna I found in the cupboard and placed a scoop on a paper plate. Wrapping herself around my legs and purring, Sylvia hungrily gulped down the freshly aromatic treat.

I was hungry also, but the odor of rotten food and the unchallenged invasion of large, emboldened roaches overpowered my appetite. Grabbing an unopened bottle of water from the refrigerator, I took it into the living room and sat down on the futon to think about where I should go for something to eat.

On the coffee table in front of me lay a scribbled note from Tatiana: "I just noticed an ad for an apartment in Queens that's supposedly close to a subway station and has reasonable rent. Maybe you want to check it out..." The rest of her note provided a contact person and phone number.

Although thankful for her help in finding a place to live, I suspected that Tatiana was doing this so that I would be out of her apartment soon after her painting celebration party next week. She kept insisting

that she wanted me, her model, to be there, but after the party was over, would she ever want to see me again?

The next few days were frustrating and disorienting— studying on maps the branching network of subway lines, meandering through smelly, filthy tunnels, standing, like a tightrope walker, on a crowded, precariously narrow ledge, staring down into the vermin-infested abyss, and fearing that one impatient shove could lead to a gruesome, dismembering death.

When I finally boarded a train, slouched down into a vacated seat, and closed my eyes, I kept seeing afterimages of the red, green, blue, and yellow arteries leading into veins and capillaries. Within this branching circulatory system, metal monsters roared and raced on carnage-smearred tracks. Sometimes, I would hear a terrifying screech, like that of a sacrificial victim trampled under the speeding wheels, but, after a slight pause, the journey would continue, around and around with no end in sight.

I thought about all the commuters who endured this daily ordeal, crowded like cattle in a train bound for the slaughterhouse, some complacent, some dreaming of lush green pastures where they could roam free of constraints and life-draining sacrifice. I feared becoming like these passengers, congested, stuck on the same journey to and from the same job until they break free by choice or are, in some form or other, terminated.

Art Party

Returning to the apartment after another unsuccessful search for my own place, I was greeted by the nose-stinging scent of ammonia mixed with the stench of shit and urine-laden cat litter.

“Go sit in the living room while I’m cleaning the kitchen,” Tatiana grumbled between panting breaths. “Then you can help me take out the trash and deal with the rest of this dump. We don’t have much time before the guests arrive.”

I had forgotten that this was the night of the art party, the night my naked image would be displayed and discussed by a bunch of strangers.

As I settled into the futon alongside Sylvia, I tried to calm myself by stroking her soft fur and listening to her lulling purr. I wished I could, even temporarily, enter her wordless, worry-free consciousness, surrender to the soothing rhythms of blood and breath. Exhausted from a nearly sleepless night, I couldn’t bear the idea of being in a crowded apartment with Tatiana’s cluster of connoisseurs ogling my naked portrait as if I were a freakish formaldehyde-preserved specimen, an eternal memento.

Tatiana had kept me up late last night with her chattering about the party. Rattling off the names of the people she invited, she described her guests with gusto, as if they were exotic ingredients in a mouth-watering gourmet meal she was preparing. Those invited, she boasted, were all artists, art critics, musicians, authors, or filmmakers. Although they might not yet be known by the bourgeoisie, they were, according to Tatiana, renowned in the NY arts community. They would be the first people to see her painting of me, and she was confident they, better than anyone else, would understand its significance. They would also see why she chose me, my body, for this particular work. She then reminded me, as we were finally getting ready for bed, that soon after the party, I would have to leave because her new roommate would be arriving in less than a week.

“Maybe my portrait of you will make you famous, even immortal in a sense,” she said. “Who knows? It may also help you with your music career.”

She gave me a wistful look as if she were already saying goodbye to me, the person, the friend, to make way for me as an artifact to be hung on a wall and admired but no longer to interact with.

As the guests arrived, Tatiana scuttled back and forth from kitchen to living room, carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres, provided by a deli owner she knew and placing wine glasses along with a carafe of red wine beside each person. Slender carrots, peeled and glossy smooth, lay amidst blue cheese-stuffed celery, glistening Greek olives, and dainty canapes filled with lobster salad. After all her guests were seated on the futon or huddled together on the newly polished floor, the slide presentation of her paintings began.

Toasting her guests with a celebratory round of red wine, she introduced her work as “an exploration of debasement and empowerment.”

In the first painting, titled “Queen for a Day,” an old woman with long grey hair cradled a matted Maltese. The dog’s eyes, clouded by age, gazed beseechingly towards the viewers, as the woman, bruised and emaciated, grinned with tobacco-stained teeth. She wore a paper crown from a fast-food company on her head.

A man beside me on the futon, a freelance art critic, chortled appreciatively. “Love the irony and nostalgia in this one,” he remarked. “A brilliant commentary of old-time TV shows, consumer food culture, and elderly neglect. The mournful dog gives it an added pathos.”

The man, paunchy and bald, reeked of mothballs. His pink, flabby flesh and perpetually squinting eyes reminded me of a mole rat. He stared at me, sitting next to him, as if questioning why I was here amongst his elite avant-garde clique.

The next painting, titled “Netherworld Madonna,” depicted a young, pregnant woman huddling in the corner of a subway station. Clothed in colorful rags, she gazed at her grimy surroundings as if she were peering into a dark, enchanted cave, its tunneled opening a portal between life and death. She smiled cryptically, like a Mona Lisa of the catacombs, her hand resting protectively on her stomach. While shadow-silhouetted people stood nearby, their faces towards the tunnel, she appeared to be unnoticed, despite the subtle golden glow enhaloing her.

“Oh, how Titian in its luminous colors and dramatic lighting,” a curvaceous young woman in a long, gauzy dress commented from a corner of the floor. “She is humble yet regal, alone yet self-sufficient, a timeless beauty in a gritty contemporary setting. I adore this one.” She smacked her lips while she sipped her wine, as if imbibing the spirit of the painting, the enticing elixir flowing from muse to artist.

Almost everyone else followed her cue, taking a sip of wine while pondering the painting. This slurping pause was soon interrupted by a loud knock on the door.

Making her way through the cluster of guests, Tatiana opened the door and greeted a scrawny young man.

“Here’s Spitz Nevus, late as usual,” she announced to the gathering as Spitz eased into a small space between me and the mothball-scented art critic.

While people around me were still discussing “Netherworld Madonna,” Spitz and I glanced at each other. His intense, almost manic, green eyes glinted with a fire too fierce to sustain itself for long. Like Sid Vicious, whom he resembled, and, as I later found out, idolized, he seemed haunted by his own shadows, torn between self-deception and true self-expression. As I watched him run his scabby, skeletal fingers through his spiky hair and sneer in derision at the pretentious discussion taking place around us, I wondered how much of him was authentic, how much a self-entrapping illusion.

Shifting my attention back to the crowd, I heard the chattering gradually diminish as a slide of the next painting was revealed.

The blurred, distorted female in the painting, titled “Kali,” grimaced with terrifying malevolence. Her bones jutted from her pale grey flesh like the spikes on a cemetery gate, and her fingers were elongated into bloody red claws. One hand grasped a deer skull, and at her talon-like feet lay two other animal skeletons.

Although I recognized the skulls and the model’s ferocious stance, I couldn’t at first recognize myself in the painting. Tatiana had tapped into a feral bloodthirst within me that the self-censoring, ascetic aspects usually kept enchained and hungry. The beast woman pictured here, though frightening and rather grotesque, fascinated me. She was a mirror more revealing than any reflective glass could ever be.

As I gazed at my mesmerizing doppelganger, I heard murmurs and gasps from the guests.

“Ooh,” a man’s voice sighed, his face obscured in the crowded darkness. “She looks like a female mantis, someone or something I hope I never meet in a dark alley.” The man chuckled, apparently unaware that he was in the same room with the mantis model.

Other voices joined his in a cackling chorus.

“Quite elegant, like an El Greco figure. Ethereal, brutal, earth-bound. Intriguing paradoxes here,” an elderly female voice remarked.

“Strangely alluring, like a Sphinx who toys with her prey,” another woman chimed in.

Although I, as a person, was barely noticed by anyone except Spitz, in the guise of this painting I became an icon evoking fear, revulsion, and desire. I was a monster, a nightmare unleashed, a wretched, soon-to-be homeless wraith.

Awakening early the next morning, I slipped out of the apartment before anyone else was up, carrying with me a list of places for rent,

along with their closest subway stops. The subway entrance loomed in front of me, grimy, gloomy, and dispiriting. Insert your token or ticket, take your twisting, turbulent journey crowded by strangers; some leave, some stay, some sleep, some your hope will stay away.

Most of the people near me on the train avoided direct glances, and so did I. Immersed in their own inner worlds or at least pretending to be, they tried to forget they were stuck in a speeding metal tube, packed together so closely that any sneeze or cough could transport thousands of freeloading pathogens.

Staring at my list of apartments, I counted the number of stops before I reached my destination in Queens. When the train finally arrived at that stop, I shoved my way through the door and joined the throng trudging drearily towards the subway exit.

The apartment I came to see was a block away, located in a noisy, congested area filled with small, rather dilapidated grocery stores selling items such as lottery tickets, beer, unhealthy snacks, milk, and bread. One of those small grocery stores adjoined the apartment I came to see.

After ringing the buzzer, I entered a dark, narrow hallway, climbed two flights of stairs, and knocked on the door. The man showing me the apartment said he wanted to rent it as soon as possible, so prices were negotiable, and no long-term leases were required. Although it was much tinier than Tatiana's and only had one bedroom, I negotiated a price slightly higher than I had anticipated paying. I quickly signed some forms, then paid the deposit and first month's rent. Since the apartment was already furnished with a bed, a couch, and a coffee table, I just needed to buy a few things, such as a sleeping bag, to make it livable until I was able to get sheets, blankets, and other household items. Once I packed up the few belongings I had brought with me to NYC, I would be free to move in.

My excitement at finally finding an apartment faded when I stepped out of the building and saw one of my new neighbors—a fat,

possibly pregnant, rat waddling by the store entrance. It carried a mayonnaise-slathered chunk of bread in its yellow-toothed mouth and defiantly squeaked at me as I walked past. Oblivious to the angry shouts of the grocery store's owner, it lugged its savory snack towards a sewer grate and somehow slithered its swollen body through one of the openings.

While living in Michigan, I had never seen a rat except for the domestic ones, such as my short-lived, temperamental Cleopatra. Seeing this fearless, filth-dwelling scavenger rat triggered mixed emotions. Although disgusted by its squalid living conditions and its disease-causing tendencies, I felt empathy, even begrudging respect for its tenacity. It did not choose its fate; however, it did whatever was necessary to keep living.

I, too, was learning how to survive, but as a human, my tenacity for life had atrophied. Trapped within my mortal body and besieged by malignant thoughts, I wished I could retreat into the feral paradise of my childhood stories and consort with wild gods driven underground by sin-obsessed civilization. The Tooth Fairy had shown me tantalizing hints of this other world. She had marked me, claimed me as her own. She had made promises yet to be fulfilled, and the years of waiting had made me restless to escape.

I thought of the commuters on the train and their dreary clockwork routine. Get off the train, go home, then return again, round and round, while the heart pumps with leaden resolve, another hour, another day. Would I end up like them, devitalized, dispirited? I would rather live like the rat than live like that, stuck in a rut, senses blunted, desires deadened. I had to find a way to keep my dreams alive, no matter what, and avoid that dismal fate.

Spitz

After signing the lease on the apartment, I was eager to share my good news with Nadia so she could move here as soon as possible. When I called Nadia, however, she didn't act as excited as I had anticipated, considering her previous enthusiasm about moving to NYC and working together on our music.

"I'll probably arrive next week," she said in a non-committal voice. "So many things to take care of here, you know. Everything's happening so fast, it's like I'm on a treadmill." She sighed. "But I'll be there when I can."

Although Nadia and I both were prone to sudden mood swings, even as children, I hadn't expected her lackluster response. We had made a pledge as "blood sisters" to confide in one another our gloomiest, as well as our most joyous, absurd, and embarrassing experiences. But ever since my move to NYC, she had been withdrawn and uncommunicative. I hoped that once she arrived, she would regain the feistiness and invigorating dark humor that had made our friendship so enduring. She knew me better than almost anyone, and now I wondered if I knew her as well as I had thought I did.

Never had I felt so alone and disconnected from everyone. The tiny rooms of my apartment seemed to close in around me, like waiting rooms in a doctor's office, leaving me naked and exposed to my obsessive, self-dissecting thoughts. There was no one to share these thoughts with except perhaps my mom, but now that she was happily focused on her life with her new husband, Hank, we rarely talked about anything personal or troubling.

In addition to being estranged from Nadia, my brief friendship with Tatiana had ended, if it had even existed to begin with. I wanted to become friends with her; however, I realized she had mainly wanted me as a model and temporary roommate. Once I had posed for her portrait, exhibited myself as a freakish specimen for her artist friends to an-

alyze, she had no more use for me and ignored my attempts to reconnect with her.

Depressed over this abruptly severed relationship, missing Nadia and my loved ones in Michigan, and worried about finding a new place to live and a job, I was completely on my own in this vast, stranger-congested city. Without having someone to share the cost of even a small, dumpy apartment in NYC and without a steady source of income, I wouldn't be able to survive here for long.

Each day as I rode the subways, searching for jobs and music opportunities, I grew more discouraged. I remembered how hopeful I had been when I first arrived in NYC, how excited I had been to meet Tattiana and be involved in her art projects. Then everything eroded, our friendship, my optimism, my hopes for a new beginning.

One afternoon on the train, as I was returning from another unproductive search, I noticed a familiar face—haggard, sneering, wild-eyed.

“Spitz!” I yelled, and he turned toward me, meeting my gaze.

At first, he didn't seem to remember who I was, then, gradually, recognition illuminated his sullen features.

“It's you, the model,” he shouted amidst the clatter and roar of the train. “Alley, right?”

“Yes,” I nodded.

Before we could continue our noise-blurred conversation, the train screeched to a stop. Getting up from his seat and heading towards the jostling crowd at the door, he handed me a grimy, partially torn business card.

“You can reach me there,” he said as the crowd shoved and grappled their way out the door.

A few stops later, back at my barren, lonely apartment, I collapsed on my sagging, thrift store sofa. Removing the business card from my pocket, I placed it on the spindly snack tray beside me and fell into an exhausted sleep.

In red-curtained darkness, a dream began. As the crimson curtains parted, Nadia and I confronted our raucous, impatient audience. We were on the stage of a small, dimly lit nightclub, and the crowd, drunken and belligerent, was pushing closer to the barrier between us. Faces grimaced, mouths slobbered, arms and legs twitched.

From a corner of the curtain, Spitz watched, winking slyly. "Let it all go," he seemed to say. "Release those demons."

The crowd hushed as I strummed my guitar, gently at first, then tearing at its strings. I tugged on one as if it were a wishbone, making it screech like an injured beast.

I echoed its shriek, then began to sing as Nadia churned out a creepy cabaret riff on the keyboard, creating a jauntily sinister mood. Anything could happen here. Was this a performance or a sacrifice? Only time would tell.

I scratched at my arms, opening a scar. Blood trickled down my arms. The crowd writhed like a convulsive snake.

From the corner of the room, eyes glimmered, human in shape yet glinting red like an animal's.

Follow the eyes, I told myself. Follow the lure.

Just as we were about to exit the stage, a strident, vibrating noise assailed my ears. I scrambled to silence it.

Awakened by the intrusive buzzing of my phone, I reached for it, but by this time, its clamor had already stopped. As I put the phone away, my fingers touched the bedraggled card Spitz had given me. Gently, I picked up the card, as if it were a magical ticket that would disappear if I didn't handle it with care and reverence. Then I grabbed my phone and called the number Spitz had listed.

After our short conversation, dominated by pauses, Spitz and I made plans to meet at a small, quiet cocktail bar in SoHo later that evening. "Used to be a flop-house for derelicts but now, disgustingly swank.

Good for conversations and privacy, though,” he explained, giving me the address. “The bartender’s a friend of mine. He can give us discounts on drinks.”

As usual, I arrived earlier than scheduled and bided my time by brooding over the cocktail menu. Many of the drinks and their ingredients I had never heard of before, the descriptions as evocative as the names. Potions to invigorate the senses, arouse the imagination, channel the muses, ethereal or chthonic, within us.

I was in the midst of deciding between “Mediterranean Maenad” and “Seraph’s Seduction” when Spitz arrived. Settling into the velvet divan beside me, he ordered a “Necrotic Negroni,” for himself and the “Mediterranean Maenad” for me. “Put our drinks on my tab,” he told the bartender.

The first sip of my drink reminded me of the patchouli incense my oldest cousin used to burn in her room as a teenager. The musky floral scent was mixed with the bitter tartness of grapefruit and the mild sweetness of jasmine. I couldn’t identify the type of alcohol in it, for it was an exquisite blend of dissonance and symbiosis, the union of which produced an elixir unlike anything I have ever tasted. One sip demanded another, each slightly different than the preceding.

“A kaleidoscope in a glass!” I exclaimed, jotting down my impressions on a cocktail napkin so that I could write about it later.

As we drank and talked, the veils shrouding our fears and inhibitions grew more porous. Memories nearly forgotten and rarely, if ever, shared slithered through the thinning gap between us. We discussed the impulses and obsessive thoughts threatening our moments of joy and the fantasies that nurtured us. I told Spitz about the animal stories I wrote as a child, my battles against my body, my friendship with Nadia, the songs she and I wrote together, our music aspirations.

Spitz told me about his drug addictions and Sid Vicious fixation. Although Spitz was born many years after Sid died, he sensed in the deceased rock star a self-consuming hunger akin to his own.

“Those people who say Sid had no talent don’t understand his genius,” he explained, reaching into his glass to pull out the lemon wedge. “His life was a mirror of his tormented soul.”

Spitz sucked on the lemon for a moment before placing it on the cocktail napkin beside him.

“A distorted mirror,” Spitz continued, “exaggerating the ugliness he felt inside and the excesses he believed a punk rocker should have. His body was his canvas. His rudimentary musicianship was his rough-hewn paintbrush. He was, in a way, like Jackson Pollock, an abstract expressionist.”

I was surprised at his eloquence, but I soon discovered that Spitz shared my love for art and literature, Van Gogh, William Blake, and William Burroughs being mutual favorites.

One of his earliest memories, Spitz recalled, was gazing at the fireplace in his childhood home, watching the flames flicker crimson, yellow, and orange.

“They looked like tigers,” he told me. “As a kid, I had a thing for tigers, still do, the way they blend in with the jungle and glide like liquid fire. Blake’s poem about the tiger described it so well, that ‘fearful symmetry.’ Tigers and other animals have that, but people don’t, at least not in a spiritual sense. Unlike tigers, people don’t usually blend into their surroundings. They’re always at war with themselves and others. There’s always some opposition, some discord, as you and I both know.”

In different ways, he and I both tried to silence the discord, slice away at the dissonant voices that tempt and torment, flay the dissent embedded deep within. I cut and Spitz jabbed, filling his veins with martyred visions.

As Spitz sipped his nearly-empty drink, I glanced at his track-marked arm. The scars had faded, new ones no doubt forming in varied locations on his body. I imagined my lips pressed to one of those fading scars, my teeth breaking through the scabby crust, probing the pulsing river giving him life.

“He has what you need,” a voice inside me whispered. “You don’t need it yet, but you will soon. He needs you, too, to fulfill his secret dream.”

A few weeks later, I saw Spitz again. Nadia, having finally arrived, had finished moving into the apartment with me, and we were celebrating our first night as roommates by seeing some local bands at Phlegm, a popular music club near our apartment. Whatever misgivings or problems she had before moving in with me had apparently vanished. She didn’t mention them, and I didn’t bring them up. The present moment and glorious future, I convinced myself, would obscure the troubles of the past.

Jostling through the crowd, we squeezed into a tiny pocket of space near the stage. Surrounded by an elbowing throng of shouting, guffawing, and restlessly rowdy strangers, we were thankful when the house lights dimmed as Spitz’s band entered the stage.

A yellow light, the color of piss and jaundiced flesh, cast its sickly halo upon Spitz and his three musicians. At the first blast of Spitz’s electric guitar, the raucous jabbering of the crowd subsided to a wave-like murmur, then a hushed whisper.

“You know it’s a lie,” Spitz sighed, his hiss of anger slithering through the amplifiers as a glob of saliva dripped from his sneering lips.

The crowd pressed closer, Nadia and I enmeshed in its wriggling mass. It surged forward like a multi-segmented parasite hungry for dying flesh. Arms reached out, clawing at the stage, clamoring for a drop of his spit or a piece of lint from his tattered clothes, holy relics to be cherished or auctioned off to desperate worshippers.

“You know it’s a lie,” he sang, as the crowd waved and howled and panted.

*You know it’s a lie,
The capitalized I,*

*A delusion of strength,
A scarecrow's bluff,
Mere straw and bluff.
Dust settles and obliterates,
With a sigh
All the self-deifying dreams.
You know it's a lie,
The capitalized I.*

Nourished by the cannibalistic fervor of his fans, Spitz grew more powerful, engorged with the energy, craving more.

I, too, felt a craving. For the feeling that would soon fade, for a thrill that would leave me depleted and desperate, for something I couldn't as yet define but could only experience?

When Spitz's song ended, I was shaking. It was as if I were famished, all my energy drained, my body and nerves feeding upon themselves.

Although I had wanted to hear more of his songs, I was so weak I could barely stand.

"I can't stay any longer," I whispered to Nadia. "Do you want to leave with me or stay by yourself for the rest of the show?"

"I'm tired, too," she said. "Maybe the move or the excitement, I don't know why, but I want to go with you."

Fumbling and staggering, we inched our way through the squirming throng. Only when we stepped outside and could breathe the cool night air did we slowly regain energy.

The Neurasthenics

*Anodyne,
Nullify time.
Lull me to sleep.
Cover me
With gas mask mercy
Let me sleep.
The lily of the valley
Scent is sweet,
Snuffing out the scent
Of bloodied turnstile sheep
In pastures of green
As I yearn to dream.*

The scrawled blue ink lurched haphazardly despite the ruler-lined notebook paper, stanzas veering from left to right as if pursued by an invisible nemesis. Even though the poem, written shortly after Grandma died, seemed clumsy to me now, I thought it might work if set to suitably sinister music.

Rereading my poem while Nadia played the electric keyboard she brought with her, I was flooded with memories of my life in Michigan—the black bird summoning words from the ashen embers of my infancy, words as building blocks, words as weapons, words as curses, words whirling on carousels during undreaming sleep, words to exorcise the demons invoked by other words, words tainting and transmuting. Words spewed from mouths and pages like puke and spit, purging poison and deeply embedded pain.

Nadia's music channeled this anguish, expressing in sounds what I had attempted with words and would try to evoke with my guitar accompaniment. Ever since Grandma died, I had barely touched the piano. Doing so was like opening a musty box filled with a loved one's mementos. Each note of music conjured moments long past—my cat

Wolfgang at my feet while I played “Moonlight Sonata,” my visions of a luminous lake, pale tendrils of light reaching towards me, my breaths deepening, then subsiding as I am overtaken by a cresting wave.

In those moments, long ago, I felt that engulfing surge within me. It was my secret tide, my guilty yet enticing sensation. While my grandparents and mom in the living room listened to me play, they did not realize that I had been swept far away from them, wrapped in an intimate, otherworldly embrace. I had escaped for a while to a realm I craved, and they had been left behind.

In reality, I was the one left behind while my grandparents, Wolfy and other departed loved ones were taken to a distant shore I may never reach.

Traces of their presence remained, however. Within the coffin-like chamber of the old upright piano, their ghosts lingered, reminders of all I had lost. No longer an instrument of creative release, the piano had become an object of mourning, and its keys, when touched, sounded the funereal voice of grief. I could not bear to play it and disturb those solemn ghosts from their mildewed slumber.

Abandoning the piano, I turned instead to electric guitar and bass. Despite some difficulties learning to play these instruments, I eventually grew more comfortable with them and their barely-tapped possibilities. Now, playing with Nadia, I hoped to banish my mournful broodings and awaken, instead, the invigorating excitement I used to feel with the piano.

Nadia’s slender fingers caressed, then assaulted, the keys. She began with a slow, rhythmic plodding. Gradually, plaintive chromatic tones began overlaying the leaden beat. As with the Doors’ “Light My Fire,” the tempo increased, dissonant notes stumbling and careening like my lurching words on the paper. My body swaying with the music, I squeezed and vibrated the strings of the guitar, making them screech and whimper. An accomplice to their torture, my voice growled and hissed. I felt as if I were a cat tearing at the sinews of a still-living mouse.

My voice then softened, pleading, as if I were the mouse begging for an end to its suffering. Alternating between predator and prey, I snarled, squealed, shuddered.

By the time our improvisation had reached its frenzied finale, I was trembling with exhaustion and hunger. Unplugging our instruments, we decided to eat dinner at a Greek restaurant nearby, then visit Phlegm for music and drinks.

Although Spitz wasn't performing that night, he stopped by our table while the first act, an all-female Goth group, had finished their set and the next band was getting ready to play.

After I introduced Nadia to Spitz and described the music we were working on, he nervously checked his watch, then smiled.

"Still have enough time before my appointment," he said with a sigh. "Anyway," he paused, rubbing his jaw. "I've been wondering if you and your friend would like to perform with me sometime. Since I know the manager, I could probably arrange for us to rehearse here and maybe even have you two accompany me onstage when you're ready. Are you interested?"

I glanced at Nadia, and she nodded.

"Of course!" I replied. I was about to ask him when and where, but Spitz suddenly announced it was time for him to leave.

"Gotta go to this appointment," he said, repeating the word "appointment" as if it were a cryptic code not meant for us to decipher. "Catch you guys later!"

Hurriedly buttoning his raincoat, Spitz headed towards the subway at the end of the street, then vanished into its musky darkness.

We waited for Spitz to call, each drowsy day, each restless night practicing until we were too hungry, tired, and frazzled to play or sing another note. The repertoire of songs had expanded to include several from my old writings and a few more recent ones by Nadia. Our styles and themes were similar. It was easy to combine them into one song or segue from one to the other. Like two fragments of a broken locket, they fit together, belonged together.

Nadia and I were like that also, complementary pieces mirroring and completing each other. Our unpleasant experiences of puberty, our anxieties and conflicts regarding our bodies, our feelings about sex, and tastes in music were eerily similar.

This similarity created friction as well as attraction. As with my vampire fantasy lovers, I sometimes imagined her hands, soft and cool, touching my thigh or gently stroking my hair. I remembered also our childhood tickling sessions, that innocent yet sensual caressing we were reluctant to continue once puberty began.

Now, however, I wondered what that tickling would feel like. Would it still be innocent, or was that innocence tainted once the blood began to disrupt our freedom and confidence about our bodies?

Although I hadn't asked, I wondered what Nadia felt about our long-ago tickling experiences and whether she wanted them to continue. I was almost afraid to know the answer, though. This was one secret I didn't want to confide to her. Maybe she had the same secret.

Bowery Brujas

A rattling of metal and a banshee-like shriek roused me from a restless sleep. I had been dreaming of Nadia and the oath of blood.

“Here, take this pin,” Nadia said as we sat together on the bed in my childhood room. “Poke your finger with it. Like this,” she demonstrated, jabbing the pin into her index finger.

I took the pin, plunged it into my finger, and watched the blood, red and sparkling as a ruby, begin to form.

Reaching over, Nadia touched my oozing finger with hers, our blood mixing, our life currents wedded.

“For better or worse, till death do us part,” she recited while a melancholy music box song played in the background. “Blood sisters for life.”

She moved her finger away from mine, blood still dripping, then placed it by my lips.

“Now we taste,” she whispered.

I pressed my lips to her finger, tasting the salt of tears shed, mine and hers.

I reached over, moving my finger towards her mouth. But before she could sample my offering, she turned her head away. She then took the pin, suddenly the size of a needle, and plunged it into her throat.

Blood spewed like a torrent of lava. Blood, drenched with tears of guilt and grief, covered me, seeped into my Felix the Cat blanket, and spread out onto the floor.

From my dresser, the Flop-Eared god grinned. Under a sanguine stain, Felix smirked.

As the scene shifted from my Michigan bedroom to a NYC alleyway, I walked alone at night. Tall buildings on all sides of the alley towered over me, boxing me in, while the moon, yellow as a cat’s eye, watched me with predatory hunger.

“Yeow!” something screeched; then a trash can toppled over, spilling raw eggs, maggot-infested meat, and green-fuzzed cheese.

From the trash can, Spitz emerged, maggots falling from his hair and oozing from his eyes. He staggered towards me.

“Make me a blood brother,” he begged. “Or turn me into a ghost, like Sid and all the others, dead in their glory.”

“No!” I shouted. “It’s too soon. Not another!”

My mouth opened, like the black-robed figure in Edvard Munch’s most famous painting. The scream became a red-black void, swallowing me in its all-consuming maw.

The shriek persisted. Getting up from bed, I looked out the window and saw the usual culprits—two tabby cats knocking over garbage cans and squabbling over the choicest trash morsels. Just as I was ready to go back to sleep, the phone rang.

It was Spitz calling to say he could set up a rehearsal with us in the evening or as soon as we were available. He had booked a gig at Bowery Brujas and, depending on our rehearsal, would consider having us open for him the following month.

After awakening Nadia to tell her the good news, we agreed to meet him at the Bowery Brujas a few hours later, just enough time for us to practice a few songs, get dressed, and take the subway to the club.

Once we got off the subway, the nightclub was easy to find. Its entrance, painted black with scarlet trim along the doorway, stood out from its monotonous brownstone neighbors like a lurid aberration. The name “Bowery Brujas” slithered in crimson Arabesque font around the door, the serpentine letters suggesting an atmosphere of Art Nouveau elegance; however, the graffiti surrounding it belied the deceptive attempt to bestow glamor upon the ramshackle building.

As we walked through the door, a young man wearing a ragged black t-shirt invited us to sit at one of the gum-smearred wooden tables while he went to get Spitz.

Waiting for Spitz, I gazed at the ripped posters covering walls and ceilings: Bauhaus, the Sex Pistols, the Cramps, Johnny Thunders, the New York Dolls, along with obscure bands I hadn't heard of. Posters were plastered over other posters, current bands replacing older ones in a palimpsest of impermanence.

I wondered if a poster of The Neurasthenics would ever join that evolving collage. Who were we in comparison to all the other musicians who had similar dreams and talents? Even if we did succeed, how long would our moment of rock and roll glory last? Would we flicker brightly, like a firefly in its dying radiance, only to be forgotten, plastered over in time's ephemeral gallery?

Spitz's voice interrupted my brooding.

"I'm ready to hear you play now," he said, entering the room and approaching our table. A thin, wispy smile flickered on his lips. Encouragement or cynicism? Either way, our time had come to prove ourselves worthy to join the collage of deceased icons, fading stars, and eclipsed has-beens.

With shaking hands, I plugged in my guitar. Sweat moistened my fingers and dripped from my underarms. Even though I had taken a shower earlier that day, my body's rancid secretions betrayed my flagging confidence. Captive to my seeping flesh, I struggled to break free from its cowardly restraints, letting my music, my voice rise above the mortal muck hindering me.

"Keep it spontaneous," Spitz advised. "Don't let your nerves defeat you. Lose yourself in the sound, the energy. I don't want caution or perfection. I want something primal, something fierce."

Emboldened by his advice, I started thinking about the cats I used to hear outside my window screaming their lustful serenades. Their music aroused feelings much more ancient than language or humanity. It was electric, like the static of wool against fur, like the lightning that gave birth to Dr. Frankenstein's monstrous, mismatched creation. Sometimes when Nadia and I were working on a song, I would feel

that electric tingle as we brought forth from the silence an exquisite frequency that sent chills up my spine, raising vestigial hackles, awakening dormant sensations. These miracles of sound were unplanned, unintentional. I could not force them to happen, but I could let them possess me and flow through me.

Spitz sat calmly at a table by the stage, sipping his drink. Although he gazed at us, his attention seemed elsewhere, giving us the impression that we were alone in the room, free to tap into our wildest impulses.

Overcoming my initial resistance, I gradually opened myself to the throbbing currents within me. Heartbeat, blood, breath, all was rhythm, flux, sound, impulse. Tapping into these currents, I could feel myself, paradoxically, rising above them, like steam above a shrieking teakettle.

Nadia closed her eyes, pausing before launching into a slow, funereal sarabande. Her fingers pounded the keys, bass notes plodding like heavy-booted footsteps in a graveyard procession. Gradually, my guitar joined the procession with deep, reverberating, legato drones.

“Anodyne,” I wailed. “Nullify time.”

I thumped the guitar, my hands mimicking a drum beat. Slowly, arduously, the rhythm ticked, the seconds sluggish, bloated with a mood of dread. It was like a funeral wake, the casket creaking open to reveal a waxen-faced, frozen-mouthed corpse. It was unveiling time, but I craved the dark mystery of the unseen.

Cover me

With gas mask mercy

Let me sleep.

The lily of the valley

Scent is sweet.

A moment of silence lingered, the lapse between waking and ether-induced sleep.

Snuffing out the scent

Of bloodied turnstile sheep

Then, like a banshee, my guitar shrieked, and Nadia joined in with a furious tarantella rhythm. Like rabid dogs chasing their tails, the rhythm careened, treble notes scurrying in dizzying pirouettes while bass notes lurched and stomped with fury. Dissonant chords clanged and thundered, throbbing like a migraine ready to burst with hemorrhagic catharsis.

The rhythm fluttered, then ceased. There was another interval of silence, then Nadia's lugubrious sarabande returned, as I softly sang the last words of our mournful lullaby:

*In pastures of green
As I yearn to dream.*

Although the song was over, the electric energy continued to sputter and sizzle, radiating from my fingertips and igniting a familiar craving.

When Spitz told us we could open for him the following month, I felt that static spark encompass me, a neon aura illuminating the night with colors brighter and more enticing than any in the daytime. My future flared in front of me, marquees emblazoned with "The Neurasthenics" in dazzling letters that glowed like panthers' eyes in a dark jungle of rival predators. Even though we were outnumbered, we had the hunger to persevere, whether or not we were successful in our struggle to be heard.

Before performing our next concert, Spitz recommended that we recruit our own band members instead of using musicians from Spitz's group.

"Find those who feel your cravings," he urged. "Don't settle for anything less."

During the next few weeks, Nadia and I interviewed many potential band members. In keeping with our vision for The Neurasthenics, imagined long ago, we wanted an all-female group of musicians who shared our anger and passion. After weeding out those who valued

commercial success over self-expression or feminine allure over creative androgyny, we finally selected Claudia, a street performer from Brooklyn who sang and played the bass, and Mona, a music school dropout who played the drums. Not only were these women exciting musicians, they were also, like us, struggling with gender issues and obsessional disorders. As we practiced together, gangly limbed, voices chanting and screeching, we temporarily seemed to become one organism, one consciousness. Like the ouroboros swallowing its own tail, we fed upon each other.

Each performance was a ritual, a sloughing of skin, a shedding of self, a creation of insatiable hunger. The more energy we generated, the more we received, and the more we craved.

Sometimes while performing, I would sense eyes, not quite human, watching me. A flash of blue, a glint of red, would illuminate the shadowy corners of the crowded club. A voice I knew from dreams would whisper to me.

“Wait,” it promised. “I will come for you. When the time is right, you will see me. Your hunger, like mine, is never sated.”

Months passed, perhaps a year or more. Time, now eternal, renders mortal chronology confusing to me, even rather obsolete. Like a dream, times and places blur as my past and its ties slipped further away.

Whenever I got a letter or phone call from Mom, I was jolted back into the illusory haven of my childhood—the stone walls of Grandma’s house and its mildewed foundations, decay from within, love perpetually ending with loss through death or abandonment, everything eventually crumbling away. Each time I visited her, a few times a year, she and my former life in Michigan seemed further away, less real. She had settled into her cozy home with her husband Hank and their new puppy. Someday, she, like Grandpa, Grandma, and other departed loved ones, would leave me unless I left her first. I had to loosen my attachments to her, to my former life, to everything I had once loved.

To dispel my gloom, I turned to my music, playing the guitar, working on lyrics, or practicing with the group. As the electric energy surged, the heavy dread became lighter, gradually dispersing.

That spark invigorated me, making my mind race with visions of blinding headlights and dark, twisting tunnels. Speeding through those winding caverns, I knew I should try to slow down, be wary of danger, but I couldn't stop.

After our performances each night, my mania increased. Each time, though the crowds and our improvisations differed, the spark seethed voraciously, its hunger intensifying with each ecstatic gyration from the crowd, each stomping foot, each drunken, blasphemous cheer.

Final Performances

I was so addicted to the manic energy of performing that, at first, I didn't notice Nadia's recurring mood swings. Although onstage she played with the same frenetic passion as always, she would often withdraw from me and the rest of the band after our performances, retreating behind stage and even remaining distant between our gigs. When I tried to talk with her at home, she would cut our conversations short, claiming to be busy or tired, or "under the weather." The excuses varied, but the sinisterly hollow tone of voice remained consistent. No longer was she the brash, witty, dynamic best friend I had known since childhood. She, like all the others in my life, was drifting away, and she wouldn't tell me why.

One evening she didn't return to our apartment until almost morning. Evading my questions about her late night activities, she began rummaging around our place, gathering her clothes and other belongings, and shoving them into large garbage bags.

"I'm leaving. The band and maybe even NYC," she said, her muffled voice nearly inaudible. "Don't know where I'll be, so no use trying to contact me. Sorry for the late notice. Sorry about everything."

She rushed out the door before I could think how to respond, and, when I tried to message her, she wouldn't answer.

I didn't see or hear from her again until our mortal lives ended. By the time I found out she had died, I, too, was dead, at least in the mortal sense, having been reborn into my new life with my Awakener. Later I found out that she had died about a week or so after I was transformed. Cause of death, the NY tabloids rumored, was suicide via exsanguination. My nightmare about her and the blood oath had apparently come true.

The troubling secrets she had locked away during her last few months of earthly existence would remain hers alone forever. Even as a ghost, she wouldn't share them with me.

By now, she has become part of my vanishing past, the pain of losing her dwindling the longer I have shed my human bonds. At the time of her sudden departure from our apartment and our group, however, I was depressed, angry at her for leaving me. Like my father, she abandoned me for reasons I would never know, making me feel rejected, unwanted, unlovable.

I struggled to cope with her departure and my turbulent emotions by focusing on finding a replacement for her in the group. Of course, none of the musicians that auditioned could replace her, the memories, the ties connecting us, but I finally managed to find a keyboardist, Maddie, with a similar style and passion. She was there with us during The Neurasthenics' last performances, there to deal with the dissolution of the group after my death.

As the last night of our final week-long gig drew closer, restlessness mingled with oppressive gloom. Although impatient to get on stage, I dreaded that final performance and the dreariness of waiting for our next booking. What if we couldn't get one right away? How would I survive without my intoxicating spark, especially now that my best friend had abandoned me?

My life up to this point was like a meager, mediocre rehearsal doomed to end after reaching its greatest achievement. All the people I loved in Michigan, even my mom and others who were still alive, had begun to fade into oblivion the longer I had been away from home. Even though I often thought and worried about them, the connection to them was fraying. I wondered if they felt me vanishing from them also, becoming untethered like a balloon released into the sky, soaring free of earth's gravity and society's leaden practicality. Each electric-infused performance made me feel lighter, more spectral, yet also more desperate for that life-giving energy and more desolate without it.

To appease my craving that last night, I offered a sacrifice. Retreating to the bathroom, I removed my favorite razorblade from the cabinet and placed the blade against my arm, scraping it across the flesh un-

til it yielded a rivulet of blood. Dragging it again a few more times, I created railroad tracks in a freshly dug field of flesh. The tracks seeped, then gushed. Before staunching the flow, I tasted a drop of my own mortal current. Then, grabbing a cloth bandage, I wrapped it around my wound.

As I descended the grimy stairs of the subway for our last performance, the late summer air prickled with the promise of an upcoming storm. Humidity drenched my clothes and skin. The air seemed bloated, ready to burst.

Walking through the sticky stench-filled corridors, I noticed a small group of people shoving leaflets into the hands, pockets, or knapsacks of commuters. Curious to see what the pamphlet was about, I let a primly dressed young woman hand me one of her pamphlets.

“I’m praying for you,” she said, making the sign of a cross, then averting her eyes.

Scattered on the subway floor, amongst partially chewed slices of pizza, pigeon shit, sticky brown liquids, and ketchup-smearred napkins, lay tattered remnants of identical pamphlets. While I waited for the train, I glanced at my pamphlet.

“The bloody times are coming, times of misery and mayhem,” the cover promised. “You have one final choice to make. Do it before it’s too late. Christ and the Rapture await.”

Accompanying the lurid text were crudely drawn cartoons depicting crimson splashes of ink raining from the skies, then landing on people’s faces and limbs as they screamed and tried to cover their eyes. Some of the red ink smeared onto my fingers as I threw my pamphlet into the nearest trash bin.

Seeing those zealots and their fervor about the end of the world reminded me of Aunt Evelyn and her grim conviction that the unbaptized were consigned to Hell. Although I didn’t actually believe such

horrific prophecies, these messengers of doom and their scarlet ink disturbed me.

Boarding the train, I squeezed myself onto a bench between an old man reading a newspaper and a young, green-haired woman absorbed in music from her headphones. She rocked back and forth, almost toppling over when the train made a sharp turn, and the old man kept mumbling incoherent commentaries about the stories in the news. Each was adrift from everything and everyone else, sheltered or haunted by an island of consciousness uninhabited by anyone else.

As I swayed and lurched beside these two strangers, I glanced at the posters and murals flashing by on the tiled subway walls—ads for a new superhero movie, a suicide prevention hotline, a blood donation center, a hospice—last resorts for the endangered, the hopeless, those with illnesses that might be healed, those with illnesses beyond help. I scratched at the red ink stain on my hand. It burned like acid.

Finally arriving at the station, I shoved my way through the bustling crowd leaving the train, and hurried toward Bowery Brujas. Along the way to the club, the pamphlets, like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs, led a trail.

As I walked the few blocks from the subway station to the club, I heard a familiar song coming from an approaching car. Unlike most of the music belched out from cars like noxious fumes, this song, Leonard Cohen's "Waiting for a Miracle," was a seductive perfume, a siren's call luring me towards my awaited fate. Cohen's sensual, ravaged voice and desolate lyrics reminded me of my own yearnings for a miracle, spiritual yet carnal, ethereal yet feral. Whatever form it would take, I prayed that it would be vastly different than the earth-incinerating Rapture prophesied by the subway preachers.

Once I entered the club and got ready for our performance, the electric surge of exhilaration conquered most of my misgivings. Only a few naysaying doubts huddled in the musty corners of my consciousness, muttering conspiracies of doom. As the house lights dimmed and

the stage lights glowed a tantalizing turquoise hue, I would symbolically excavate the naysayers, cut them from me in a ritualistic scourge.

Waiting until the scattered mumblings of the crowd subsided, I blasted a note of my guitar and spat out the word “Rage.”

Voices gasped as I slowly began unwrapping the bandage on my arm, layer by layer, like a striptease, baring my wound to the expectant audience. When the scar was fully exposed, I scratched at it. My blunt nails dug like a tenacious terrier into the raised scabs, excavating until the lava began to trickle beneath the thin-crust surface.

“Rage,” I hissed again, then spat out the rest of the lyrics, anger and nausea erupting from me.

Rage

Taste of mustard

Rises in my throat

I want to choke.

The words were venomous arrows aimed at the toxic purveyors of paranoia and diseased piety scuttling like roaches in the convoluted tunnels of their perverse theology. Some, like Aunt Evelyn, were victims of these malignant creeds, hapless hosts spreading affliction. Some, like Tammy, were deluded crusaders of their own diseased ideology. The rancid residues left behind in their wake linger like a slow-acting poison instilling hatred, guilt, fear, and shame.

I picked again at the scab on my arm, letting its crusty coating rupture and ooze.

Slippery strands spill

From my mouth,

Pumpkin seeds,

Snotty seaweeds.

Pussy slime

Birth brine.

I'm not a mother,

Never will be,

Too many orphans stuck inside me.

Consuming creations

Gnaw at my womb

Dredging up my

Familiar sense of doom.

My words spewed out, saliva-soaked syllables ejected with fury. My anger was a cry of frustration and despair, a hunger for rebirth.

In that crowded room, something waited for me, eyes glowing, neon blue, then sanguine red. I had seen these eyes in my dreams and fantasies and a few times before in the shadows of the club. They were as familiar to me as my childhood memories and as enticing as my secret desires.

I heard a voice whisper to me, a voice deep and sensual yet lulling. It was the voice of someone who, as in Leonard Cohen's song, had dwelled in the dismal depths, ravenous and desperate, yet still glimmered with an inextinguishable spark.

"Say goodbye to the flesh as you know it, and embrace what you are," it murmured.

"Yes," I whispered to myself, then screeched out the rest of the lyrics.

I cry into my pillow,

But I know there's no tomorrow.

The ending light

Eclipses my sight.

With anger and blight,

I tell you good night,

Forever good night.

The words rose up from my throat like molten mercury, hot and bitter. I growled, moaned, snarled, and sighed. The song concluded in a sorrowful spasm, my fingers quivering as if I were gently touching the eyelids of a sleeping child. Claudia and Maddie swooned while Mona, savagely flailing her arms, battered the drums, the loud, rapid beats

faltering, then staggering like an arrhythmic heartbeat. The cymbals crashed, then slowly hissed to silence, and the bass drum pounded hollowly, a tolling bell proclaiming death. Maddie, Claudia, and I paused for silence, letting the drum lead wherever it wished.

The ponderous rhythm continued, as if plodding towards a fatal destination, and the crowd joined in the funereal march, stomping their feet. My fingers throbbed, probing the seeping scar. Blood trickled onto the stage, and the crowd surged toward it, clawing and panting.

Glancing at Mona, I gave her the signal, and the tempo gradually increased as we segued into our final song.

In search of perfection,

Affliction,

I come to you.

My paramour,

My mirror.

The fear within the fascination,

The razor within the caramel apple.

The audience pushed closer, wanting to taste that sweetness, that danger, through me, their surrogate sacrifice. In turn, they gave me energy, drunken devotion. Our connection was as ephemeral as the firefly's luminous rapture and this blazing moment of triumph. After this concert ended, that bond would be over, and the energy would gradually dissipate. Then, for me, craving and desolation would return, whittling away at me.

With a gurgling rattle in my throat, I sang the last verse of my last song, not knowing when or if I would perform again.

I shape myself to feed my longing,

Paring away, paring away

Flesh to bone,

Bone to stone.

The Sphinx, lion-breasted,

Hides beneath my skin.

*Year by year, clawing,
Trying to scourge human sin.*

As the crowd cheered, we unplugged our instruments and disappeared behind the velvet curtains. There would be no encores, for Spitz's crew was already moving his band's equipment onto the stage.

Spitz waited for me behind the curtain. A smile flickered across his haggard, ashen face; then he winked as if acknowledging a shared secret. He, like myself, yearned for a mysterious seducer, someone who would steal his virginity and transform his soul.

The audience was Spitz's now. We had only whetted its appetite for the main course.

Leaving the club, I lingered for a moment beneath the neon lights bearing our band's name. Would they ever shimmer like that for us again? I soaked in their radiance, listened to their electric buzz that murmured like tinnitic whispers, blending with the throbbing of my heartbeat, the churning of my blood. In that moment, I felt more alive than at any other time I could recall. I didn't want that moment to end, yet I already sensed its passing. It was time to move on to whatever awaited me.

Insects, drawn by the glow and buzz of the light, gathered around it as I walked away. They, too, buzzed and throbbed, cicadas humming like reedy harmonicas, crickets clicking like castanets. I loved their nocturnal songs of longing, serenades for lovers who lurked in the darkness. I, too, knew that longing for someone as yet unseen.

Their songs were almost drowned out by the rumble, roar, and screech of the traffic, yet still, the insects continued singing. Their ardor was at its peak as the summer heat reached its climax. "Come with us," they seemed to murmur. "Before winter. Now, Alley, the time is ripe."

Their seductive music, though muted by the traffic, was still in my ears as I stepped off the curb.

A shadow crept past the swollen, smugly gleaming moon, and the lights of cars glinted like distant stars, coldly indifferent to earthly yearnings.

A second too late, I heard the simian shriek of the brakes, a second filled with darkness and blood and splitting, searing pain. Looking down from somewhere high above the neon lights, I saw my twisted body lying on the street, my head torn open, pieces of blood-tinged metal jutting from my skull.

Awakening

From the sky, I watched my body until it was a speck on the ground of a gradually shrinking cityscape. Dark clouds rolled in, obscuring everything below me. I floated amongst them, feeling the chill of their feathery caress as they brushed past me. The clouds, like the dot pictures I used to see at night when I was a child, formed different shapes:

They were tombstones in a cluster.

“This is the section for unbaptized children,” I heard my dead Aunt Evelyn’s voice say. “If you were still a child, you would be buried here. But now, as an adult, you are denied even this dreary sanctuary. You have no place anywhere but must always wander, rootless and hungry.”

The cemetery was filled with lonely wails, cries for Mommy and Daddy, cries for salvation.

They were wilted grey lilies, dead as the corpses surrounding them. I was holding the flowers in my cramped hands. My fingernails were as long as claws, bloody as in the painting Tatiana made of me. My head was wrapped in a shroud, like a ghoulish present waiting to be uncovered.

Dark clouds covered me, smothered me. Trapped inside my thoughts and memories, I drifted through moments of the past, nightmares, and visions—Morbidity Graham and his perverse temptations, his menagerie of torments. The Tooth Fairy with my bloody tooth on her necklace, the taste of salty taffy in my mouth. The mysterious being whose voice I heard that night of my last concert:

“Say goodbye to the flesh as you know it, and embrace what you are,” he had said.

“Yes,” I murmured, my voice cracked and hoarse.

I felt something touch my bandaged head, unraveling the layers of gauze, letting a small glimmer of light enter my shrouded vision. Something soft yet bristly as a cat’s tongue touched my neck and lips. Something sharp penetrated my throat, sending icy waves down my spine.

Something lay on top of me, pressing down. I heard deep breaths and suckling sounds as something warm and wet seeped over me. I felt myself growing weaker with each pulsing heartbeat, each leaking droplet. My body spasmed, and something burst within me, spilling out hot as flames. I was a scream in an opening womb, a scream erupting into the ecstasy of newborn life.

Ripping off the last bandage obscuring my sight, he revealed himself—long black hair silken as the wings of the chimney bird that awakened me to the magic of words, blue eyes as turbulent as the sea, teeth as sharp and fierce as the beasts I wished to become. He loomed above me—tall, slender, with the wild, graceful beauty of a panther or fox and the ethereal sensuality of an Orphic god.

Memories flooded from a time before I was born, a time of stone monuments and archaic tongues, darkness illuminated only by fire, stars so bright they were given the names of deities. Somehow, I knew this place, that language, but that knowledge had disappeared when I was born.

Fangs still dripping with my blood, he plunged them into his wrist, then pressed his bleeding wound to my dry, cracked lips. Thirstily, I drank his musky, sweet offering. With each droplet, my lips grew softer, replenished, and my fragile body was transformed into a stronger, much more vital one.

Rising from the hospital bed, I cast mortal existence aside forever. My old life as “Alley” had died, and my rebirth, sustained by subterfuge, aliases, and eternal thirst, had begun.

After a while, almost everyone who had known me would assume I was dead, just another mysterious hospital disappearance in a city plagued by many recent cases involving missing persons and unsolved murders. Only a few would come to know me in my immortal form. I would hear their anguished cries and snot-snuffled whispers, their impassioned prayers and curses as they begged for release.

Subsisting on liquid life and death-desirers' yearnings, I roam the city streets with my Awakener. We listen for those who summon us, bringing them deliverance from pain and despair as we drink their last sweet dreams.

If you enjoyed *Dark Visitations*, then you can continue the Feral Rebirth series with *Revenance*¹ (Feral Rebirth, Book 1):

“I come scratching at your window,
 wraith claws caked with mud,
 hair sooty with revenant smoke
 from our embered fire.
 Where you walked,
 where you ate
 encoded in me
 like a reflex gasp,
 a ruminated cud
 resurging from dissolution.
 A strand of your hair,
 a yo-yo thread
 binds me to you
 with need and dread.
 A lagging distemper
 disjoints,
 anoints,
 seethes,
 unsheathes
 as I tap the glass
 with bleeding palms
 stigmated
 by your
 subcutaneous touch.

The end times are coming, or so the preachers say, scuttling about like roaches, thriving on oblivion. In the meantime, I rest, not at peace, waiting for my Awakener.

A flower rots in my cramped fingers. Pretty little lily corrupted. Visions of half-attained desires, scenes from books and movies that fueled my imagination combine in crazed mutations, atrocities of invention and compulsion, the poison apple visions of a slumbering Snow White whose prince has not yet come. I see my fragmented scream in a shard of shattered glass as the too-late brakes squeal with futile remorse, and then I am silenced, shrouded, entombed.

I wait for the call, the kiss. My muse is here. Time to kill, then time to arise.

1. <https://books2read.com/u/b5Wax7>

Invisible to human eyes, he walks through the white corridors of the old medical school hospital, looking for those who are praying for deliverance.

Raspy, wheezing, cajoling, demanding, obsequious, desperate, the voices only he can hear call to him. He is their savior, their lost love, their forsaken but fervently desired hope, their nullifying nowhere-guiding last embrace.

A sigh, like a drooping flag, signals surrender. He pauses, breathes in the subtle scent which, eluding antiseptic, tantalizes his nostrils. It summons him, and he approaches the little girl from whom it so seductively emanates.

Tubes slither from her frail, bruised arms, tubes ferrying clear liquids and dispatching yellow fluids. She is the port through which these watery cargoes proceed.

One liquid flows untubed, undisturbed. Underneath her cool, blue-white flesh this liquid churns—warm, pulsing. Placing his fingers against her neck, he feels the wild throbbing of hidden tides.

Her eyes open, their dark brown depths muddied by disease. A tall, slim man stands beside her, his long black hair shimmering darkness within a halo of flame. Fire of warmth, fire of comfort. She smiles, thinking of Christmas stockings and her grandfather's cottage, the Yule log burning.

The flames surrounding the stranger billow towards her. They are everything she wants them to be. Her will is their command. All she has to do is make a wish and they will become her favorite things. They flicker, becoming blurry, malleable dream taffy shaped by her imagination.

Kittens with fluffy fur play by the hearthside, tickling her toes. Silver tinsel dances from a Christmas tree, the pine scent, ancient yet fresh, promising blissful surprises. Red foil packages seem to wink at her as the flirtatious flame reflections glide across the shiny wrappings. Everything twinkles and sparkles in a firework bravado she hopes will never subside.

His lips, soft as her mother's satin nightgown, press against her throat. He cradles her in his arms, the flames beckoning her into their warmth.

That paler wisp of flame is a golden pony, its darker companion a stately stallion. The black stallion whinnies softly, inviting her to climb upon his back.

"Yes," the stranger says gently. "All the pretty little horses, all your favorite things are yours, forever and ever."

She grasps the black mane and clutches tight, as eyes closed, she feels a soaring gallop merging her with a force stronger than any fairytale magic. Riding with this force, fused with it, she is flying into a radiant sunset, which, like the fireplace flames, bathes her in warmth. The rays of the ebbing sun reach towards her, orange red tendrils caressing. "Hush . . . shhhh," they whisper as a darkness even more beautiful than

the black horse, dappled ponies, fluffy kittens, or endlessly twinkling tinsel, ushers her into its sheltering, inescapable depths.

On the hill the graves of unbaptized children stand, apart from all the others. The wind blows colder there, as if abandoned by God, there is no warmth or shelter anymore. Inside the tiny coffins the remnants of briefly-lived bodies decay, baby bones snapping like twigs in the remorseless crush of time. Above the bones and worms and damp earth, the spirits flutter, moths seeking light.

They wait for their wishes to be granted. They wait for their prince to come. They wait for ice cream and watermelon, tinsel-bedecked Christmas trees, all the delights of life they had lost, all the happy-ever-after futures their parents and the fairytales told them could come true.

Fragile dandelion seed fluff hovers over their graves, upside down spiders hanging by silken silver legs, fairy messengers bringing wishes from dead little girls and boys. The voices and memories of these lost children echo in this neverland vortex. I hear the whisper of the endlessly recurring dreams, the hiss of candle flames being snuffed again and again. Never will their wishes be granted. Never will they be adults. Never will they be anything.

A new member tonight enters the ranks of the dead. Whether she will join those on the cold, windy hill, whether her wishes are to be granted or whether she will forever be kept waiting, I do not know. My muse has sealed shut her eyes.

Down she falls, her body as light and insubstantial as the faltering fluff. Down we all fall, ashes to ashes. Like her, like the children on the hill, I, too, had once believed in fairies and wishes come true.

For years, it seems, I had waited as I grasped the decapitated dandelion stems and watched the parachuted seeds float above the unevenly paved driveway, relaying my wish to a faraway kingdom in the sky. Ignoring the seeds fallen wind-thrashed upon the cement, I thought about my wish, my fingernails etching stigmata of bloody battered beliefs upon my palms.

Scratches became scabs. Scabs, dug open, became scars, port holes of infection proliferating as my childhood wishes metamorphosed into futile, intangible desires. I yearned for something as yet nameless and elusive. I seethed with anger.

In a blur of rage, I would plug my guitar into the amplifier. Nourished by the rage of my bandmembers and my audience, I would, at the end of the performance, walk down the alleyway leading to my home, unconcerned with the blowfly buzzing of people and the huffing frenzy of traffic-congested cars. My ears sizzled, manic radio broadcasts hissing in arcane tongues. I didn't hear the predatory snuffle of the approaching car. By the time I heard the gloating growl of its engine and baboon-like shriek of its brakes, I was unable to escape. Mangled, broken, obliterated, I now am covered by layers of ever darkening shadows.

The chill of inevitability seeps from the ground up, a chill as desolate and distressing as the eternally damned. I hear their cries, these lost souls, children and adults,

who have given up all but their most desperate hopes. No longer do they wish for the comforting joys of life, the simmering summer barbecues and gentle motherly kisses. They have forsaken the fairy messengers and other whimsically enchanting emissaries of youthful imagination. There is nothing innocent or happy about their hopes. They crave absolution, only that. I feel their knotted, clammy, granite-grey fingers as they grasp mine. They cling to me, clawing, pleading with me to intercede for them, their flesh falling from their bones and sticking to me like a layer of adhesive leprous skin.

I cannot help them, nor can I help myself. All I can do is wait.”

More information on *Revenance*², the Feral Rebirth series, and other writings by Alison Armstrong is available at her Horror Vacui Web site³.

2. <https://books2read.com/u/b5Wax7>

3. <https://horrorvacui.us>

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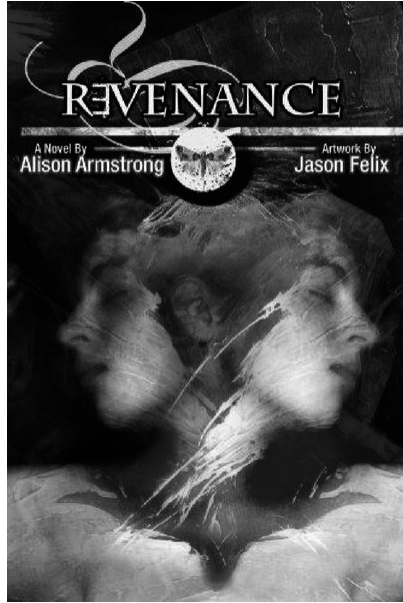
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About the Author

Alison Armstrong is the author of two literary horror novels (*Reverance* and *Toxicosis*), a novella (*Vigil and Other Writings*), and a collection of writings addressing women and horror archetypes (*Consorting with the Shadow: Phantasms and the Dark Side of Female Consciousness*). Her work focuses on inner terror, stealthily lurking, solipsistic dread and nightmare flash epiphanies. Having obtained a Master of Arts in English, she has taught composition and literature at Washtenaw Community College in Ann Arbor, MI and Kingsborough Community College in Brooklyn. In addition to her novels and novella, she has had writings published in *The Sirens Call* as well as the horror anthologies *Book of Bones*, and *From the Cradle to the Grave*. Further information on her writings is available on her Web site, <https://horrorvacui.us/>, and on her Facebook page for the novels *Reverance* and *Toxicosis*.

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