In the rind

Regina Lynn Withnell

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In the rind

by

Regina Lynn Withnell

A Thesis Submitted to the
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FEARING NOTHING

"The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me."
--Pascal

My Grandma Grace kept lima beans in a tiny glass jar that she carried in her black vinyl purse. For her, those beans were a lucky charm, a reminder that if she lost everything, she'd still have at least one meal. Grandma liked to say that the future has only one redeeming quality: like a soiled shirt left in the hands of a bad launderer, it never unfolds quite the way you think it will. So for all her penny pinching, Grandma was a great believer in lotteries and in gambling. "You can kill the ground if you stand still for too long," she'd say. That's why I started running, running from everything and nothing. This was Grandma's legacy to me: the ability to run without knowing why or where. When I was bored, during recess at school, I ran along the cyclone fences that penned the two acres of schoolyard. I ran with her fears pounding in my ear, her fears of emptiness and nothing.

Even our anatomy acknowledges this anomaly. Eve took that extra rib for a good reason: it helps us hold in our fears, our fears which we hold between our hearts and stomach. We gain weight there, over our stomachs, to contain, to bury our unquenchable fears. My grandma ate herself into oblivion, attempting to stuff down with food those fears that boiled up her throat and threatened to escape and materialize.

My grandmother also claimed all gynecology was obscene. Her own female body puzzled her and she was terrified of what man's science might do to her. Within six months of the diagnosis, she died of ovarian cancer. She gathered us all around her hospital bed to give us some last advice. "Work as hard as you can," she rasped, but we could barely hear her. She died a few minutes later, her mouth a round circle. She might have been saved if she hadn't been so stubborn, the doctors confided. My other grandmother, Doris died suddenly--there was no saving her. She died of an aneurysm, a tiny explosion in her head. She must have been thinking a very bad thought and it stuck in her head like a fishbone and killed her. My mother has rheumatoid arthritis which will eventually cripple and kill her and I guess I will have it too because everyone has to die of something.
And I am a composite of these women, pulled between starving and stuffing, pulled by their fears. I write and stuff these words, overused and trampled like bad salt as they are, because it is my turn in my family to remember: to remember everything, how unflattering that may be. But I, too, am a woman of fears. Even with all my ribs, I am afraid I cannot contain our secrets or retell them correctly. I am afraid the stories like silverfish, will slip away from me before I can remember them. I am afraid that when I remember, both forward or backward, I will plow my past and reach untillable ground where there is nothing. I am afraid I will remember my life backward, untell my stories, unstitching them one word at a time. I am afraid I will die with my mouth forming a perfect zero.
FELDSPAR'S ROCK SHOP

"This city (I thought) is so humble that its mere existence and perdurance, though in the midst of a secret desert, contaminates the past and the future and in some way even jeopardizes the stars. As long as it lasts, no one in the world can be strong or happy."
--J.L. Borges, Labyrinths

leonid Chervo teased the ignition mount with the tip of the key. Then slowly so that each notch of the key made a delicious tick-tick sound, he slid the key all the way in up to the hilt as if it were a dip stick sliding along in oil within the tube. Then he turned the ignition over and breathed a sigh of relief. It was not easy starting Feldspar's temperamental truck.

The truck, a dowdy GMC, coughed and spluttered and when the shortling subsided into regular intervals of wheezing, something like labor contractions, he threw the stick into gear and started out for the rock.

Feldspar looked on from the pit tower.

It was not with a little trepidation that Feldspar handed Chervo the keys. Chervo was an idiot savant whose particular vein of idiocy afforded him an inexplicable ability to drive standard transmission vehicles. Although he needed assistance fastening his seat belt and kept trying to smoke the cigarette lighter, Chervo passed the driving test with a nearly perfect score. The state awarded him a driving license. Such is the lunacy of certain state institutions.

But, rules are rules, and Feldspar's license had expired.
Chervo did not know much of anything except he knew he liked driving Feldspar’s truck that was a she. Feldspar always called the truck a “she” or “Girl” and Chervo was beginning to like the idea of girls. Then Chervo wondered if driving the truck that was a she was sex, sitting inside the wombish cab of the truck, pounding the throttle and hanging on tight. Maybe that’s why Feldspar didn’t like to give him the keys.

Chervo snatched the cigarette lighter, and studying it carefully, he craned his neck toward the glowing orange end of the lighter, and kissed it. It burned. But Chervo didn’t mind. That was just like what he thought a kiss might be. Girls are like little coals, orange and wicked and hurtful. Chervo wondered if Feldspar’s daughter would burn his lips. His whole body smoldered like a spitting ember when she walked by blowing smoke in his face because she was going to be a great movie star someday and wear even shorter skirts. But, it had been awhile since he’d seen her. Yet, with the way she smoked those smelly cloves, he thought she might show up pretty soon.

This and so much more Chervo the Idiot pondered as he hauled huge slabs of granite deeper into Feldspar’s quarry. When he reached the pit and backed up to the edge of the precipice, he rolled down the window and smelled the delicious sulfur and burning air. He tipped his head back and grinned. Sooner or later Feldspar would come and unbuckle him.

The quarry was little more than an ugly chasm or a gaping rock wound running a zig-zag line. Everywhere he could see, deep gaping emptiness gouged the rocks and ground. Feldspar bought the quarry the day he died and decided to reserve a portion of it for his hated brother-in-law. In the interim, he inherited the Idiot Chervo and a desultory, temperamental GMC truck that reminded him of his ex-wife.
There were no rocks in the quarry. That was the whole point of Chervo and
the truck. When he died, he had been sentenced to populate the desolate hole with
rock and to hew out the millstones for the damned about to die. In the meantime,
Feldspar pounded on the stones that Chervo brought with his pick-ax and hammer,
breaking them into blocks the size of bricks. During his allotted labor break, the
blocks would mysteriously liquefy and melt back into huge stony conglomerations.
As soon as Feldspar picked up his hammer to start to work, the congealed molten
would instantly cool and solidify and Feldspar would again pound away, as if he
had never set to work in the first place.

Moreover, the Idiot hauled the wrong rock into Feldspar's quarry. He did
this every day. And every day Feldspar sent Chervo back out to bring the right rock.

With a maddening predictability, Feldspar could calculate the Idiot’s
mistakes. If he wanted Chervo to bring back three tons of sandstone, he brought
granite. If Feldspar asked for granite, Chervo brought basalt; if basalt, sandstone. If
Feldspar tried to outwit the Idiot by asking for sandstone when the invoice
requested granite, somehow the Idiot managed to bring back worthless mounds of
flint or shale, as if Chervo could read Feldspar’s mind.

Thus, working with the Idiot was even more futile than reasoning with his ex­
wife. But at least he’d gotten rid of her. Chervo, on the other hand, would haunt
him like the burning image of the Zahir, an object that torments the hapless until
they are driven mad.

“Chervo!”

It was Feldspar. Chervo the Idiot jumped up from a pile of rock he had been
rearranging and trotted over to Feldspar. Next to driving the truck that was a she,
Chervo liked it best when Feldspar talked to him. Today they would talk the same
words that Feldspar had taught him and made him repeat day after day for the last
year or two. Chervo knew the session would probably make his head hurt, but not
for long.

“Chervo!” Feldspar fairly barked at the Idiot. “Repeat after me:
All men are mortal
Ivan is a man
Therefore, Ivan is mortal"

Chervo repeated the phrase, pleased that Feldspar was still speaking to him today. And as stupid as Chervo was, small doubts still assailed even him. He liked the little nursery rhyme. 'But,' the voice inside Chervo's head persisted, 'I am not Ivan, I am Chervo and I am alive. What a silly saying,' the voice said as Chervo made his way to the she-womb GMC. So Chervo laughed and sang the happy song Feldspar hated most. He hopped into the truck, and forgetting the seat belt, drove aimlessly, breathing deeply the air that burned his lungs. Yes, life was grand in the GMC.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Feldspar watched Chervo, who could do nothing without that godawful grin on his face, ramble about the quarry perimeter. After a bit, Chervo returned, slid out of the cab and found a pile of flint to sleep behind. Feldspar studied Chervo, with a mixture of hatred and puzzlement. How could the idiot be so happy, Feldspar wondered. It did not occur to him that one could be plunged into the depths of their personal Hell while a principal player in that Hell was simultaneously enjoying Heaven, or that Chervo was not yet dead, or was perhaps merely a concoction of Feldspar's own imagination.

"Perhaps Hell is a state of mind," Feldspar mused. But the throbbing in his hands and the open wounds did not concur. Yet, a place of pure torment would certainly contain his ex-wife. Thus, he was not in Hell, only quasi-Hell or a purgatory from which one can never be purged, Feldspar reasoned.

Feldspar rested his head on a rock. He could brain himself to death. It would do no good. Tomorrow he would wake, dreamless, but completely capable of work and he would work-- again and again. He closed his eyes and wished for the great sleep of death. Instead, the loneliness of a long, unquiet night wrapped around him, suffocating him with the heavy foul air.

At last he could stand it no longer. He jumped up with the tiredness of an eternity without sleep in his bones. He picked up the hammer and pick-ax, and shouted:
“Chervo! The keys!”
Chervo, sleeping blissfully on a pile of flint, rolled over dreaming of a GMC with the strongest drive-train and U-joint ever built. He smiled.
“Chervo!” Chervo did not answer.
“Where in the Hell is he?” Feldspar muttered. The rocks did not answer.
Feldspar jangled the keys like the musical bells of acolytes. Chervo opened one eye. Was that the sound of the keys? Chervo bolted from behind the rocks and nearly mowed Feldspar over, clambering for the keys.
Feldspar dangled the keys precariously over the ledge.
“Chervo...repeat after me...'three tons of basalt.'”
Chervo repeated, but had forgotten what basalt looked like by the time Feldspar buckled him in. There were more important things to consider. Chervo licked the key and slowly slid the notches in, each tick sending a spasm of ecstasy through the Idiot’s body.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Feldspar watched Chervo round the edge of the quarry and back down the narrow path of the haul-back. There was no rock on the truck. Feldspar dropped the hammer and strode to the truck to unfasten Chervo’s seat belt and pound him for forgetting the rock. Somehow, Chervo managed to unbuckle himself and slide out of the truck. And then when he looked up and saw the waspish figure round the other side of the cab, Feldspar understood.
It was his ex-wife.
NORMAN MITCHELL, THE IMMORTAL

Norman Mitchell wanted to die. It was Sunday--so hot that people could boil an egg on their cars, or lethargic frogs who did not jump would be fried alive. People caught them and ate them in the streets, the blacktop streets that frizzled the air and the bottoms of shoes like a brazier. Even the cattle in the outlying fields did not mount each other the air was so heavy.

Norman Mitchell pounded the dash of the company car. The air conditioner would not work. He imagined himself as one big oily zit boiling like Crisco oil, or sizzling like the frogs on the pavement and wondered what it would feel like to scrape himself up, and pour his fat liquid body back into his shoes.

Norman stared into the rearview mirror. He was stubbly and crusty around the edges of his mouth and ears. His eyes were the color of brown that always made him wonder if they were really brown or green. They stared back at him. They saw his beakish nose, his eyebrows that nearly joined over the bridge of his nose, the small funny shaped lips. The eyes looked back into his, the color of brown and disgust.

Norman knew disgust. He felt it everyday when he went to work with and for disgusting people who had rancid coffee breath of curdled cream for whom even binaca drops wouldn't help. The very idea of insuring life disgusted Norman and his disgust must have been apparent. He had been demoted three times in the last year and nearly lost his job at the Christmas party. His boss raised a glass of champaign and bellowed "to life" while Norman rejoined with a hearty "to death." For Norman, death was a grand, beautiful, awful affair, and he, Norman Mitchell, longed to taste death in the splendor some men tasted of life.

Norman pondered life, and death, read too much Flannery O'Connor, and in this process, made some interesting observations. Norman figured that insurance agents do not sell insurance, they sell life--any size of life: ten-year indemnities, long-term, whole-life, etc. He also discovered that when one buys life insurance, one is in fact buying a ghost-life, a pale twin, a paper surrogate, should death come unexpectedly. The dead leave behind to the grieving this life, measured not in time, but paper, which perpetuates the myth of immortality in their absence. Thus, agents
sell quantified bits of life which makes them something only a little less than divine. And divinity (which is something akin to immortality), more than life, frightened Norman Mitchell.

However, Norman’s real crisis started on that Sunday, sometime during the Carter Administration when the inflation rate had swollen to the size of the Mississippi in spring, and Norman Mitchell had a revelation. First he discovered his wife dead on the kitchen floor. Just like that. When Julia died, Norman wept. He had never wept like he did at her funeral. But his weeping had a strange, almost inhuman sound to it. In fact, had the mourners peered under his hat and glasses, they would have seen that Norman was not weeping tears of sorrow. He was crying out of unadulterated rage. Julia, that was Norman’s wife’s name, had died. That was it. Instantly. Effortlessly. Like a swallow or a soul frightened up the flue, Julia had mastered the fine art of death. Almost as easy as breathing (or in her case, non-breathing), Julia had thrown open the portal and left him.

When the mourners had retreated to a safe distance and all but a remnant milled about the cars or the older memorials, Norman had a word with his wife, Julia’s stone slab. He gave it a stout kick and screamed,

“How? HOW did you do it? Tell me!”

The few that heard him clucked their tongues and murmured niceties like ‘the poor man,’ or ‘how he must be grieving.’ They did not see him gathering rocks and hurling them at the marker.

He was barely human.

That next Tuesday, he was killing time at a Laundromat when he discovered a very cosmopolitan article about a certain paradox. He copied a portion of the article in his meticulous handwriting:

Achilles runs ten times faster then the tortoise and gives the animal a head start of ten meters. Achilles runs those ten meters, the tortoise one; Achilles runs that meter, the tortoise runs a decimeter; Achilles runs that decimeter, the tortoise runs a centimeter; Achilles runs that centimeter, the tortoise a millimeter; Fleet-footed Achilles the millimeter the tortoise, a tenth a millimeter, and so on to infinity, without the tortoise ever being overtaken:

\[10 + 1 + \frac{1}{10} + \frac{1}{100} + \frac{1}{1000} + \ldots\]
Substituting paycheck for Achilles and "life insurance premiums" for the tortoise, Mitchell made his startling discovery: It does not profit a man to live.

Clearly something had to be done.

That night Norman Mitchell faxed a memo to himself, a sort of shopping list of death:

Item #1: Jump from overpass bridge into river which I know for a fact has all kinds of waste by-products, sewage, and eels in it.

Item #2: Overdose on Ibuprofen

Item #3: Eat raw pork; pray for trichinosis

Item #4: Plant pregnant earwigs into ears; wait and wait

Item #5: Go to Department of Motor Vehicles; try to pick up on the desperate women working behind the counter because everyone knows that a man-hating Amazonian DMV woman can kill a man with a single look

Of course he considered the obvious methods: shooting himself with a shotgun--"too messy," he mumbled--poisoning himself with strychnine --"too intestinal,"-- or setting himself on fire--"too smelly," he thought. So on Monday, Norman ate Wheaties, the Breakfast-Of-Champions. He took six Geritol, drank a quinine fizz, and put on a clean pair of underwear (BVD's) and socks. He even shaved. Then he walked 2 1/4 miles to the river overpass. He leaned his elbows on the pigeon splotched concrete. The river had swollen with rain and smelled sour with the excesses of the summer run-off and factory drainage. The quintessential
picture of quietude, Norman sniffed the wind, spat for good measure and watched to see where the spittle landed.

There were children splashing along the edges of the river and throwing rocks at some piling. A man flew a kite while his wife flapped her arms, spun dizzily, and screeched. A couple, firmly ensconced among some scrubby bushes and beer bottles, necked furiously. A cop was patrolling the bike trails with his dog, a German Shepherd. The cop poked around the weeds looking for evidence, or maybe a murder weapon. The dog was watching the couple. No one was watching Norman Mitchell.

And no one saw Norman Mitchell flying through the air.

But they all heard him.
“Jaysus....” the man with the kite said.
His wife flapped and screeched.
The couple stopped necking.
“Wow...” the boy said. The girl rolled onto an elbow and squinted.
“I guess,” she said, desultorily.
The children hollered at the cop to make him come watch the flying man bob and gasp in the swollen, sour river.
The cop yanked off his shoes, his belt, his Billy club, his pistol, and a few other useless items, and dove into the water. He paddled, chuffing and spitting, out to the flying man who was now floating face down. The cop snapped Norman’s head back with one hand and flipped him over. Norman spluttered and gagged. The river water was even fouler than he had imagined.
The cop side stroked to the shore with Norman’s head neatly tucked into the side of his uniform. When the water shallowed, and the cop could stand knee-high, he stood and dragged Norman to the pebbly bank. When he finally had Norman laid out on the ground, he dropped to his knees and hovered over Norman. He brought his mouth close to Norman who was an uncanny shade of blue-ish/white. The cop pinched the blue man’s nose and pressed his lips over the man’s. Miraculously, the man’s eyes snapped open and he managed to throw him off and struggle to his feet.

“Hey, buddy. Take it easy. Relax.” The cop said.
Norman nearly gagged. He straightened his rumpled, wet clothes.
“Don’t even think of touching me, you sick sick bastard,” Norman spat through lock-jaw teeth.

Norman whirled around and walked, indignant, yet very slowly, along the bike path. He passed the couple necking in the bushes and nodded.

The boy gave him a thumbs up. The girl merely squinted.

Some children threw pebbles at the backs of his heels, and the German Shepherd, who missed the whole thing, trotted over to Norman and gave his leg the sniff of familiarity, and peed on his foot.

That was Monday.

* * * * * * * * * * *

On Tuesday, Norman read the papers. The aforementioned law enforcement officer, Terrence Gallagher, had been nominated for a medal. Unfortunately, Officer Gallagher died early that morning, having somehow absorbed or swallowed too much toxic river water. Undaunted, Norman continued to eat his Breakfast-Of-Champions. When he was finished, he went to the medicine cabinet and polished off a whole bottle of Ibuprofen. He turned on his least favorite soap opera, and began waiting through the suffering of day time television and of waiting. At last, he slipped into merciful oblivion.

When he awoke, fourteen hours later, he was moaning and clutching his head. His head was imploding. Or maybe it was exploding. Or merely splitting like an overripe watermelon, Norman was not sure. But something was very wrong with his head. Worse yet, Norman Mitchell was very sure that he was not dead. He glanced up at the TV. General Hospital was playing. Norman moaned and suffered through the rest of the longest day in which aspirin and cold clothes can do no good.

* * * * * * * * * * *

On Wednesday, Norman ditched the Breakfast-Of-Champions. It was not doing much for him, he figured. He ate raw pork, instead, and spent the rest of the day waiting.
On Thursday, Norman ate more raw pork. He grubbed around in a patch of stubble growing along the edges of his back steps. He did not know what an earwig was supposed to look like, but he did find a few creepy looking bugs that he thought might do the trick. He could not tell, however, which of the bugs were female, much less, pregnant. But, Norman mumbled to himself, life is merely an extended series of calculated risks, and so that night, he calmly coaxed a few of the creepiest looking bugs into his ears. He went to bed singing, “if not for the courage of a fearless crew, the Minnow would be lost, the Minnow would be lost.” He dreamed happy dreams of rancid meat, day-time drama, and eel-infested waters.

On Friday, Norman woke with a start. He felt himself all over. He was definitely still alive. He shuffled through his sheets looking for the insects. He found nothing. Norman pulled himself out of bed and padded into the kitchen. Although he could smell the gaminess of rotting meat well into the hallway, what he saw when he turned the corner and spotted the uncovered side of pork completely jangled his universe.

All around the base of the ham were dead insects. All of them had eaten the pork and, apparently without much effort, had neatly died. Incensed, Norman ate the insects. Then, he grabbed at the pork and stuffed huge chunks of the rancid meat into his mouth. He broke a window throwing the rest of the pork out, and kicked the table over.

He cursed the day he was born. He cursed the day his father met his mother. He cursed his father for being born. Norman cursed and cursed. When he was done, he showered, shaved, and picked pork out of his teeth. He had hoped he would not have to try Item #6. It frightened him more than any of the other items. It actively involved women, and women were always to be feared.

Norman slapped himself. Of course he would have to go through with Item #6. If nothing else could kill him, the women at DMV, the women who did not shave often, who ate too much garlic, who hated men, who desperately wanted men,
who had large thighs that could crush him like a boiled drumstick, the women who worked at DMV, could kill him. He was sure of that.

Norman dressed, ate an emergency stash of raw pork and drank an iodine fizz. He straightened his tie, checked his gums for evidences of gingivitis, and strode out to his 1979 Chevy Chevette. He climbed in and yanked the door shut. He eased out onto the street and drove around the block. When he had passed his house again, he started picking up speed. By the fifth time he passed his house, the Chevette clocked 60 mph. On the sixth pass, Norman floored the pedal and made a bee-line for the telephone pole at the end of the street. The Chevette had maxed out at 67 mph and it was with a terrible rattling and fishtailing that Norman managed to slam the Chevette into the pole.

Norman smacked his chest against the steering wheel rather soundly. But, as he had expected, he was still, very much alive. He climbed back out of the car without ceremony and walked two blocks to the bus stop and waited for the central metro bus that would take him to DMV.

DMV lends a whole new meaning to Hell, thought Norman as he entered and snatched his numbered ticket from the meter just inside the door. He grabbed an accident-report form from the fake wooden table next to the meter and looked for an empty orange or magenta vinyl seat.

The smells generated within confines of the vinyl seats, the stained wood paneled walls, and steamed pane glass reminded Norman of an introductory chemistry experiment gone awry. The polyester pant-suit wearing woman next to Norman had the distinct fragrance of burnt wood fibers in an ethyl alcohol distillation or of a woman who hadn't showered. Even though a good two feet separated his nose from any part of her body, he could still smell the oiliness of her scalp. Norman bit at his nails. He wondered if small nibbling pain could dull the sense of smell.

On the other side of Norman was a mother with four children, two of whom were arguing over who could put their elbows on the elbow rests. Norman relinquished his elbow rest without so much as a glance. He hated snotty-nosed, whiny kids.

Norman waited for nearly four hours before his number popped up on the digital counter. He straightened his tie and ate three Certs, crunching them between his teeth and rehearsing exactly what he would say.
He pressed his shirt to the side of the counter and leaned in slightly. The woman behind the counter did not notice Norman, she was busy punching the keys on the computer keyboard and glowering at the screen. Norman slid his numbered ticket toward her until the edge of the ticket brushed her sleeve. She turned and glared at Norman. Norman smiled. It would work this time, he thought. This time it would work, he prayed. The woman’s name tag read “Darlene.” Norman knew a Darlene once who was very friendly. He knew, this time it would work.

“Uh...Hi.” Norman said. Darlene’s eyes drifted to the accident report form Norman was still holding in his other hand. She did not say anything to Norman, she just stared at the accident report form. She pursed her lips so that her mouth looked like a wrinkled fig, narrowed her eyes and nodded in the direction of Norman’s left hand and the accident report form.

Norman gave in graciously and handed her the form.

“You might think this is silly, but, I knew a Darlene once.”

Darlene glared and turned to the winking computer screen.

“Yeah...she lived just around the corner from me. That would have been in Des Moines. I’m originally from Des Moines.”

Norman let his sentence dangle and turn up at the ends like ripe invitations in a July garden. Darlene alternated from shooting withering looks at the screen to Norman to the accident report form.

Undaunted, Norman continued in this tangential fashion, tossing out all kinds of pleasantries and other meaningless inanities. When Norman could think of nothing else, he leaned his elbows onto the counter and slouched toward the screen and Darlene.

After an interminable silence Darlene turned and raised an eyebrow.

“There is a very famous Ukrainian proverb, ‘The elderberries are growing in the garden and my uncle lives in Kiev.’”

Norman was completely stumped. He scratched his head, and considered trying a different tact. Item #6 was the last item and he was determined to make it work, with or without Darlene’s help.

“I had a great-grandfather who lived in the Ukraine,” Norman offered, at last. Darlene took a sip of stale coffee from her Styrofoam cup perched on the computer. She handed back Norman’s report form.

“Why don’t you just drop dead?” she spat. Norman shrugged.
"I'm trying," he whined. Darlene studied Norman under her heavy green eyelids, punched the digital number console and yelled with the constrained, reluctant agitation only DMV women can, “NEXT!”

Norman neatly side stepped the woman with all the children, straightened his tie, checked his zipper, and threaded his way toward the door.

He would not give up. Item #6 would work. There were other women, each as equally deadly as Darlene. He did not need her. He was thinking of all he did not need in a DMV woman like Darlene when he walked square into the shortish woman with the four kids. He bounced off her ample chest and bumped into the wall, hitting his head with a solid THUNK.

What happened next was a complete mystery to Norman. The holed-tile ceiling and fluorescent lighting suddenly became a cacophony of kaleidoscopic colors and lights: bright dots floating across his eyes, paisley configurations and stars orbiting the air just micrometers from his nose. He heard noises, chirruping and chatter and then, then--the most angelic face he had ever seen, bending over him and speaking softly in his ear.

It was Darlene--his Darlene, crooning and fawning over him, offering her Styrofoam cup of stale coffee and peppermint lozenges. She was asking him questions--would he like to come over for a late night candle light dinner, could she call him, would he like to take her out to the show? Her voice was dissipating, he couldn't make anything out now, but her hand was in his back pocket. She pulled out his wallet, looking for his phone number, he was sure. She pulled out his blue-cross card. He couldn't tell why, his phone number wasn't on that. No matter. He pulled himself up off the floor with a flourish. He would just have to come back tomorrow and ask for her phone number. Darlene tried to make him sit, probably so she could pretend to straighten out his tie or collar. Norman breezed past her with a blithe smile and winked. He stumbled into the plate glass doorway, but recovered gracefully, nodded to all the onlookers and walked into the penumbral glow of an afternoon of wet sunshine, shadow, and nascent love.

Life, thought Norman, is a relative investment. Worth is merely a relative concept for the value one will divest into something (or someone) else. Hence, if one values love, or the idea of the idea of love, one may, and not completely
inaccurately, find meaning and worth in life. Thus, life is worth living. Or maybe loving.

This and so much more Norman pondered as he jay-walked across the intersection, completely unaware of the green GMC truck barreling though a red light.

Norman heard a scream. He looked up in time to see a grinning face, a pair of hands gripping the wheel, the grillwork of the truck. A brilliant flash, the displacement of a thousand years, sounds dying in his throat.

Norman was, at last, mortal.
The eyes staring into the mirror belonged to a young man from Gdansk—the handsomest man the mirror had seen for a while. He studied the mirror, unmindful of the clover-like petals fluttering behind him on the wallpaper. Just as he heard the tune tearing itself from behind the paper, peeling free with the clover and floating out the window like cotton from trees, he stared in horror as his reflection in the mirror moved its mouth and said, "You should know, beauty is a great curse." With the last strain of the aria, the dispossessed gathered his strength and leapt straight into the soul of the unfortunate young man. The man felt nothing, just blinked his eyes: first his right, then his left, and that was all. And that is how they say Florian the Pole, now housed in a name and face, navigated the last migration from the forgotten day into man's seven-day-week-world where he remains.

* * * * *

While Tonya Volkov served in the order, she maintained an unusual vow of silence. She never said anything except, "Beauty is a great curse." She plucked her eyebrows into thin arches and dusted nickel-based powder over her face to hide her age, giving herself the look of a wax model or a Dresden miniature. She moved more cautiously than her sisters Natalia and Irina, moving as if she was afraid of shadows, of what they would do to her face, afraid that shadowfall would reveal her strange curse. Not very long ago, before she joined the order, Tanya's jagged beauty was legendary. From Estonia to the New Siberian Islands where the sun never

1Everyone knows that the more beautiful the tune, the more likely its notes are to be caught, trapped behind the bars of musical scores and in the grooved paper of rooms where that music has been played. It is also true that these tunes are the most likely to attempt flight.
melts through snow, people knew of the powers of Tanya's beauty. Her beauty froze the breaths of passersby in their throats and noses and could freeze infectious diseases or ill-will before it reached her. Until a most unusual thing happened to her. Even now only in silences can her family speak of her strange calamity.

According to her sisters, Tanya had several suitors but could not decide which to marry. Each of them for some reason or another both fascinated and yet, also repulsed her. One was too fat. One suitor, a respected major who had been decorated many times, was far too old. Pyoter Nikolaevich, whom she grew up with and knew how to make cry with three words or less, was too feminine. Florian Daubrinsky, a Pole with large eyes, was by far the best looking. But Florian was mute. All the other suitors had sung songs, made speeches, and raised toasts to Tanya. But not Florian. Still, Tanya chose as her fiancee Florian the Pole. Before she agreed to marry him, however, Tanya decided to test the Pole's devotion. In exchange for her dowry and her hand, Florian would have to speak.

On a day when even the Serbs would not go out to pee and Laplanders burned the ends of their fingers for heat, she sent a note by pigeon. She informed Florian that she would marry him and asked him to meet her by the river Yenisey's stone bridge at dusk to talk. Florian flew the pigeon back with a note. "Please forgive me," the note read, "but I must speak to you in my own way tonight at the bridge."

Now it should be understood that Tanya was not completely compassionless or unreasonable. She was too young for her beauty, unable to comprehend what a terrible curse a face like hers was for the opposite sex. 'Stringing beaus,' as her sisters called it, was as lighthearted business as threading thimbles on Cassack's hair or hanging Chinese lanterns up in the gardens at twilight. But with Florian, she felt differently. True, he was a man, and therefore, part of a very great game, but, he was almost more beautiful than herself. For that, she could almost love him. Moreover, Florian the Pole, who sweated tiny drops of blood and who trembled and shook when she teased him, made her laugh. And now, even more amusing was his promise to attempt to speak. She found the whole ordeal of communicating through a network of carrier birds highly entertaining. And although she was not what one might call genuinely evil, she was young, vain, and completely unable to pass up a good game.
The evening she was to meet Florian, Tanya braided baby’s breath into hair so black her sisters could see their own reflections in it, and painted heavy lines of Kohl around her eyes. When she decided the mirror could no longer hold the image of her face, she swung on her mother’s cloak and rushed to the river.

When dusk had fallen and everything wore purple and grey, Florian emerged from the river’s fog, his shoes softly tapping the cobblestones. Tanya sat perched on the stone ledge, waiting. Florian walked with purpose to her and kissed her hand, as he always did when they met. She looked at him through her painted face and watched as he dropped to his knees and from his breast pocket produced another message. She frowned slightly.

The message was written in an unspoken language that only the soulless or dispossessed can hear and understand instead of his customary Kashubian or her Russian. For our purposes the English is provided as follows:

I know who and what you are.
But I agree to marry
you, you who wear as
many names as I.

She could no longer see the pale reflection of the night in his eyes. She crumpled up the note and tossed it like salt over her left shoulder and laughed hysterically at the mute still on his knees who puzzled out what even the angels themselves do not know.

She laughed, eyelids closed and her head thrown back. She could hear Florian’s shoes squeaking angrily on the cobblestones and the haunting sounds of the Pole whistling a dark tune. She stopped short and called after him in the unspoken language,

“I curse you, mute, and congratulate you!”
To her great bewildermnt, he spun around and with the deadly smile that could charm the poison from a viper, called back,

“You curse yourself.”
Florian turned and continued whistling. Just as he reached the stone ledge, he leapt over into the icy waters of mother Yenisey.

Tanya clambered down from the ledge, defeated. The tears of her laughter cut a trail into her nickel powder and as she leaned over the stone wall and gazed at her
reflection, she watched her face age. She studied the waters of the Yenisey until from the river's black surface mirror she saw the face of her mother. She traced with her fingers the folds of skin around her neck, her mother's moles on the chin and forehead, and her mother's hook nose. Horrified, she pulled the cloak around her shoulders and hurried home.

Her sisters, still awake in their rooms, listened for Tanya's return. When she flung open their doors, they merely stared at the image of their mother who spun about the room, snatching the cloak and gloves off and moving from mirror to mirror, mumbling. Her youngest sister, Irina, pulled the coat off the floor and in its folds smelled the Yenisey. From the mirror, Tanya whispered,

"Florian the Pole has stolen my name and my face."

When she said it, the mirrors cracked, each of them in long jagged scars.

The next day, even before the pigeons stirred in the belfries, the news spread throughout the city that the famed beauty, Tanya Volkov had taken orders and would wed the church in Khalysnk.

Before she left, she forbade her family, particularly her sisters, to speak of Florian—his name would forever remain unspoken within their four walls. In the meantime, she would scour every grave site, especially those belonging to the Khazars, who were well known for their changing faces, for her old name and face. She made herself a poultice of crushed dandelion and echinacea and coffee grounds. With a scaly flask full of crocodile tears in her hand, she caught a train to Pest to find an eleven-fingered woman who knew the secret healing powers of cat's clay.
Rossalia had a very dumb daughter. Her daughter, Rose, sat in the corners of their tiny apartment picking the dirt from underneath her toenails and eating what she found. She often stumbled and fell or accidentally cut or scraped herself. Instead of crying as most children would, Rose would stop what she had been doing, plop down on her large ass, and inspect with glee her cuts and wounds, picking off the scabs and eating the scab and whatever else was in the wound. She did not suck her thumb—she sucked the index finger and her third finger. Her two pronged suckle served two purposes: first it kept her groping fingers and mouth occupied; second, the index finger told her what to think about in the odd minutes of the day and the middle finger told her what to think about during the even ones. Even with a two finger guide—Rose’s thoughts revolved chiefly around acting out nursery rhymes and old family legends, studying old photographs, and eating as much bread as she could hold without splitting.

In spite of all this, Rossalia loved her misfit daughter. Rossalia bit her lip, drawing blood, and determined to work as hard as she could for her unusual daughter. And so at the New Moon festival, Rossalia started paying on her unwritten contract she had made for Rose. When Rossalia was thirteen, doctors discovered that she could never bear a child. She sought other doctors, mystics, herbalists, and finally, in desperation, consulted a medium. She had scoured every quarter of the sagging city before finding a witch who would help. The witch burned the mark of three trees in Rossalia’s arm sealing the contract as a binding agreement between Rossalia and the witch for as long as Rossalia lived.

The next morning, Rossalia, woke to find a small salt and sandstone figurine of a dirty child. Rossalia poured water on the statue and watched as it slowly came to life, writhing and struggling off the stone and salt into a large muddy pool. The child blinked through sandy grey eyes and tried to speak, but the sounds stopped short in her throat, as if even her throat was full of sand.

The stone child was enormously handsome and well made from perfectly carved ears to a smooth sanded cheek. However, as the minutes progressed, it became quite clear to Rossalia that there was something very wrong with her new child: she was deaf and one of her eyes was slow.
During the short years she lived with her mother, Rose showed unusual strength and intelligence. However, Rose's energy seemed to her mother a bit misdirected, if not perverse. On Friday evenings, when the Jews began preparations for the Sabbath, and the faithful fasted from shelled and scaled creatures, Rose would creep toward the water's edge of the river and catch grasshoppers and frogs. Once she had collected a whole skirt full of frogs and insects, she would sit on their back stoop. She had filed all her fingernails to razor sharp points and pinned the grasshoppers onto cork board with her nails. For hours she watched them writhe and squirm, tearing their own legs off and then dying as they baked under the sun, unable to move.

But with the frogs it was different. Rose would hold the frogs in her lap, stroking their skin. Then starting from the base of their head and working backward, she skinned them with her nails, flaying them wide open. She always left a bit of skin around the frog's feet so that the whole of its skin was still attached and lying in a puddle like shadow. Then she'd clap her hands and stomp her feet. She'd shriek with glee as the frog jumped around with the skin shadow trailing and she'd pin the skin down and watch the frog jump out from its own skin.

Perhaps even more unusual was the fact that animals—whether butterflies, birds, or frogs—so readily followed Rose around. And each one of them provided for her some new perverse pleasure: the legs of the daddy long legs adorned her braided hair with butterfly wings, and once as a joke, she wore around her neck a thrush she had just killed.

Her mother would watch in horror from behind the screen door, but said nothing. Yet when Rose had turned ten and was well past the age of accountability, Rossalia sent her strange, inscrutable daughter to the sisters for monastic training.

The nuns of the order of Cluny received Rose with misgivings because she was so beautiful and yet, God had clearly stopped her tongue for some divine reason. However, Rose, as silent and odd as she had become, was quite useful in the kitchen skinning and slicing the foul or fish with her nails so deftly that she could drape the skins completely intact from the hanging pot rack. After a time, she earned quite a reputation among the lesser nuns with her uncanny culinary abilities, and began by virtue of her talents, to earn an unusual amount of respect.
Rose stayed on with the Cluniacs and studied their scriptures, which seemed, at times, incomprehensible to her, and at other times, completely ridiculous. By the time she was thirteen, Rose had been entrusted with a special stylus with which she could write the sacred scripts in mercury. The nuns trusted her because she could not possibly tell the others what she was doing or divulge the secrets the words afforded her.

However, what the nuns didn’t know was that Rose had a photographic memory. Rose studied the Latin texts as she translated, all the while filing them away into the dark corners of her mind, waiting for a great storm to scare them up again.

Rose grew in beauty, piety and grace, and to the amazement of the Cluniacs, seemed to relish the pains the discalced incur, growing unnaturally mindful of the blisters and scabs on her feet. She continued on this way for several years until one day, on her twentieth birthday, a great wind arose. The wind was so powerful, the pots gathering rain water on the cornices fell into the courtyard with a terrible clattering and the pigeons flapped frantically against the wind. Several were kept at a dead standstill, straining against the blast. A furious clanging could be heard in the portico under the bell tower, a racket whose fury reminded the nuns of the day on which St. Thomas’ bell tolled, a day when ghosts were said to walk.

A fire broke out in the kitchen. The nuns scattered to pump water and in the midst of chaos, a man appeared at the gate and let himself in. He walked with calm, surveying the scene, and went directly to the kitchen where Rose stood, mutely watching the others and the fire. He seemed to possess within his black cape, the halcyon calm of someone who knows a great secret, the future perhaps, but wouldn’t dream of revealing it.

Rose instantly recognized the man.

She felt an odd stirring in her throat. She felt like she had swallowed feathers and dust and she thought she might cough. Then an cold warmth generating from her voice box spread up her throat, and her tongue, which had lain still as a sloth within her mouth, suddenly twitched. Rose the Mute opened her mouth and for the first time in all her life of stone and salt, Rose spoke.
"If you’re here for the texts, follow me,” she said.

And so he did. Up the winding stone staircases and long dark corridors they climbed until they reached Rose’s solitary cell full of air pregnant with the smell of mercury.

Rose opened the only fragment of the texts she still had in the room and read its contents to the man. Then, she retold the accounts stored in her picture memory of every word and event she had translated or recopied. She felt her tongue making sounds it had never known and once, she felt the burdening of Eve, of knowing too much, and she stopped speaking. The man waited for a moment. Then he spit in his hand, spread the spittle on his finger, and without a word, touched her lips. And as if her tongue had a tongue of its own, it began to move restlessly over her palate and up against her teeth, articulating whole books in a single breath. As she spoke in the forbidden language, language that only lost angels know, the stranger recopied the text. His fingers passed over the mercury, burning the letters as he went, searing them forever into oblivion. His fingers wrote so fast, the pages glowed under his fingertips which looked as if they were actually setting the words on fire with a strange blue-white cloud.

At last, they finished. All the work Rose had done in the seven years the Cluniacs received her had been consumed by a stranger in mere minutes. In the place of the texts and Rose’s memory of the words was the image of crumbled parchment. The pieces containing the words of Christ resembled broken bits of stone. Rose closed her eyes and imagined herself eating the stone and found that it tasted like manna. It was not the Eucharist of fire, or grace. It was for Rose a taste of thorns, thistle soup, something like sadness. She opened her eyes to ask the man the meaning of sadness, something she had not known. But the man was gone, and her tongue which had moved so easily before, was shut to the bottom of her mouth. Rose could not even contort her tongue or mouth enough to make the sounds of a woman crying. Even so, she tried. The sounds escaping her throat were barely human.

While the fire had consumed everything within the convent, Rose put on all her clothes under her habit. She plucked the thorns from a rose bush and pushed a thorn into the tips of each of her fingers, one for each year at the convent. In her iron shoes, she walked a thousand miles to a woman who claimed to know the curative properties of a certain kind of soil or mud, a mud that could not only cleanse the
heart, but heal wounds as well. Rose walked toward Budapest where the woman was rumored to live. So happy to reach the mud fields at last, when she found the woman and her mud, Rose cried tearless salt. But when she stepped into the mud and began rubbing it all over, something strange began to happen. For Rose, the mud contained no curative properties; instead, the mud quickly solidified on her body and began drying first as clay, and then sandstone. Within a matter of seconds, Rose had been turned completely back to stone. And that is how she knew that she could never be human. She died with a salty warm cry on her lips.

The next day, the woman took the stone figurine from her fields to a nearby gravesite and propped the statue on a grave marker. Rose remained undisturbed until a novice from the Caucuses, furious for a face and relief from the Khazar's curse, chiseled Rose's beautiful stone face away, catching the fragments in a scaled pouch, until not even the figurine's nose remained.
THE PRINCESS AND HER CHILD

When the princess became the Queen Mother and brought to the world the greatest child-magician ever to have walked the land, the princess was still only twelve years old. Although she was a child, something inside of her blossomed to such a fullness, the change spilled out of every pore. In only a few weeks she became the most beautiful virgin in a three-province radius. The priest forbade her to attend mass or any public function without at least three veils covering her face, her beauty was so fierce. When she gazed into the mirror, the eyes that stared back seemed to follow her to every corner of the room. Even the grape blossoms on the vine paled at her touch and the wind trembled. In spite of her beauty which had some mysterious and sometimes dire effects upon the men, the princess was very shy. A reluctant beauty, she held her tongue between her teeth. Worse yet, because she had not spoken for quite some time, when she did speak, she stuttered. Those who had not heard of her famed beauty supposed she wore the veils to hide leprosy. And her innate shyness kept her from redeeming herself, keeping the gossips' tongues busy and the truth at bay. Thus, over a period of two or three years, the princess found herself almost completely isolated.

Beauty for the princess was a terrible disease and she prayed fervently for a cure. At the river one evening, after the ashkam could be heard from a country away, the princess studied the waters. Deep within the watery sky, the distant constellations hung in icy china coffins against the black mud of the river. She threw her hair over her face and plunged her head into the sky water, knocking the cold stars off the water's edge. When she pulled her head up again, she worked the clover into the roots and braided her hair into thick ropes. But when the water stilled, she saw on the surface the reflection of a young man staring intently at her. She pulled her veils on quickly. But even through the hazy film of the cloth she could see that the man was one of the most beautiful men she'd ever seen. His skin looked like that of a newborn and he had three nostrils instead of two. The princess did not know at first who or what she was dealing with; the man had a Jewish nose, Turkish manners and the language of a nomad: some Italian, a little Romansch, some Greek.

"I have news for you," he said.
The princess laced her fingers behind her back to keep her hands from shaking.

"Who are you?" she asked.
He countered, "Everyone knows me by some name or another."

The princess stared into the reflection of his eyes which glowed like embers and old ash. He smelled Jewish, but his Italian sounded like a cart turning bumpy corners. His unusually large eyes followed her image floating on the water.

"You will mother the greatest star and from that star, a thousand lights will be shorn off like glowing bits of steel. Your people will litter the night sky and children will gaze at them to make a wish and toss coins at their feet."

Still the princess said nothing. Her pupils grew so wide, they might have swallowed the man had he not moved away. Her eyes grew, taking in everything: the man's funny accent, his three-nostriled nose. Then, the nameless man pulled from out of each nostril a charm piece: a small silver clover, a spade of obsidian, and a tiny diamond.

"Keep these next to your heart," he said. And then the man with the beautiful blue eyes dove into the water, plowing the night stars.

"What a strange man," she thought and laughed a small bitter laugh because she knew she would never marry.

That night, a night when children's prayers form small silver chains to heaven and virgins pray to St. Agnes and gaze at the Hunter's Moon, she crushed chamomile and verbena and sprinkled them over her door. At midnight, when the moon looked full as a ripe orange, she felt a faint stirring within her. She slept badly all through the night and when morning had come--pale and limp like chalky death, she gasped in surprise. Between her legs and sucking its thumb was the ugliest child she had ever seen. She smiled tenderly, pulled the ugly child to her breast, and breathed a sigh of relief. The mark of the spade was stamped on the child's heart. The mark and the child's ugliness assured her beyond a doubt that the child belonged to her and that the pestilential beauty which tormented her had been spared her son.

She raised the child as her own, breast-feeding him with the bitter liquid that came down from her heart. The child did not grow any prettier nor show signs of unusual strength or coordination. With relief she could see that, as of yet, the child was unexceptional and began looking for a suitable father to provide a usable last
name. And so she went to the cathedral to search. She had stopped wearing the veils during the fasting days and she walked slowly through the portico of the cathedral, dropping bits of unleavened bread at the feet of the fasting men. And although the princess had worn the veils for three years, it soon became evident that during the years of hiding, her beauty had not faded. In fact, it had grown much more intense. Her beauty was a sort of redemptive poison: only the very pure in heart could bear to look upon her. Animals and children clung to her skirts for a vision of her face while all those past the age of innocence cringed in remembrance of the days when they too could view beauty such as hers. Two men she passed by openly wept, two others had heart attacks, and one man died in excruciating pain in his nether regions.

At last, she seemed to find what she had come for. Near the altar screen kneeled the dirtiest blind indigent. He sat in the archway, one palm extended. She approached the beggar and placed the silver spade piece in his hand. Without a word or so much as a gesture of surprise, the blind beggar followed the princess back to her home where she made a huge pot of lentils for him. After they had eaten, they licked the bottom of the bowls, then smashed them against the walls. Later, after the sun burned each grain of sand into a bloom of violent orange, she asked him his name.

"Which?" he asked because every soul has several names.

She already knew his Hebrew name, the one she married him for, so she replied,

"Christian."

"Oh...that is very different, then. I am called Florian the Pole." As he spoke his Christian name, the candles licked the shadows and hissed like serpents and scales like those on fish or unclean reptiles fell from his eyes. Florian smiled as the princess stared in horror into the bluest eyes she had ever seen. They had a peculiar light in them, a light the reflection of the candles could not have produced.

The princess moved away from him and picked up the pottage on the floor. She knew from the uncanny light in his eyes that she had borrowed the name of a very dangerous man. Like a cat, he must be carefully watched and killed at least nine times. She pulled on her veils and picked up her ugly son who had quietly been sleeping in the corner of the room.
“Would you like to see him?” she asked the man who was now busy blowing out the flames of the candles and relighting them with fire from his fingertips.

“Not really. We've already met, he and I, many times,” he said without turning, catching her eyes in the shiny copper reflection on the pot hanging over the fire. And yet her face had no effect on him as it did all the others. She could not think what it was she had unwittingly brought home as the child’s father. And then she recalled a chant or a rhyme she learned as a child. It was a charm, a spell an old woman taught her to say when she felt hunted or fear fastened her down to the floor. It was a chant a hunter would softly sing as he hunted and the sounds of the words dropped like little jewels or bits of gold before his feet, drawing the hunted in closer and closer to him. Soon the song would put the beast into a quiet slumber from which it would never awake, giving the hunter the freedom of the wood.

The man in the princess’ quarters would not go away. He had given her his name for her child and now she knew, he had come to collect her soul. And as his blue eyes began to put her under the heavy sleep of ether, she quietly began to hum the old little tune she learned as a child. The child still slept and the princess kept humming until the blue eyes fastened on the pot began to grow dim. Then, she sang. She sang with all the wild abandon of a soul that hasn’t a moment to lose. She sang and sang without a single stutter, and watched the notes nail shut the eyes of the man called Florian the Pole. When her song had stitched every scale back into place, still singing, she led the blind man, for a time her husband in name, back to his place in the temple. And as she left, a trail of diamonds unraveled off the hem of her veils, dropping like rain onto the laps of the beggars.

1The Story of Nikon Sevast: it is believed that the devil traveled under this name and many many others in his wanderings through the misunderstood lands where people worshipped sun and stars and refused to eat salt.
THE CORRECTED ACCOUNT OF PLAKIDA

It must be mentioned here that many stories of strange metamorphosis are recounted in the lands to the east where the grass grows black and the cities change their names each season. This story begins with the account of the beast turned out of the City of Angels and hunted by a famous archer, Plakida. Plakida had caught, like St. Hubert, a stag with a cross on its head rather than the horned-color antlers. And from that moment on, his hunting took a fateful turn.

On a day when the clouds flew lower than crows, Plakida hunted a particularly elusive quarry, something like a ghost. In fact, Plakida, commissioned by the King, was hunting for the crafty animal that could steal both life and death. But the old account begins as follows:

"That same Plakida who caught a stag with a cross on its head instead of antlers was once hunting by the sea...."2

As the needles of the trees rattled like the angry bits of angel pieces in sand dollars or the keys to a very old lock, Plakida hunted like picking diamonds from his teeth, carefully scouring every inch of ground. And they say he could read the beast's dreams so that when the beast dreamed of Plakida, Plakida saw himself as the beast did. By morning, after the beast had dreamed all night of Plakida, Plakida, who had by then lived two days in one, was exhausted. But even in sleeping, he did not rest. As he slept, he dreamt and thought so quickly and so much, that by the time he awoke, he had dreamt four days into two while the beast had only lived two days in one. And on it went until the two, both the hunter and the hunted, dreamed themselves into utter fatigue. And they say, that is when the real hunt with the beast capturing the hunter occurred. But whether that story is true or not, only the dispossessed know. For an alternate account of the legend says that Plakida followed the trail, his nose to the ground, like a bloodhound, tracking curious and changing prints. At first they resembled the prints of a phoenix:
and then the sphinx:

and then lastly and most curious of all, the split scales of a reptile or fish. Closer Plakida crept toward the river where the tracks mysteriously disappeared. At the river's edge, the tracks resembled a cloven hoof and he could see the imprint of the animal's left cheek in the wet mud. Then kneeling, Plakida sniffed the edges of the print and placed his left cheek in the print, astonished to find an exact match. He looked up and saw the beast-- a cast iron bit of Hell with clattering teeth within its hatch that tottered on its cloven legs. With a growing tuft of steel needles for fur outside the glowering kiln, the iron stove with the changing feet slowly crept closer to Plakida. Plakida threw his head back and howled the terrible howl of the hunter about to attack. But it did no good. His baying stopped short in his chest.

Then the cast iron stove, blackened with soot to the grill, cast the spell--the last rite that charms the quarry into submitting. Plakida, feeling a heaviness in his heart and a funny tin ringing in his ear, bowed before the hunter without so much as a whimper.

Plakida laid his cheek down again and let the spectral ash of the iron stove blow pieces of next week onto his forehead. He licked his hand and wiped a smile
onto his face. The stove spewed out more ash of tomorrows and Plakida settled himself in for a long winter's hibernation. He curled himself into a needly ball, tucked his paws under his armpits, and dreamed of an aria--the sounds the swan makes as it dies, and a day without scales or claws.

1Plakida or Placcidus: the hunter pursuing/pursued by the metamorphic quarry which may have been, in fact, Plakida's own ghost.

PROFESSOR CHAVEZ'S DIVERSION

During a twilight when the wind blew the birds backwards and the grass would not grow, Professor Inigo Chavez shut the dusk out of his apartment and went to work. Brushing aside the clutter from his cramped desk, Chavez pulled out his chess board and carefully positioned the playing pieces. Many years had passed since he had a partner worth playing and since no one had responded to his computer bulletin queries, he would have to settle for another game of solitary chess.

Professor Inigo Chavez led an unusual life. Outside of the classrooms, he avoided his colleagues as if he were afraid of becoming one of them. He avoided social gatherings, departmental potlucks and picnics, coffee, and teas. He only attended meetings heralded on the dreaded goldenrod colored office memos because he knew those meetings were mandatory.

Inside his classrooms, students found the professor intriguing if not a little strange. "All history is a premonition of the future. When you smell history in fruition like a sour wind, you have just smelled the future one breath away," the professor loved to say. He spoke of history as if it were a great game. Factions and revolutionaries advanced on the chalk boards in flurries of X's and O's, died on a Monday and resurface later that week under a new time and new name and a new cause. "But," the professor wagged his finger, "the net result is the same. Conflict is the fuel of the universe. Without it, nothing can be born from the ensuing chaos," Professor Chavez explained to his class once. The professor braided his unruly hair with tiny strips of paper with important dates like 1066 or 1862 written on them and with amusement, sometimes amazement, his students watched him spinning around the room like a mad top, pointing to maps and stratagems on the chalkboard, and creating a whirlwind of fluttering pieces of paper and a little chaos. By the end of his morning lectures, he would unbind his hair and pull out his precious facts as if he was picking diamonds from his scalp.

He had chessboard dreams in which the next move or the next scene could not be breathed until a wind from the east or sands from the south knocked a piece loose. That is why Professor Chavez, when he was not studying old maps, cleaning his measuring instruments, or playing chess, loved to sleep. When he slept, new
endings to old problems suddenly fell open like shingles falling off of boarded windows. And with a little effort he could shape how things fell apart, or as he saw it, opened up. One night, when the clouds in his dreams drifted and snagged on spires, he peeled stones from a marbled checkerboard. Behind the stones covered with moss, grass, and bird droppings, he discovered Hadrian's wall. That is why Professor Chavez often said to his colleagues that waking was a terrible chore. "Why wake and work eight hours of old business when you can excavate with the strength of twenty men in your dreams?" But that is also why Dr. Chavez swallowed lumps of bitter disappointment the size of asters when, even in his dreams, he could not uncover one clue, divine one more movement to further his ongoing game of chess.

Initially, his obsession with chess took flight one day when, quite by accident, he encountered a strange, cryptic lexicon. One of the entries discussed a Khazar monk who lived for chess. This monk played one move per season on a huge expanse between two seas east and south of the Urals. Chavez felt a powerful surge throughout his body. The image of a chessboard chalked over a vast territory in which the priest released a falcon to hunt the animals he used as playing pieces, branded Chavez's imagination and he could think of nothing else. A week later when the image had cooled enough that Chavez could begin to work it, the professor built his elaborate chessboard.

On that night in 1974 when each tooth registered as a separate ache, Professor Inigo Chavez sat down and answered the Khazar's challenge. Upon each fingernail, he carved with a pen knife the figure of a chess piece and on his palm he painted the Khazar's address.

But instead of a game stretched over a specific territory like the monk's game, Professor Chavez wanted to create a mystery of buildings and places scattered all over the world in which the solver would have to slave for the results, like a woman giving birth.

First came word and then word became life; before there was anything, there was language. So after drawing his blueprints and an outline of a chessboard, Chavez took word and went to work. Writing sketches of some of his least favorite students and colleagues, Chavez created a vast catalogue of characters, each of whom would assume the role and function of a given chess piece.
And with his love of cartography in mind, Chavez supplied a map with each new intrigue so that the reader could trace the character's movement and direction, interpolate and then overlay those movements onto the chessboard.

Chavez sat at his desk well into the early morning hours past the time when the bird song exploded from the eaves and trees like grapeshot against the window panes. He wove and spun his flax of folklore, meaningless legend, and characters, chuckling at the sheer stupidity and enormity of his task.

He assigned the piece of the black Queen to one of his most mysterious students who also happened to write the worst poetry he'd ever read in the margins of her loose-leaf notebook. This student haunted his thoughts and he found himself rehearsing his lectures in his mind as he walked to work, imagining the expressions on his students' faces, but particularly the face of the student with the long purple scar at the base of her neck who wrote bad poetry. Although he drank vodka during his lectures to “break the phlegm and boredom of things,” he told another history professor, he really drank because vodka was the best cure for sore throats and hearts and because he could not stop thinking about the student with the scar.

In the evenings, the Professor continued to drink. He thought about his chess game and sometimes read the student's bad poetry. It never occurred to him that the student, Ciri Jones, was writing about him, or that her words and his would someday become hopelessly crossed.

Ignoring the mountains of unopened correspondence and students' ungraded work on his desk, he became increasingly engrossed with his unsolveable chess game. He poured over books retelling ancient legend and lore of medieval times to better understand the knight, and studied gothic architecture to "resonate" with the rook, and sent reams of letters to the Khazar monk.

Finally, after weeks of ceaseless writing and plotting, Chavez came to a dead standstill. He had written himself into a corner. His black pieces had all migrated to the other side of the board, surrounding in a checkmate the unfortunate white King. However, Chavez could not decide how to end the game. To do so, he must kill the white king with either the black queen or bishop, which required of him a story he could not write.

"Cut a throat and out springs silence," were the last piece's words. And once Chavez had eliminated all the pawns, the movement and chatter of the pieces collapsed into a silence that could still a sea. Completely stumped, Chavez sat in his
thinking chair. After hours of refiguring, juggling the pawns and moving the pieces, and coming no closer to a solution, Professor Chavez decided to solicit help.

The next day, in his Medieval History and Structure class, he made a modest proposal. Students wishing to earn research credit could either work together or alone to construct the perfect murder. The murder must take place in a cathedral structure they had studied in class and must include:

1. Nave
2. Apse
3. Cloister
4. Transept
5. Narthex
6. Chapel
7. Choir

The students responded enthusiastically, and, the professor noted with satisfaction that even the temperamental student in the back of the room seemed to glower a little less.

On that night he dreamed that the cherry blossoms hanging from the tight-lipped buds of the trees turned into flame-orange and candy-pink wax bodies of small swallows that melted and fluttered into flight toward the sun. Professor Chavez woke with a start. Without even bothering to light a cigarette or wipe the sleep seams from his eyes, he sat at his chessboard, waiting. The answer was only a few words away.

* * * * * * * * *

She started with the narthex and retold an ancient story about the hunter and the hunted:

"That same Plakida who caught the moon and the stars dancing above the horn of his quarry ..."
A girl with green eyes the color of trampled water, Ciri Jones had been slowly hating Professor Inigo Chavez for several months. It began innocently enough when the professor greeted her and made the mistake of noticing the scars around her neck. He could not know that the girl with the muddy green eyes had put them there herself or that she could read his thoughts as he spluttered and fished for a way out of the encounter. That was the first day of her hate. The next week, she simmered in her back row seat when she noticed the professor looking at her legs. She wrote hate poetry in the corners of her assignments which she addressed “To the stuffed shirt” and continued to count the ways in which she could hate him.

She had hoped the history professor would be younger, more eligible, better looking. He was not. He reminded her of a protractor with moving parts like a bad Swiss Army knife commercial or of a man who needed a good meal of fish fried in its own oil. On the days when the frost crimped hair and curled leaves, he would sweep into the room, out of breath, his hair as wild as untamed unalphabetized languages. He had an annoying way of shuffling in shoes that did not fit, rapping a long ruler on the overhead slide screen and clearing his throat mid-sentence, which was, to her, utter sacrilege. A word or phrase should never be silenced in the middle of its soul. Better to cut off a finger than to stop then start again. That is why she only wrote and only read stream-of-consciousness writing and why when she had collected enough words to rain her own rivers, she stopped numbering days or wearing a watch.

But when she turned five, Ciri also discovered she had unusual abilities even for a child. Her mosaic eyes from a distance appeared mottled, but up close, one could see her thoughts move over her eyes like the hands over a clock face. When she looked at something she could see through it and if she concentrated very hard, she could detect the faintest scents from great distances. In fact, her nose became so sensitive that it developed an intuition of its own. She knew the store owner of a tiny delicatessen put chorizo in his soups two days before he actually made the soup. By the time the soup was made, the meat smelled rancid, the spices bland and her nose, which was always a week ahead, would not let her eat it, even though the delicatessen owner had a shop full of patrons hungrily smacking their lips and asking for more.
She could also dream the events of a few days in advance. She never feared meeting her counter-dreamer, her proverbial twin, because she knew she would meet him first days before they even knew of her existence. Somehow, she knew that this Professor Chavez, with all his understanding of ancient texts, legends, and history, held the key. She could not resist the invitation of an unfilled page, an empty china plate made for piling and arranging words for eating later. She balanced her words, each of them with biting power, carefully on the rind, the skin of the paper, bearing in mind which words were acid burning easily through the layers of the rind, which were sweet, which were sour, and which, like salt, must be taken with other words. And so she let her pencils which she held between her teeth like knives, stab at the pages of her sketch pad and wrote herself closer to an understanding of the puzzle, closer to the fated meeting with the counter-dreamer, deeper into the hunt for the elusive author of the beast that she herself hunted. With the words of the hunter-story, "that same Plakida was hunting on a bank of crescent-shaped dreams" coiled around her stomach, she began to write:

--- The Joke About Dr. Iigo P. Chavez ---

For days like these when throwing salt over your shoulder invites the devil to throw it back in your face and the corn in the fields, like a eunuch, has no sex, only one remedy can banish the curse - a sacrifice. That is why it is good for one man to give himself up for the wrongs of others. This is real religion - the loss of God - the journey toward nothing. Surrendering is only reasonable.

Once there was a cockless man who loved to garden. He held in his hands wild letters of all the different alphabets of the world. Without glancing at the letters, he shook them out of loose fists. In no time at all, he grew a labyrinth from which he could not escape. Each day that passed, his gardens within his labyrinth grew increasingly unruly. Chipped letters, the garden spoiled from mere seeds that the scholar left to the discrimination of the wind. So what started as a handful of distinct alphabet became a path of L's, S's, those and hydrangeas, shoveling with lyric P's, B's that like ink spread everywhere,
tripped the scholar at each turn. Even hacking at a tangle of bramble-briers which bled with each blow, seemed to only make them grow faster. In despair, the man decided to trace his steps from the beginning of the labyrinth and methodically search for a way out. He skated at theradeum of the lab-

reth, a squash plot of cabbages where if he pressed one ear to the wall, he
could still make out faint sounds of travels passing by on a busy road.

From there, the man inch ed forward through the wild rose bush and

where he saw a figure of the Virgin Mary pointing her child in a dense thicket of nis

which grew as thick nettles. Crouching himself, the scholar continued, the

sand of a strange humming pulling him forward, around his feet carried

him, and they flowed that ever beginning to melt. Through a corridor-
ike colonade of more vines, the man then wandered into a soundless cave

where the air was heavy with old snow. That is where he caught the first

sent of his creator, salt, and gardener. Chilling the scholar with sparkling stones

and the garden passages in hope of staving new growth and to know his

way back out. By the time he entered a long slab-sided corridor he could quite
clearly detect the musky sent of a beast in heat. At the end of the corridor the

man encountered a glass greenhouse that pulsed as if an electric current

flowed through it. As he approached the glass octagon, he found his feet
had a mind of their own, pulling him forward as if they were slaves to the

spinning wheel. Close his feet pulled him until they took him to the greenhouse where

the animal smells grew stronger and he could hear the musical cooing of hette-
doves as they began to drift in the caves. He ended, clenching his knuckles
to Sadly his fear away. The first thing he noticed was the overbearning heat of

the sun magnified through the panes.

In the center of the glass greenhouse was an altar and on it a huge

lacquer egg, wet with the female smell of animal. He felt the egg over
and placing his index finger and his thumbnail in a tiny crack, popped it open at its seam. Instead of liquid or an embryo, a letter made from powdered angel hair and egg whites fell out into his hand.

He read the letter one syllable at a time, listening to the sounds of the words swim like fish that weave in the water. The words did not pause to take breaths but moved like a flood over a dry desert, knocking all punctuation loose, filling every empty space with word spell. Knitting his fingers into a knot he read:
Dear Dr. __________

you, who have dropped clues like bones for a bird

cannot be surprised
it has come to this
not a match of wits
but rather, a race of time
and space
had you a greater appetite
you might have crowed me out

Words are like orphan sisters
one departed and hungry,
the other again return.
Words cannot be tamed:
a mere word quit Heaven from Hell
and cast Man back Pandis

Having worked yourself at my mercy,
with a tongue full of sorrow
I leave you to your fate
But here Ciri faltered. Would he escape the glass hothouse only to be trapped again in the labyrinth which had under her intense sun, grown three days growth in one day? Or would he, another Icarus, melt into fabled memory? Or would she do to him what he had done to every other player in his game all along: write him into sure stalemate? She pulled out another sheet of paper, sharpened her knives on her tongue and kept working:

As he read the lines, or rather, they read him, all the man could do was shake his head and cluck his tongue, say, "hah." He could feel the heat like fleas crawl over his skin. As the heat fell upon the panes, melting from his memory every thing he had learned from his studies, everything he had discovered, had thought, had known, even his own last name, the gazillion everything in it began to melt as well. The last thing the scholar remembered, the last relic from his memory was the shape and sound of the last utterance he made, "hah."

A Fly trapped in amber, he remained encased in the glass, having a puddle of hair and epidermises, making the only word he could remember how to make.

And overhead, the hawks of prey and scavenging circled, winging closer on every turn, echoing the sound of the scholar. And still to this day, when a murder of vultures or crows make their prey, they call out with the same sound, laughing, shrieking, crying, "hah."
The next day, Ciri Jones went to class, barefooted and three minutes early as usual. As she walked in, she dumped the story "The Perfect Murder" or "The Joke about Inigo P. Chavez" on the professor's desk. She knew something was terribly wrong when the customary water thermos of vodka was not there. One minute later, the history professor, who prided himself on keeping only water in his thermos, sat in Professor Chavez's swivel chair and poked around in the desk drawers for the ruler. What he saw instead, is this story, which you now read, the exact account of the greatest joke ever played on Professor Inigo Chavez. The noted historian glanced at the very bad poetry in the margins of Ciri Jones' creation and stuffed the copy into the remotest corner of the desk, where it was eventually recovered.
Lukharyen, Azaralia--(1530-?) When my son disappeared during the wars with his hair tied with the tongue of an ox, I didn't worry. I knew he would come back a hero—he never shamed me, except once, before the wars. His father, Mikhail Lukharyen, was a worthless man and when he wandered off over the rock and never returned I did not miss him. I put a saucerful of scalding milk and honey in front of my son. I pulled on my sweater and gave him a broken button and placed it on the saucer. This is what we do when bad luck strikes: we sew our lips shut to our misfortune. He slurped the milk through the hole in that cracked button while I told him the bad news. He took it very well: he picked up a knife, wetted it with his tongue, slit off a button from his shirt, and handing it to me, said, "Here, let's swallow the bad news and never mention it again."

I took the button, and holding it between my two teeth and drinking my tea through the button hole, Islurped my agreement.

From that day on, we became more and more alike, like an old married couple. Who else but Isaila would eat my baked sturgeon with mushrooms I found in my husband's old cork boots? We'd swallow them whole and watch the pale fire throw shapes against the wall and tell each other in the morning of the strange dreams we dreamed after dinner. Although we were alike in so many ways, I hated his fiance, Elya. I did everything I could to discourage his suit.

Isaila and I loved to play cards. We never bet money; we bet time. For instance, I usually won hours of his spare time after a long night of cards. But one night we ran out of spare time to bet with. So we played for Elya. My son has eyes like the fuses of dynamite—deadly when lit. When I suggested we bet for Elya, he looked at me with those lit eyes and I felt afraid. But he agreed to my terms: If I won the most hands, I would arrange another marriage for Isaila; if he won, he, of course, would marry Elya.

We played for over four hours. Something was wrong with the deck. We each suspected one another of cheating. I checked his sleeves and found nothing and he checked mine, but neither of us had pulled any cards. On we played, each of us holding worthless hands. Even after counting the cards, I could not do better than a pair of two's, my luck was that bad. We shuffled in two decks. But our hands were just as worthless as before, as worthless as river carp. When you have nothing
to lose, then you are in the position to win the most. Besides, I knew my son; I knew how to stump him. So I decided to bluff my way to a win. On the next hand Isaila dealt: a four and five of clubs, an eight of diamonds, three of spades and two of hearts, I bet everything. I bet the break-up of Isaila and Elya's engagement, the rights to our family home and the right to discuss Elya with my son. Without even a moment's hesitation, he called my bluff.

I could smell Elya from two rooms away. Her eyelashes and eyelids fluttered all over my best Ukrainian linen and her scent had wrapped around my best candlesticks. I knew she had bewitched him but I said, "Sashenka, you've fixed the deck somehow. Shame on you."

"No, mother," he replied. "I haven't. But let's play double or nothing and see if you do any better."

Boys are bent willow; if bowed, they spring back with a force twice as strong as if they'd never been bent in the first place. On the first hand, Isaila threw down a pair of three's and won Elya for a second time. The next hand he showed a pair of jacks and won the house. With the last hand, a full house to my pair of fours, he silenced forever all my objections to his engagement and forbade me to speak of Elya. That night, I lost my son, my house, my voice all in one sitting.

Before I knew it, Elya's purple and black mustached eyelids floated on my curtains, my lace doilies and linen tablecloths. Finally, after smelling her vomit after every meal, evidence that she, too, used the Walachian way women keep their beautiful figures, I made good on my lost bet. I packed up and moved into the attic. The attic stretched out like yesterday's smile--long and expansive. I almost got lost in my own attic. I arranged all of the furniture into seasons. During the winter I sat in the southern quarter of the attic and cooked Mediterranean dishes and watched the fish cut themselves on the ice as they struggled south against the water which always flows north and freezes early. I spoke to myself loudly to drown out the sounds of my son and his wife below: the bumping of their rutting, her coughing and hawking in the bathroom, and all those noises that reminded me that another woman had occupied my house.

On a night in spring when I had begun living in the western portion of the attic, I could hear a terrible bumping and clanging, and the rattling of the dishes that jumped like rabbits in their cupboards. Even though I suspected what they were doing, I was still curious.
I knew they were up to something scandalous: the faces on the icons of our six slavas had turned red and our patron saint, St. Petka, had pulled his halo over his eyes. I crept down the stairs, each step registering as another wave of excitement, curiosity and dread running up and down my spine. I could hear Elya humming a hymn in soprano. Without even opening her mouth, she could still hit the high notes perfectly. When I reached the last step, I discovered why. There they were, on top of my kitchen table, fully clothed from the waist up, forming a letter Y, Elya humming and Isaila muttering an Our Father. I pulled my shawl over my eyes, but I could still see through the holes. On each "pray for us," he gave a colossal shove which rammed Elya's head into the wall and punctuated a shrill high note. I was shocked; they had managed to perform one of Verdi's most difficult arias without either of them actually singing, and celebrate a mass all at the same time. On the last note, a note that fluttered like a small bird in Elya's throat, they both shuddered. Crossing themselves, they held each other and shivered. I knew I should have walked up the stairs backward and so undo everything I heard and saw, but just then, Elya's purple eyelids flew open and her green eyes, unwavering and triumphant glittered at me.

"It seems the walls have eyes as well as ears, Sashenka," she said to my son loudly enough so that I could hear. At that moment, if I could have, I would have traded all my jewels and raffled off St. Petka to turn time back by just five minutes. But time is an arrow and once spent, it can never be returned.

Hunger is a convenient excuse to hide our other appetites. I pulled my shawl back over my shoulders, clapped my hands together and wiped them on my skirt and bustled through the kitchen to the pantry.

"Who's hungry?" I asked, a little too cheerfully, I think, and started pouring flour and sugar into a huge mixing bowl, breathing huge billowing white clouds to hide my embarrassment.

By that time, Isaila had rebuckled his pants and Elya clambered off the table, leaving pockmarks where her rings and bracelets rubbed the wood raw. She brushed past me on her way to the toilet where I knew she would shower in vinegar. My son scratched his beard, resettled himself in a chair and watched me work.

I rolled out pancakes thinner than paper and served them with red caviar and sour cream. Elya returned and drank my coffee but refused to eat. I watched them carefully while I ate with a hunger of an ox, packing away cake after cake. My son
studied Elya with eyes half-asleep while I ate everything on the table. Just as he reached for a pancake, I slapped his hand with my spoon. That was the last meal I shared with my son.

I could not keep them from behaving like a man and a woman, I knew that. But I could keep another woman from stealing all my space, I could do that very easily. So I began to put on weight. While they were bumping away at night, I ate mousaka, spanikopita, seven-cheese soufflé and whole pig's head. My breasts spread over my chest until they pushed my elbows out and I could no longer distinguish between my buttocks and my hips. Still, I kept gaining weight. I prayed with a fury to St. Petka and invoked every power vested in female nature—jealousy, pettiness, possessiveness, the power of cunning old age and an incisive tongue—namely, everything that makes women the fiercest of warriors. Meanwhile, Elya grew thinner and thinner. At first I thought she was losing weight to keep Isaila's attention riveted on her or to abort a child because I knew that sometimes vinegar alone doesn't work. But, when I sprayed the walls down with cooking oil so that I could slip down the staircase to the kitchen, I saw Elya knitting and reading at the same time with her two dogs sitting at her side. She had lost so much weight that her dogs dwarfed her and even in the full morning light, she had only a sliver of a shadow. I smiled a smile as wide and cold as Siberia. I pulled myself back up the stairs and started boiling water for hard-boiled eggs as fast as I could, and cackled with glee. I knew I was very close to ridding myself of her forever. Just another pound or two and she'd be gone.

Once the eggs cooked, I peeled the shells off as fast as I could and shoved the eggs in my mouth, two at a time, swallowing them whole. Even though I couldn't hear a single sound below me, I wanted to see what Elya looked like now. After all, a daughter-in-law is a problem you inherit and spend the rest of the time trying to remedy. I poured more oil, extra virgin olive oil, down the staircase, sat on a large piece of flattened tin, and slid down the stairs. I landed with a tremendous thud that rocked the dishes and rattled the windows in their panes. I saw Elya's pile of knitting fuzz and her dogs, but no Elya. I pulled a button out of her sewing basket and went to find my son to tell him the bad news. On the way out, St. Petka winked at me.
Matroshka--(derived from Slav; Russ. for mother) Wooden nesting dolls made in Russia and the Ukraine and considered to be the fruits of the old Russian style. The chronicler Isaila Lukharyen believed them to be ill-omened tokens of evil because of their combined large surface area but also their disproportionately large area of empty space.

In fact, so fanatical about the symbolic evils of the matroshka, Lukharyen often likened them to a similar word, vampire*, which also connotes a certain emptiness within the womb, a seed gone sour and unrest. However, Lukharyen's first wife, Elya, did not agree. And where her husband thought she was planting nasturtium and thyme behind their expansive house, she planted matroshka, each empty, pregnant with possibility, each buried face down to the mud from which all things come. She watered her wooden patch with her tears and waited to see if she would grow children, hatching them out of the ground as a hen with her eggs.

She had an unyielding sense that, wealthy as her family had always been, she somehow carried a shroud of poverty over her shoulders. She worried that she would die a beggar, abandoned, ugly, and completely forgotten. She feared that she herself was becoming a matroshka, wooden, brittle, empty inside. She took to burning herself with her pipe ash, cutting her legs with cooking knives, plunging her hands in boiling oil. She had to know if she was in fact made of wood and if that too, was part of her secret curse. And so, instead of crying out when on the few occasions her activities produced real pain, she smiled and her whole body danced with joy because at least, for now, for a little while, she could still feel something.

But then one day she could find no more matroshkas to plant and even after holding her hand in a candle flame for an hour, she felt nothing. Her husband had not slept next to her in the same bed for months. She knew she could not have children because she knew he no longer loved her. She understood, then, that even with her silver trees in the orangery, that her greatest fear, poverty, which is a barrenness of sorts, had struck. Without a child, a woman, such as herself, built with empty spaces inside, will go mad, haunted by all that emptiness. She tied her hair over her ears like two flapping wings of a crow, and walked toward the Black Sea, the healing Black Sea whose mud eventually covers all wrong.
Metal--What we are all made of, a ductile, fusible substance that can withstand anything but sorrow. A sign which read "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another," hung above the monastic cite known as Mt. Chelendra where instead of swallowing communion wafers to remember our Lord, novitiates practiced swallowing their swords because they believed it was better to fortify oneself with the metal of a sword than the bread of a body. One novitiate, Isaila Lukharyen, became so proficient at swallowing his sword, that one source actually suggests he became metal. Exactly how this metamorphasis occurred is not known but this portion of Lukharyen's edition relates a strange incident recorded by Lukharyen's first wife, Elya:

I knew he was an incurable Mama's boy. But once we were free of his mother, terrible things happened to us. Whether she cursed us or our bad luck just multiplied on our one slava-less day, I don't know. But on the night we married, we walked to a bar. We sat on old Genoa metal chairs that listed like tired ships and drank ouzo. I knew my husband was made of stronger stuff than I: it took a lot more alcohol before he showed any signs of the effects. But when I sat at the bar and drank, I felt like I was swallowing lit candles. Immediately I felt warm all over, and after only a few drinks, I was drunk. I could feel my bones expanding with the weight of the alcohol, expanding and absorbing the alcohol. As I kept drinking, I felt more and more bloated like an old piece of wool or waterlogged wood. My husband, on the other hand, winked at the barmaid, rocked back on his stool, and kept tossing down shots, swallowing them in a gulp. But the more I drank, the more spongelike I became. Finally, my husband had to carry me home: I couldn't walk under the weight of all that liquid in my bones. He pulled me up the stairs and rolled me onto our bed. Over the bulk of my own body, I could barely see him moving around the room, pulling off his shirt, his shoes, his trousers. I knew our honeymoon was not going to be at all what either of us had hoped for, and I began to cry.

Then my husband did something wonderful, something tender, that even to this day, still surprises me. On that night, as he watched me swell with all that water and the salt of my tears, he took off the rest of his clothes and laid himself down on the bed beside me. He threw his outer arm over my huge rib cage and wrapped his leg over mine, and held me until we both fell asleep.
In the morning, I opened my eyes and couldn't believe what I saw. Isaila had rusted all over from the head on his hair to his toenails on his feet. Rust under his arms, down his stomach and groin, and all along his legs. In fact, everywhere he had touched me, he had rusted. I wanted to cry, but I knew crying would only make matters worse for the both of us. I wanted to cry because I knew then that I was wood and he was metal and even if we could love each other forever, we were made differently and would always in some elemental way, remain worlds apart, untouchable to each other. I scraped at his eyelids until I could pry them open. My husband took one look at me and gasped in surprise. I looked down at my hands that held his, my arms, my waist, my feet. That's when I noticed the incredible change that had come over me: I was thin again, thin as a communion wafer. I ran my hands over my body feeling for evidences of my former self, but I could find no traces of the water, the bloating and excesses of the last-night me. It was as if all my water had flowed into him, and now, dried out, I felt brittle and weightless. Isaila didn't seem too troubled by the whole incident: he shrugged his shoulders, rolled over and went back to sleep. As he did, I soaked the sheets in lye and let him sleep. He awoke, bellowing for his pipe with his tongue and teeth as hairy as a horse's mane. He rolled out of bed, not a trace of rust on him, and sat in front of an empty fireplace. He looked at me with those impenetrable eyes, the eyes of a goat, and asked me how I felt. Although I had shed most of the water, my heart still felt heavy.

"Never better," I lied and handed him a lit candle for his pipe.

"That's fine, then . . ." he said. I saw him open and close his mouth like a fish expelling water. I knew he had intended on using my name, but he had forgotten it already.

"What will we do?" I asked him.

He chewed on his pipe, crossed and recrossed his legs. I didn't even need to ask. One look at him and I already knew there was little hope for us.

"Nothing," he said. I rushed to his chair and clasped his hands in mine. I kissed each of his fingers and said "Thank you" because at least, for now, I still had a home.
Salt--derived from the Greek word ἅλς, or sea, in Slavic and Mediterranean cultures, salt carries unusual properties and powers. Although sources cannot agree about the exact nature of saline powers, sources concur that a nomadic group of hunters and warriors that settled for a time around the Black Sea, the Kosar'i, worshipped salt. Eating salt was a form of prayer, and crying then, was the ultimate sacrifice: more precious than blood were tears. That is why when a strange woman appeared at the edge of the village, cradling a block of salt to her breasts, everyone went out to meet her.

She looked as if she were already dead and had spent too many years with ghosts; her hair was white as ash and her eyes were empty as the end of winter. She had walked a long way—that much the villagers could see: she had worn through the soles of iron shoes. Where she had been and why she was here, no one knew. But when General Lukharyen waded through the crowd for a closer look, they thought they saw a flicker of life flash across her face. Lukharyen must have noticed it too, because he grasped her hand in his, and asked, "Katrine?" She dropped the block of salt on his foot and spat in his face. That is how he knew it was his Katrine: he only had six saints and on this day, his one saintless day of bad luck, something only his Katrine could know, a block of salt landed on his foot. He picked her up and carried her back to their home. He did not mind that his wife had grown old while she had been away. Nor did he mind that, having aged so, they could have no children. What troubled him was that she would not talk. It was as if she had lost her tongue. But he was not too surprised: Katrine was always losing things. But when they walked to mass one morning and Lukharyen saw the devil walking behind them and casting his shadow on Katrine, he knew he had to do something. True love is like this: when you love someone with a pure love, you will do anything for them. That is why, even though he was a dubious saint at best and had never once successfully performed a miracle, St. Isaila Lukharyen decided to heal his wife.

He knew there was a devil inside of her, sealing her mouth, twisting her tongue, wrapping hairballs around her larynx so that she couldn't even hum in morning mass. He knew she had a devil inside and that is why he forced salt into her eyes to keep the devil from stealing the light away from her. Her other problem was that she had not cried: not since the day she first lost Lukharyen had she ever
shed a tear. She hadn't cried in years so he rubbed salt into her eyes until she remembered how to cry again. And this is the only miracle in which St. Isaila Lukharyen was ever successful. After forcing bit by bit the entire salt block into her eyes, Katrine finally gave in and shed one tear. And then he nearly died of joy when she shook off that one tear and spat, "Fuck off!" After that, Lukharyen decided not to press his luck; he never again attempted any more miracle-healings on his wife even though, cursed as she was, she still lost things all the time.

2Vampire—[F, fr. G vampir] a woman who exploits and ruins her lover. The great General and St. Isaila Lukharyen unearthed this strange letter:

My dear husband:
bad luck teaches us to live our lives backwards. 
When we die, we will eternally long for those moments of back luck and wait our time for a chance to return and relive, correct those ill-taken steps. Even dead, we can unsnarl the knots that pulled us toward our death. I don't mind dying--everyone must die of something. It's how I died that still bothers me. And so, now, remade and renewed by the water, I will unfix the events that first sent me to the mud.

Men think with their pants; women have known that for centuries. But men forget with their pants, too. No sooner had I died than you took another wife, a woman from Odessa, the city of mud. I hated her not because she loved you, but because I think you loved her. And neither of you ever gave a thought to me--not even when my dogs dug up all those matroshka and laid them one by one at your feet after a night of furious love-making.

Hunger is a deep pocket; nothing can fill it up.
I traveled with my hunger and chewed on my fingers
until I reached the home of my marriage. It is a long building made of white stone, the famous flagstone of Odessa, and built with lots of open spaces, inside and out. It was easy for me to slip in; you never believed in shutting doors to the wind.

Smart people always think they are smarter than they really are; dumb people don't know the difference. When I walked through the open door, I sat at my old kitchen table with your new wife, Katrine. She looked at me for a moment, saw the hungers I carried, and continued snapping the enormous pile of green beans she held in her lap. She was smart enough to know who I was, but not smart enough to know how hard she would have to work to rid herself of me.

When another woman is intimate with your lover there is no need for formalities--we're already sharing everything anyway. I narrowed my eyes and traced a line with my finger over the table top.

"Well, who are you, anyway?" I asked.

"General Lukharyen's wife," she said, smiling with only half of her mouth and tracing her own pattern on the table.

I laughed out loud. Here was a woman who could appreciate ironies. I helped myself to some food in the larder and sat, eating with both hands to my mouth while she continued to snap frazzled ends of the beans.

"I know why you are here... you want to kill the General," she said, her words syncopated with the snap-snap of the beans.

"Well, it won't work," she continued. I raised an eyebrow, but kept eating. "I've already tried twice this month--when he was asleep," she finished. "Smart enough to know what to do, but not how to do it," I thought.
"Well, that's the problem. He is the strongest when he is asleep. He can hear your thoughts from two weeks away. There is only one person who can finish him off properly," I said.

"Who?"

"A dreamwalker," I said, licking each of my fingers and drying them in my hair.

"How will I find one?" she asked again.

"Don't worry--I've found you," I said, my hungers at last quieted.

I reached across my table for her hands that were warm in mine and white as dove's eggs. I leaned forward to kiss them. As I did so, I turned her hands over in mine and bit her palms--first one and then the other. She did not pull her hands away, but licked her own blood and smiled at me like a lover.

Here the page had been torn as if the reader did not want to finish the letter or as if what followed next was too horrible to be re-read. For committing words to paper can force the hand of fate. Whether or not whoever tore the letter, presumably Lukharyen, successfully altered his fate is not known for sure. For a woman without a country is a desperate, vindictive creature. Everything to her is foreign--even her own thoughts. What she was thinking as she slipped into her husband's dreaming later that night, no one can say. But with one thought, a blinking stroke of her scimitar, and the great General Isaila Mikhail or Michael The Brave Lukharyen fell dead. She killed him carefully, severing his neck just above the girdle of his shoulders.

Death is hard work; dreaming in death is even harder. But it is not for nothing that Lukharyen trained under the best fighting/dream master. Every dreamwalker learns that the dreams of the dying are the most potent of all dreams. Like a pomegranate seed, these dreams carry a stinging bite that your teeth will never forget.
So the General, a wary adversary to the last, anticipated his wife's dream-time movements as the best dreamwalkers can, and planted in his death-dream a surprise for his wife. Just as she turned from her husband's decapitated body, his head rolled directly in front of her feet. He winked at her and uttered the dreaded curse, the only effective curse against wayward dreamwalkers and vampires. Sources believe that Elya, who was probably on her way back to Black Sea mud, never made it. However, Elya's fate cannot be determined. Every since that great resurgence of interest in Vlad the Impaler, or Dracula, for which Americans flocked to Romanian sites and graveyards, the Romanian government's stance on excavation is extremely firm. No stone, no plot can be overturned. So whether the crafty General in fact put an end to his wife as she killed him still remains in question. Attempts to examine the chapel entrance and altar at Lake Snagov where the General and his wife most likely are buried have been roundly thwarted by the government. Sources suggest the possibility that both the General and his wife could have been discovered by a fellow dreamwalker who would have received detailed instructions concerning the proper disposal of the General and his wife. In order to escape the sure discovery or mutilation by their enemies or by wolves, when they die, dreamwalkers ask the person whose dream they last inhabited to sew a stone in their stomachs and drop them into the Snagov lake. Over a mile deep, the lake acts as a moat to the chapel and discourages much investigation. That is why the bodies of the dreamwalkers are rarely recovered and why the church can with certain impunity, deny the very existence of this sect and of Isaila and Elya Lukharyen.
THE KEEPER OF THE STREETS AND WHAT HE FOUND

Our hungers are like our fears; we must always feed them lest they consume us. Tired of fear and battling hunger, Pavel Dedinye wanted to die. Every day before work, he drank his pot of hemlock tea and still nothing changed. With the unfortunate soul of a Jew who has more lives than three cats, he devised new endings to his life, savoring each daydream like twigs of mint. His trouble started even before he had been born. His grandfather's grandfather made cast iron bells with the most sought-after music imprisoned in the hallowed space between the bell's body and the tongue. But by the time Pavel was born, his father, a wonderful bell-maker but a horrid businessman, was reduced to selling only the tongues of his bells. His mother who had the most beautiful head of hair, a peculiar color of burnt copper, grew her hair in the summer and sold it every fall at a kiosk in Krakow. Even then, they sometimes walked the streets three neighborhoods away with palms upturned.

Pavel and his sister tap-danced for stray change on the strand off the Wisla and spent their growing years concocting ways to twist hearts of tourists or newspaper readers rushing to work. Their games had more substance than their meals; thick as kasha, their designs and schemes grew more and more complex and kept them from thinking of the day when, once every last tongue had been cast, they would starve.

Then, a stroke of luck rode on the back of a soot-covered sun one day and when he turned thirteen, Pavel took a job with the city as a street sweeper. But when he picked up the handle of the broom on that very first day, he felt a peculiar ache inside. Maybe he had swallowed, like a seed, a bad dream that once hatched, reaps nothing but bad luck and ill omen. Because now the houses along his familiar street loomed in tall stories above him, watching with hundreds of pane glass eyes. And the people—they seemed different too.

The spinster, whom he loved spying on, spat on his left shoe whenever she walked by. Fruit vendors who pretended not to notice when he stole apples, now threw their rotten fruit at him. When he went home at night, the door would slam in his face.

But he was changing quite visibly on the outside as well. Slowly at first, and then so quickly he could scarcely recognize himself, Pavel watched himself grow as
fat as an overripe peach even though he could not remember having eaten a bite since he started his job. Yet, day by day, it became quite clear that like a fish too fat to swim, Pavel could scarcely move and his mother claimed she could hardly recognize the traces of her boy—only in the eyelashes could she see him. And dumber than a fish in an Akathistic hymn, Pavel had less to say for himself with every ounce he gained, and with every ounce gained, he became less and less his mother’s son.

On a day when the sky like good leather was ripe for chewing, Pavel pondered his strange predicament. Although the secret of Pavel’s curse never revealed itself to his mother who prayed for a cure, as bizarre as his curse was, Pavel knew exactly what had happened and was still happening to him. This strange problem reminded him of a story taught to him in one of those schoolrooms so small and low ceilinged that students past the age of twelve or thirteen could no longer study because they’d outgrown the school. For this reason a teacher might say of a student who had become wise, "You are too big for your trousers," hand them a spoon, a shoelace, and kick them out.

But the story Pavel remembered told of appetites and ill-crossed loves. A prince took for his bride a woman made of rushes and mud. She had green hair and wall-eyes and carried a strange curse: if she drank without her husband, she would turn into a fish. This was a secret she never shared with her husband because she had never encountered such insatiable thirst that she couldn’t wait for his return home.

One day he left as usual on a day so hot he could smell his own salt. She stayed behind and thumbing through old papers he had stuffed in a cupboard, she came across his family tree written illuminated in gold and silver on thin paper. She didn’t see the haw and rose bushes the copyist had beautifully painted along the borders and she cut her fingers on the pages. Without even thinking, she sucked the blood to stem the flow and to keep from staining the pages. Instantly she became a fish. When her husband returned, he found a fish smelling of roses there on his dinner table. Without blinking his eyes even once, he fried and ate the fish in its own red rose sauce.

Suffering under the one-way curse that is irrevocable and irretractable, Pavel decided that the prince had done the only logical thing. And this was precisely Pavel’s problem; he was cursed. He chewed the grit under his nails and tasted city.
That is how he discovered that he was destined for the city or that even more mysteriously, the city was destined for him. He could no less rid himself of the city than he could of his own body. And even as he realized his strange predicament, he knew what he had to do. Like the prince, his only alternative was to sharpen his teeth and eat.

He started small at first, sweeping up tiny bits of left-over bread, stale and crumbly, and overripe vegetables. Then he began eating cigarette butts, metro ticket stubs, bottle caps, wilted flowers and stems, buttons, and pieces of crisp flaky dirt. Before dawn, while the city slept, he scoured the gutters looking for anything digestible: bits of glass, mud, and theater bills.

Like the turtle within the heart of the shark, he began eating the city from the inside out. He swept up the filth with a quick, deft flick of his large wrist and ate whatever leapt up from the ground. Yet, the cigarette butts and vast array of browning vegetables, mere plankton to Pavel, could not quell his insatiable hunger. And with horror, Pavel stood on the barber's oversized scale and watched as his weight for an entire hour stabilized.

And then suddenly, Pavel discovered a new source of nutrition. For in that hour, Pavel developed a fine nose for hate, and keeping his nose hound-low to the ground, Pavel could quite clearly distinguish the putrid, beautiful, sour smell of hate everywhere around him.

For the first hour of hate, Pavel didn't feel much differently. But then, as he ate with a relish and an appetite that frightened even himself, Pavel scoured every back alley and abandoned building, looking for anything hated, old, disused, or ugly, gaining so much weight so quickly he popped off a button from his enormous trousers. Three trouser buttons later, Pavel had eaten most of the hate out of the dockside of the Wisla. By the end of the week, the city was nearly purified of its filth. But then, Pavel witnessed another interesting phenomenon: even as he ingested more of the city's hate, purging the city of her sins, the more violently the townspeople hated the fat boy who reminded them of everything they loathed: the spinster spat bucketfuls of spittle at Pavel, his mother and sister could not recognize him at all anymore, more doors slammed in his face, and even the great revolving doors of the downtown buildings which embrace anyone would mysteriously shut down when Pavel approached. Yet, Pavel would not, or could not stop eating, and on he went, shoveling mouthfuls of city trash and ugliness. He swept the ground at
their feet smiling like a mole blinking into the sun, quietly digested hatred and slowly, happily kept gaining weight. Clearly, nothing could be done to rid the boy of the city or the city of the boy.

And then one day, while Pavel had been looking for the hate medicine that fed his hungry heart and was sucking the scum of the entire riverside sector through a long stemmed pipe, he discovered in a grate an odd, shiny object. He could not bend to pick it up, but he managed to push the object against the curb with his foot and shoving the broom under his foot and against the curb, he let the object fall onto his broom and brought it up to his face. It was an old, tarnished key. Without even asking why or how he knew, Pavel knew that this key was no ordinary key. He licked it, rubbing the grains of dirt around his molars with his tongue. The key tasted of copper, aged perfectly in the gutter with the city soot and rain. Pavel opened his mouth and put the key in. He let his tongue play with it, feeling out each of the odd indentations and protrusions. Tired of his consuming, beast-like hunger, Pavel prayed the city would take him, swallow him, and make him invisible. Finally, when he had sucked all the delicious soot out of every cranny, he swallowed the key in a ceremonious gulp, uttering a hot cry that was almost human.

And that is how, quite unknowingly, Pavel swallowed the city and abandoned all hope for death.
THE BEAUTY PAGEANT

When she turned six, Elsa Fairchild knew she was ugly. And it was not just her face. Even her neck, her elbows, her ears that jutted out so far she could hear conversations a week away, and her fat pink toes were all equally unlovely. In fact, there was not a single redeeming feature about Elsa. Her colorless eyes were somewhat lazy. She was missing most of her front teeth. Her hair was coarse, frizzy, and the color of oatmeal. And because she was rather plump, she had a hard time walking a straight line without straining any of her muscles.

As bothersome as her ugliness was to others, she found it intriguing. She would spend hours gazing into the mirror at her large features, wishing them to rearrange themselves into prettier shapes, hoping that her teeth she had lost would grow back like her fingernails did when she bit them to nubs. However, the more she wished, the uglier she grew. By the time she was thirteen, she was positively horrid. And yet, she would not give up. She dreamed her freckles would blend with her natural skin color or darken and cover her entire face giving her the appearance of an East Indian or Mexican. Yet, the freckles only became spottier, splotchier, darker, and much more distinct against the pale moon of her ripe face.

When she turned fourteen, she covered all the mirrors with the linen sheets and would not look at her reflection in window panes, car windows, or any of the plate glass of store fronts. For a time, she would not even look at her reflection in still water. But that was all when she was fourteen.

At sixteen, Elsa had reconciled herself with the fact that she was frightfully ugly and there wasn't a thing she could do about it. That was the year of her self discovery. Off came the linens from the mirrors and Elsa, who had not seen a store front for years, suddenly appeared behind the plate windows, her face twisted in the strangest contortions, studying her reflection. Once, she bought new clothes at Grange's Mercantile and wedged her thick body in between the mannequins and their starchy wigs and tried to look refined and vixenish. With her arms akimbo, her cheeks sucked in, and just a bit of cleavage showing, Elsa single-handedly managed to scare the customers away for a solid 90 minutes before the store owner discovered her.
Small children still cried when they saw Elsa and their mothers still gasped with surprise (they had assumed that her ugliness had killed her by now), but Elsa paid no attention. She was busy reveling in her sheer ugliness. And it was when she was reveling in the wondrous of ugly that she slowly became cognizant of her near celebrity status in the county. The children were terribly afraid of her--she looked like a witch. With her misshapen nose and missing teeth and nasty disposition, she very well could have been a witch. Girls her age avoided her as if she had bubonic plague or her ugliness was a communicable disease. Men coughed and tried very hard not to stare. Some even offered her their seat on the bus just so they wouldn't have to look at her. And for a time, Elsa enjoyed her notoriety without much thought. Then she grew somewhat philosophical. As she studied her beautifully monstrous face, she realized that her ugliness for some inexplicable reason granted her a strange power. A few other revelations about ugliness and people slowly unfolded themselves to her, but that will come later. Suffice it to say, Elsa began to admire her ugliness the same way some young girls value and admire their beauty. However, in Elsa (as with some of the very beautiful) her admiration ran to a depth some might consider perverse. She took Polaroid pictures of herself every four hours and had studio photographs taken each month to document her deepening ugliness and once, as a Christmas joke, she sent photos of herself to all her least favorite relatives (some of whom had gratuitously suggested cosmetic surgery).

Finally, in her boldest and most daring stroke yet, Elsa Fairchild, undeniably the ugliest teenager alive, entered the Annual Little Timber Beauty and Talent Show.

When the news of Elsa's decision reached Mr. Trumbull, the pageant director, he did not know whether to laugh or cry. Elsa, as ugly as she had become, could quite easily spoil the pageant with a single smirk. Like an angry skunk, she had a way of making people uneasy. Surely this was one of Elsa's sick little jokes, he thought, and decided to pay Elsa a visit.

When he could not persuade Elsa to drop out of the contest, Mr. Trumbell offered her cash. Then he threatened to do her bodily harm. Elsa relished the thought. How much uglier she would appear, bruised and bandaged. She asked Mr. Trumbull how much it would cost to be "roughed up." Then Mr. Trumbull's face (which was not altogether attractive, either) turned an uncanny shade of blue-
violet. He spun on his heel and left her, spewing expletives that matched the shade of his face.

Finally, the fateful day of the pageant arrived. Ushered in on a wave of fanfare, the smell of cotton candy, and great yellow banners, the girls all filed onto the rickety stage and sat ram-rod straight in metal folding chairs. Elsa, nonplused, watched the girls one by one parade about in their sequined, spandex, and lycra swimsuits. They took small mincing steps and pirouetted at all the marked spots on the stage as perfect as polished runway models. Elsa looked on from her chair at the end of the row, her chin resting in her hands. As they walked past her to their chairs, Elsa merely yawned while the contestants’ parents and siblings clapped dutifully. Yet, when the girls made their way back to their chairs, some made the mistake of glancing at Elsa. When they did, their radiant smiles slipped a little and their steps would falter. More than one contestant brushed too close to Elsa’s ugliness and landed nose first on the platform. Even then, Elsa was bored.

Then it was Elsa’s turn to walk the runway. When she stood, the whole stage, down to its wobbly wooden girders, groaned. She was fairly large—not big-boned, just large, and each step she took registered as a ponderous thud. The girls on stage, still smiling, laced their fingers underneath their chairs and hung on. Elsa smirked a little and wiggled her fanny like the others had.

A grim audience looked on. Fragments of their conversation drifted up to her:

"Lordy, she’s ugly."
"...a face only a mother could love"
"I bet she could crack mirrors with a face like that."

Amused, Elsa pivoted, curtsied and pounded back to her seat to watch the talent portion of the show.

Two girls threw pom-poms and screeched inanities like “Eat ‘em up” and “Go....Team!” One girl struggled with an accordion, pulling and pushing on the bellows while smiling a frightened grin which seemed to suggest she knew how ridiculous she looked.

And then it was Elsa’s turn.

Every creak of the chairs and the stage could be heard as if the audience had collectively stopped breathing.
Elsa stood and walked slowly to the edge of the platform. She wore her ugliness as if it were a string of precious jewels. Her eyes had a peculiar sparkling quality about them. Like stones sharpening stones, her eyes sharpened and began to glitter like water on a knife-grey day.

So delighted to be in the pageant with the others, Elsa for the first time smiled. It was not a coy smile, or a calculated smile. Nor was it the easy, Vaselined, and expectant smile the others on the shaky platform wore. It was a genuine smile—the first of its kind the pageant judges had seen in a few years. And as gap-toothed and gummy as Elsa’s smile was, it too had a faintly peculiar quality about it—as if it was working a spell on all who looked at it.

Elsa gulped a huge breath of air and went to work.

She frowned slightly. For a whole minute she held her breath and concentrated. A veil of perspiration covered her face, catching the sunlight. For a moment, with her face all aglow, she almost looked divine. And as she knit her brows together tighter than a surgeon’s stitch, something incredible happened to her face. Hesitant at first, then as if they gathered strength from Elsa’s determination, her nose and cheekbones slowly began to move. She closed her eyes and imagined horrid leering Cheshire grins of Halloween jack-o-lanterns, and within minutes, she had willed her face into the wide gappy grin of a carved pumpkin. She took another whale lung-full of air, pursed her lips, and by sheer determination, stretched her stumpy nose into the gnarled bumpy hook nose, complete with warts, of a witch. And then Elsa summoned all her nerve, every kernel of strength and concentrated herself into a rash of tattoos, breaking out in pictured splotches the way some children contract the pox or measles. She took another gulp of air for her last feat. The audience held their breath along with Elsa, completely captivated and horrified at the same time.

When she had concentrated her face back to its normal ugliness, the audience sat stunned, not knowing whether to applaud, throw rotten vegetables, or hoot with laughter. Finally, a girl a little younger than Elsa and not quite as ugly began to clap in a slow methodical way. Soon, a few others joined. Just as Mr. Trumbull fell from the back of the platform in a cold faint the rest of the crowd began to applaud. All Elsa could hear was the sound of rain in a thunderstorm clapping all around her ears. And then the crowd, and even the bubbly contestants who could not have seen any of Elsa’s performance, jumped to their feet, still clapping.
Elsa smiled her all-stops-out grin and bowed, deep and slow. She pirouetted and pounded off the stage, indisputably the winner of the Little Timber Annual Beauty and Talent Show.
THE TIGHTROPE ARTIST

Ignatia The Fat knew suffering. She had studied every form of suffering she could find. For a time, she slept on a pallet of nettles and briar bordering and ate stone soup. She never wore shoes and strewed bits of glass and pot sherds in front of her when she walked along the street. She offered piranhas and pitbulls her fingers to chew and teethe on. But after reviewing her careful, meticulous notes logged during her adolescence, she discovered that the most painful of all her suffering was her binge-purge ritual.

First, she would drink a gallon of water and swallow boiling chips and salt. Then everything in her cupboards—sausages, potted meat, mustards, garlic, whole onions, deboned chickens—would slowly feed Ignatia's ravenous appetite. When she had eaten everything, she would lie on her back and knead her fearfully bulbous stomach. She dreamed of the sea, green water sloshing in her stomach and sang whale songs. Her belly stretched; the zig-zag zippered lines on her flesh ran like small rivers of blue paint on a road map. She lolled on her back, suffering the displacement pain of stone, salt, water, and meat all churning and fighting for space in her watery womb. When she thought the stones might split her belly, she waddled into the bathroom and into the bathtub where she drank water and a half pint of vinegar.

Then she polished her mother of pearl stomach and listened to the jumbling of stones, secrets and pain within. When she was sure she had waited long enough for the stones to settle, she stationed herself in front of the toilet and purged the stones, meat, salt and vinegar until her stomach was a shrunken prune and her mouth tasted like death.

For three years Ignatia religiously practiced her pain ritual until she discovered, quite by accident, a longer lasting, more bitter pain. She found the pain, or the pain found her one day at work under the blinking lights and the unwavering gaze of the circus audience. But how she managed to land this job is another story in pain. Before her strange romance with pain, Ignatia had always been mesmerized by the circus. She tried for months to hire on as a clown, but she was too serious and too self-aware to laugh and small children scared her. Even though she knew she could out-think Osbourne Bigley, the circus owner, and out-walk the best tight rope
walkers, Bigley could not find an act for her. That was when Ignatia the Fat decided to take drastic measures. She decided to gain so much weight that nobody could ignore or forget her. That is how Ignatia the Fat came to be called Ignatia the Fat. But for a long time, when she was just a young girl, just before she joined the circus, she was not fat at all. She could have been a baton twirler or an elephant rider, waving brilliant peacock feathers the colors of screams, riding in a skimpy costume wearing rogue and false eyelashes. If she had wanted. Or she could have been the magician’s assistant, her delicate hands scissoring the air with a flourish after every trick. But the tightrope, the steel that sang like a lyre from high above the heads and the penetrating gazes of the crowd called to her. She snuck into the tent to watch every tightrope act, each act stamping an ache into every nerve of her body. After five years of ache: maintenance work and ticket-taking and after Ignatia had both entered puberty and gained over 100 pounds, Bigley finally let her sing as The Fat Lady’s understudy.

As the Fat Lady’s understudy, she felt obligated to gain weight and Ignatia blossomed to a matronly 300 pounds. Her voice warbled and swam as trillingly as a great robin red breast. She back combed her red hair into a beehive and paid the tatooist with the gold fillings of three teeth for a permanent black beauty mark just above her upper lip.

She kept pet bullfrogs and studied the bulges and belches of their stomachs and the way in which they could eat anything: glass, dirt, mice and digest them over one slow month. Every morning she practiced their croaks and imitated the soft croonings of the pigeons lodged in the big top tent rafting. She could copy every aria the swallows sang and before long, she could out-bellow, out-warble the long established and highly acclaimed Fat Lady of Oz Bigley’s Big-Big Top Circus. And she continued to gain weight, making visits to Esmerelda the seamstress every third day for a new fitting.

When the Fat Lady discovered that her apprentice, Ignatia, had mastered the art of gaining balanced weight, the two of them worked together, coming up with the incredible tightrope routine. Of course, no one knew Ignatia’s real talent was pain or that after every binge session or jaunt in the stone slippers, she made copious notes in her pain notebook. Still, great practice breathes perfection, mused Ignatia, as she sharpened her act in order to pursue her private art--pain.
So every day, Ignatia The Fat in her tremulous gauzy pink taffeta lined with super-strength underwire supports, waded out onto the tightrope strung over the speckled, dusty colored lights and the popping galactic flashes of cameras. Each day, after gorging herself with filmy cotton candy, stuffing the whipped sugar until the pink was crowding the back of her throat, she wiggled into her circus outfit, powdered her face and on her cheeks smeared the garish rogue that she shared with the elephant riders and acrobat artists. She lined her pink slippers with chalk and small stones, jammed her rhinestone tiara into the softness of her scalp and practiced her performance smile until it hurt.

That was how Ignatia pained herself into the anxious readiness of a circus performer. The pain cheered her into a certain grey willingness to walk a gossamer thin line that for a woman of her size meant almost certain death. Only one thought troubled her: if she fell, her death would be much too quick, and therefore, not nearly as painful as Guido's, the hunchback who accidentally cut himself in half during his juggling chain-saw act. When she died, she wanted her death to be the most intensely painful, memorable moment of her entire life. Still, she settled for the tightrope, sliding one gew-gawed slipper carefully in front of the other, balancing her tremendous weight on a steely line, imagining snapping turtles were pulling her feet forward, faster, bidding her to falter, to slip, to plunge into the safety of upturned faces, and the cold sod floor.

By the third season, Ignatia billed as one of Bigley's biggest attractions. That season she weighed in at a ponderous 413 pounds. Little children from the smallest farm towns in Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska, begged their parents for tickets to Oz Bigley's Big-Big Top Circus just to see Ignatia-The-Fat negotiate her huge body across the one-half inch wide wire strung over sixty feet high from the dirt and sod floor. Little girls marked solid black dots above their upper lip, washed red hair dye into their hair, and stuffed newspaper and rags into their pants and dress fronts as they walked the cracks in the sidewalks, imitating Ignatia-The-Fat, the most talented and famous fat woman they knew.

Yet even after several of the circus entertainers had caught Ignatia swallowing knives or calmly offering her fingers to Clotilde, the Ravenous and Very Dangerous Lion, very few of them knew of her specialty in pain. After three seasons of intense stardom and the pain that follows notoriety, Ignatia grew bored. She felt the familiarity but also the fleetingness of that pain. Although the stone purging sessions
caused bland discomfort, sanding her throat smooth, either in eating or vomiting, she felt nothing. She wanted a more substantial pain. She wanted change. And that is when her real pain began.

After a novena told in salt and a morning in horsehair, Ignatia-The-Fat decided to lose weight. She knew weight loss would hurt the most if she stopped eating altogether. So she did. Shut up in her specially-made-for-fat-people trailer, for forty days and forty nights, nothing passed the lips of Ignatia-The-Fat.

The weight in the folds slipped through the fold creases and every day when she bathed, yellow oil of her fat floated on the soupy water and down the drain. At first, she had to wedge her thick body into the Taft-sized bathtub with a huge shoehorn and Esmerelda's help. But on Day 14, she could slip in and out of the gargantuan tub by herself, her body like a dolphin's, all oily and rounded. It was on Day 23 in the bathtub, through the diaphanous film of soap and fat, that she discovered her hip bones and the rounded hints of her rib cage. With an elated curiosity, she slid her hands all over her body, the sloping small bulges, the emerging curves, the elongating legs with small, dainty ankles. She splashed and kicked in the water, spraying the sides of the tub with congealed waxy globs of fat from the old Ignatia's body. She reveled in her new body, this new body with a stomach that gnawed at her heart, a new svelte body whose joints ached with a terrible pain. Every ounce she lost hurt like a bee sting, every trace of fat in the tub stabbed like a tack in her fingertips. But what pained her even more was the fact that near Day 40 she had lost so much weight, she couldn't recognize herself. That was the day, Ignatia-The-Fat came out of hiding and decided to go back to work.

She trekked over to Esmerelda's tiny camper and knocked on her screen door. She saw Esmerelda's head pop out the side window, and her furtive appraisal. The door did not open. Ignatia knocked again. "Move along," Esmerelda called out the window, "I only sew for circus personnel." Ignatia hung her head and chewed on a finger.

Ignatia marched back to her own camper and sewed make-shift darts into her pink tutu and studded the inner lining with small safety pins just in case she lost more weight and she needed to take in more fabric in a hurry.

That night, oblivious to the acrobatist's puzzled squints and the ticket taker's nosy search for her circus pass, Ignatia made her way through the off-stage chaos: the elephants, the poodles, the Very-Dangerous-and-Ravenous-Lion, Clotilde, a
horde of trapeze artists and Flash, the flying human cannonball. Ignatia threw pieces of broken beer bottles in front of her, and the bare-footed artists and their animals parted before her like a tangle under a comb. When she had climbed the chalked rungs of her silver high wire stage ladder and surveyed the audience from her platform perch, she noticed a difference in the crowd.

The high-price-ticket children lining the hay-bale barrier on the floor were not clapping their hands or screaming her name. They were pulling each other's sleeves and squinting into the bright lights, their heads turned toward the empty platform on the other end of the rope, as if they were waiting for someone else. Ignatia could taste their disappointment, their disapproval, and from some children, a taste of betrayal. It made her kidneys hurt.

Below, in the sod circle under her wire, the clowns in pink slippers and stuffed tutus, imitated her act, wobbling along an imaginary line. They glanced up at her, in between their antics, waiting for her to salvage Ignatia the Fat's big act.

She sighed a heavy-lung sigh, and stepped out onto the wire. She pirouetted and leaped, did two front flips and the splits. She held her breath and waited for the roaring applause to fade. Instead the disenchanted voices of Ignatia the Fat's admirers floated up to her:

"That's not Ignatia the Fat," said a tow-headed boy pushing his glasses farther up his nose with a grimy, cotton-candied finger.

"She's not fat at all," said a chunky little boy sitting next to him.

"I wonder if the real Ignatia the Fat is sick, or something," mused a girl with two pillows stuffed under her shirt.

Three rows of disappointment behind her, two twins yelled, 'WE WANT IGNATIA--WE WANT IGNATIA!!" Soon, even the littlest kids, barely old enough to appreciate the clowns, echoed the maddening chant, as only little kids do, until the entire front section of the bleachers pounded and roared.

Ignatia's face blanched. She slid herself up from split position and opened up her balancing parasol. She twirled and whirled, spinning the umbrella with the tips of her fingers while beads of sweat dropped from her forehead. Still, the children roared.

And then, just as she was twisting into a back flip, she felt the first peach smack her hand. She wobbled and then straightened. Two candied apples whizzed past her nose. She searched the ground for the clowns or security. She saw Oz,
white as a bleached whale bone, wringing his hands and stamping the ground with
his feet. A shoe clipped her ear and she nearly lost her balance. Ignatia spun on her
heel and began her perilous walk to her platform. She smiled at the children who
threw their trash at her, smiling in a pain she had never felt before. She knew, then,
she had something in common with the child whose betrayal she sensed. She felt a
pain blossoming in her spleen and spreading throughout her body like thistles in her
veins. Every step jarred her bones, her cracked lips in the circus smile faltering
under the weight of her make-up, the lights, and the angry, cheated eyes of her once
cult-following.

When she made the platform, the crowd bellowed like angry moose, hissing,
booming, and throwing bottles and trash. Ignatia scampered from her heights and ran
under the cover of her parasol for the nearest tent exit. Oz Bigley, his hands red
from wringing, did not even bother to glare at her. He was busy stuffing cotton
batting into the Fat Lady's purple sequined-studded costume and dipping her
slippers into a barrel of chalk dust. Ignatia stood, in her already too-loose tutu,
behind Oz waiting for a chance to redeem herself while Oz spluttered, "--when I find
out where she's been . . . " his voice tapering off into an unspoken threat.

"Don't worry; no one will know the difference," wheezed the Fat Lady.
Ignatia plucked Oz's sleeve. He turned and shot her a perfunctory glare.
"Beat it, missy. One more prank like that, and you're out for good, " he yelled.
For the first time in all her years of ache, Ignatia could not muster up the old
circus smile.

"O.K., Mr. Bigley," she croaked, and walked out the door, her parasol held
out in front of her painted face. By the time she reached her trailer, her heart had
started to throb and it hurt to walk. She leaned with all her weight against the trailer
door, and shoved with the bones in her shoulder and hips until it opened. She
slipped her shoulders out from under the straps and let her costume drop to the
floor. Then she stepped out of her nylons, which slid down her legs into a hose
puddle on the floor, and pulled on an old t-shirt that now came down past the
pointy bones in her knees and she climbed into her bathtub. Everything felt too big
in her trailer: her t-shirts, the bathtub, even her writing tablet journal of pain was
too big for her hands.

She filled the tub half full of hot water and lemon rinds and propped her
journal in the hollow between her knees and her rib cage.
She had a lot to write about.

Two days passed and still no one knew where Ignatia-the-Fat had gotten to. They brought dogs by her trailer and she opened the door and let them all take a sniff through her stuff. Everyone was polite. No one recognized her. She thought she'd die from the pain. And it was when she thought she was dying, she hurt so bad, that the old circus smile came back. She licked her cracked lips and let them spread into the familiar performer's smile. She had found it. She had discovered real, lasting pain. With a half-hearted yell (her heart really did hurt, now) she kicked her ankles together with glee. It was old friend, loneliness, all along. She pulled her pain notebook from off the unused microwave and scribbled out her discovery in large, childish, Crayola, letters. The bones in her fingers gnawed angrily in their sockets, but she kept writing. She wrote everything she discovered about people and fat and skinny and pain and lonely until she wrote herself into exhaustion.

It was the seamstress, Esmerelda, who found Ignatia, three days later, skinnier than the crayons she had used to write in her notebook. Esmerelda didn't know what to do with the body—it seemed to decompose before her very eyes. Heck of a way to lose weight, she mused, patting her plump stomach. Before she left the trailer to find Oz, she noticed a corner of the old pink tutu and the flash of the rhinestone tiara from under the bed, remnants of the old Ignatia-the-Fat. She studied Ignatia with narrowed eyes, took in the fuzzy red hair, the beauty mark. She shrugged her shoulders and let a small sigh out through pursed lips. Ignatia looked just like a thousand other circus performers. Snatching the pink tutu from underneath the bed, Esmerelda backed her way out of the trailer. With a few snips here and there she could let out the darts, maybe even sew in some elastic for the new tightrope artist.
KOVALSKY'S ELECTRIC CIRCUS

In the mid 1950s during the big-tent revivals in the United States when metal chairs leapt with life under the shadow of evangelicals and holy electricity and anything could happen, two brothers, Simon and Levi Kovalsky, teamed up and started a traveling road show. Levi had studied to be a Goyim lawyer specializing in publication copyright and law while Simon had been busy flunking out of medical school. The two combined their money ($25), their meager possessions, hocked their trinkets, and scouted the mental institutions of the midwest for freak show draws: Geeks, hunchbacks, dwarfs, and the fattest woman they could find.

They leveled a training area out among a cornfield let to a neighboring llama farmer and set their hopefuls to new dreams woven with corn husks, cotton candy, and the sound of little children going wild with joy and fright.

After a long summer of prayers scattered like chaff in the winds, the troupe was ready: the humpback’s hump had grown to the size of a Hermiston watermelon, the dwarf had shrunk, the Geeks hadn’t eaten for 90 days, and the fat lady had gained weight beautifully.

That fall, just as soon as the wood burnings began and the smoke painted black shifting icons above the fields, the Kovalsky’s rented several boxcars on the Southern Cotton Line and started for their first booked showing in Sterling, Nebraska.

As the train ate up the tracks, the members of the troupe began to look younger and younger. Their skin lost the lines from laughing or crying, slowly becoming the skin of newborns who have no memory of emotions or the permanent record on their face. However, as they began to age in reverse, their thoughts grew far beyond their years.

For instance, Levi began experimenting with Planck’s constant, \( h \), against a space-time continuum to project and attempt to channel all the universe’s potential energy and sell it in packets, or quanta, for an enormous profit. Simon, on the other hand, worked tirelessly on a new juggling act involving ionized water which would attract the electromagnetic energy needed to complement Levi’s endeavors. Simon’s juggling act consolidated into movable masses life, truth, and death. He prayed to
Hesperus, fashioning his understanding of each of the three elements into keys: one of lithium, one of cadmium, and one of copper. Then Simon practiced juggling over 12 hours a day until he could firmly grasp each element and then, just as easily, with two shakes of his handlebar mustache, toss them high above his head with a marksman’s accuracy.

When the train finally arrived, the troupe anchored the midway rides, strung Chinese fire lanterns, and chalked out the lines for the big-top tent. And around the entire campsite, Simon strung his special gas lights, each with a letter of the alphabet: aleph, beth, gimel, daleth, He, Vav, and so on until he had woven the unruly tendrils of the gas in Hebrew.

That night, when everyone else in Sterling, Nebraska slept, a new city of gas and lights sprang into life. The troupe worked furiously, nailing up clapboard and plywood stalls, tents, circus rides, and food stands while the Kovalsky brothers tested and retested the lights and wiring. At midnight, the brothers played chess with permutations of Einstein’s equations, disputed Bohr’s theory of electron restriction, Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, and ate huge amounts of potassium enriched plum pudding.

By dawn, everything stood ready: the fun house, the horror house, the Big tent, the gaming stalls, the gypsy’s tent, and all the carnival rides. When they could hear the angelus tolling in a belfry from a town three pigeon flights away, they stopped and sprinkled litanies over themselves like small seeds. The hunchback prayed his hump would keep growing, the dwarf dreamed of pygmies, the fat lady chewed on her sugar-beaded rosary, and the gypsy painted the images from her Tarot cards on her finger and toenails. Levi prayed for freak happenings, and Simon mulled over Shrodinger’s equation. By noon of the following day, Simon, using the sketchy notions he’d picked up at school about wave and quantum mechanics re-organized the entire carnival compound to function like an excited atom. The big-tent, the nucleus, sat dead center with the circuit breakers and generators lodged nearby. The rigging, support beams and main spar were all carefully constructed of copper designed to conduct electricity. Likewise, the lights strung across the compound and around the fringe of the big-tent were all contained within glass bulbs encompassing the filament and empty valence shells.

Simon reasoned that if all the glass bulbs captured enough light energy, electron leaps, or quantum gaps, would result, producing enough excess energy to
elucidate the mysteries of life, truth, and death for one brief instant. Moreover, they
could, in a sense, store all the potential energy for the future, which would, no
doubt, be quite a marketable commodity should natural sources fail.

That night, after a week of testing and calculation, the Kovalsky brothers’
prayers were answered. Above the fields, the sky was a cauldron, hanging low and
wet. They could hear thunder a mile away which sent the carnival troupe into a
frenzy of activity.

Finally, the lightning approached. As the first bolt struck the rods of the outer
perimeter, the alphabet lights glowed strange magnetic colors. At the next
thunderclap, the Chinese lanterns leapt from their outer contingent two levels of
lights inward producing a strange hum throughout the compound and static around
the central glass bulb in the big-tent. Inside the tent, Simon calmly juggled his great
keys and waited.

Then, the lightning struck. In a brilliant flash and thunderous roar as if the
very bowels of the earth simultaneously divulged all its ancient and horrible secrets,
the flat lands shook. In a region that never knew earthquakes, the land rocked and
ripped in jagged chasms and scars with lightning dancing over head. The tent
swayed and crackling noises of billions of dispossessed electrons jumping all at
once, popped like tiny firecrackers.

Still standing in a puddle of ionized water, Simon waited. Then, juggling his
heavy keys, Simon Kovalsky suddenly felt himself on fire or glowing like a coal or a
firefly. Great bolts of electricity leapt from the copper rigging of the big-top to the
enormous wasp-belly glass ball, through the keys, and into Simon Kovalsky. His
face lit up with a strange smile as if his eyes were really seeing for the first time. The
troupe gasped, spellbound, as they watched Simon Kovalsky, a med-school flunky
hold for a brief moment all the answers to life, truth, and death. And then, Simon
Kovalsky died, the most fortunate, and for a split second, the happiest man to have
ever walked the earth. Had the crowd been very very quiet, they could have heard
the fat lady warming up.