

Also by Juli Kearns

*Unending Wonders of a Subatomic World or In Search of the Great
Penguin*

Thunderbird and the Ball of Twine

**THE
RHETORIC
OF
STREETS**

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Dedicated to Nina West

THE
RHETORIC
OF
STREETS

A novel by Juli Maria Kearns

Idyllopus Press

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1

SQUARE

ANGLES

AND DARK

ANGELS

“We are in the death zone,

so-called as here the human body fails to regenerate and begins to die, for which reason we must attain our goal quickly and return to safety, or fail and leave but survive,” a voice says, which will not be recollected.

A residual and telltale grain of its sand briefly troubles the sole of her foot on this side of the threshold over which she has crossed less than an atom’s measure of an instant before, the world in which she was disappearing so rapidly, unless her foot finds that stray particle of sand (which it doesn’t always) no realization of her departing and crossing the threshold is had. If her foot accidentally stumbles upon that microscopic grain, the weight of her is enough to shatter its matrix, the energy of the event releasing a brief illumination sometimes akin to the weak and quickly aborted flicker of a flashlight with dying batteries, sometimes the strong beam from a slender column of a lighthouse that briefly blinds the squid ink dark before being swallowed down its abysmal throat. Sometimes, instead, the sparkly fizz of a rainbow pop rock explodes effervescent in her consciousness, stunning and disequilibrating her with the overwhelming sensation of the eye of an all-encompassing boss intelligence briefly opening to her a portion of its field of vision, sharing with her a compassion greater than the knowledge of purpose, the mercy that is forgiveness for all her gross and minor failures, sins of commission and omission that every breath of hers increases exponentially until there looms a Mount Everest wave of loss that, day by day, extends its magnificent and terrifying curl over her, head bowed in threat of an imminent collapse as certain as gravity. But, often enough, not only is the illumination not transcendent, it only admits there is more behind the scenes though she sees little other than the light itself. The capsule of sand, upon opening, destroys its contents. The lunar rock, brought back by dream astronauts, is obliterated but for a faint whiff of its vestigial dust inhaled. Video feed is extinguished before we even know the story’s title, much less its plot. Vultures spiral, well-satiated, their

job complete. The defleshed bones of what was fall away into the abyss as the feathered guardians of the threshold rise into the sky to wait the next journeyer.

Waking consciousness is the opening of her eyes into the simple continuation of this life; it is almost always this simultaneous.

Once again, she is. Once again, she remembers herself.

"I'm back. Why am I back?"

It is a mystery.

Not yet accustomed to the fact of her return, that she is here once again, there is a period of adjustment as she acclimates to being.

She gazes at the dulled white of the walls that surround her and as she stares at them the aging paint slowly flakes away to reveal, beneath the artifice of plaster, calcium hydroxide and sand, a framework of bone upon bone, horizontally aligned, like the logs of a cabin. Limestone its fundament, composed of skeletal marine life, the fossil plaster has been but a catacomb overlaying another.

The eruption of light from today's grain of sand was enough to give glimpse of the threshold and beyond it a blankness as a blind being drawn on that prior life, a few inarticulate shadows that lingered at the edge fleeing as she noticed them. There then not there with the abruptness of the flick of a light switch.

Within the sheer gauze of morning sun she raises her hand, the dim weight of its shadow cast against the opposite wall. As a child she would have been drawn to the shadow. As a young adult she would have been drawn to the hand. As a teenager she had spent many hours sketching that hand until the representation of its form was perfect. Now she attends again to the shadow, ignoring the flesh except for its presence made known by the interruption of light. Her mind attaches itself to neither shade nor flesh. It was a movement unpremeditated and she places her hand down.

What the walls need are replastering and painting, or to be torn away altogether in favor of a more open blue print for life. Just a thought. Then arrives the cascade of the many thoughts that arise out of some backstage generator to cross the curtain of consciousness, seeking the spotlight, while she, beyond the orchestra pit, in Row 10 Seat H, is still barely awake enough to play assistant director and select from the flood what wins an opportunity for a callback. She's an easy target for habitual concerns that tumble out of the black into remembrance, irrepressible and demanding as

Sisyphean boulders, but there also arise images that surprise her. The background majority of the flood of inchoate thoughts scarcely registers, in tandem with the apprehension that even in discarded ideas are whole worlds that could unfold for an eternity. For no good reason, more than a moment's consideration may be given the unapproachable hypothetical as to whether or not her distant descendants could, would, and take as a matter-of-course the crossing of cosmological oceans to colonize terrestrial earth-like exoplanets, or if she would want to be or have what it takes to be selected as a future colonist on Mars. Thoughts briefly paused upon as they were brighter in color, and because it goes without saying there's no possibility of commitment or fulfillment. Avoidance welcomes passing fantasies, perhaps what amount to escapist fantasies with no personal magnetism, as in nothing to be gained and nothing to lose. They have sometimes the affect and effect of pleasant, unrecollected dreams. Other times they seem a mechanism of pernicious procrastination that ends up not really detracting from daily affairs, procrastination that deflects by mere centimeters the trauma of world news that pitches drama hard across the stage like a ball straight at her face.

Quieter and far more crooked signals filtering through her brain have the fleet weight of dust and are never even recognized.

Though the electricity that ferries those thoughts is real, imagination isn't. The Mars Rovers trumped Edgar Rice Burroughs' John Carter. One can't feed the body on mental pictures of food, not even intimately recollected flavors that stimulate saliva and make the mouth water as if that for which one hungers is at hand, just as she can't even skrye her own apartment when her eyes are closed, she instead can only imperfectly recall its spaces in puzzle piece fragments against a stock photo general expectation. When she removed her boots the night before she placed them inside the front door under a long, thin table that collects the odds and ends of coming and going, but she knows when she retrieves them her mental picture of where they sit will be different, perhaps slightly, perhaps a good deal, from their physicality. She feels how she lies on her side upon the bed, but if she looks down at the undulations and faults of her body she knows what she'll see will not be exactly as she pictures or senses it to be, which used to be a surprise, that what she felt and what she saw didn't perfectly conform. On a bookshelf

beside her large work table that occupies the dining room is a bag filled with special things, but she can never recall anything that is within it except for when she wants a specific item and she reaches for the bag as she knows the item is in there and not in one of the drawers of a nearby desk. Approximations and categories. Exactitudes as she has need of them, exactitudes of her wants as what she wants is lost. Might those future, hypothetical children crossing celestial seas miss their old world, which they would lose in categories and approximations, absent specifics reclaimed and lost again as they arose with painful exactitude in memory? Would their children feel native to their new home, rooted in it, or would they be a nation of dispossessed wanderers?

"What's the problem here?" rises from the street a floor below a man's voice.

Then a woman's muffled response, cheerful. One or the other or both must live in the building. She doesn't know.

The street is urban narrow, barely the width of two lanes. To the east it ends at the end of the block, depositing traffic onto a more expansive avenue. In the other direction, the street climbs several blocks up a hill before vanishing into the ever-ongoing sunset that is the west.

She can't hear what next happens. How many people breathing in, breathing out at that moment and she doesn't know what next happens with any of them except that those who had breathed out will next breathe in and those who had breathed in will next breathe out. That much is certain. Exempting those who have lost the need.

What happens next? Even when it seems to be her decision, what happens next, sometimes it seems she has very little say in it.

The torture and pleasure of imagination is that one absurdly wastes time and energy trying on and projecting both intolerable and lovely possibles and impossibles. The mind continually entertains itself rearranging the physical world, always rehearsing, trying on stories and taking them off.

Back to earth and the old walls carved out of the hive mind of their world in which she rests, she sleeps, she wakes, she dreams, she daydreams. The walls that give the illusion of separating them all. Walls that give the security of separation. Containers for private spaces. We are animals who rent and build nests. A fundamental concern of life, self-protection, and preservation of the species, the

home. Okay, now her thoughts have wandered into one of those yawning crevasses devoted to the belabored obvious. Climb out and move along. But it's true, the bedrock drama of almost all creatures is the anchor and refuge of the home, even if in a state of diaspora. Trace a bloody vein back far enough, from the tips of her fingers up her arm, and soon enough one comes to the ancestors who lived in single room log cabins. Trace back along another vein and the hands of other ancestors erect bark houses and mat houses of woven cattail leaves in the wilderness. There were earthen refuges carved out of hillsides. Of course, long ago, there were caves.

As a child, she had fashioned a home from a white sheet over a card table. She played hunter-gatherer with the kitchen pantry as pretend supermarket. Made salty biscuits out of Play-Doh for her sister. Under the table, within the confines of those nine square feet they were masters of their domain, their freedom as simple or complicated as their ability to remain hidden from outside demands.

In an apartment building, her children had preferred the make-shift home of a humble cardboard box in which only one could fit at a time. At their request she'd cut out a window and door. The door opened and closed but the box was not for hiding within so the flaps for the doors and windows were soon removed. Their home was social. They invited her over for cookies. She was expected to furnish them and did so. Chocolate chip. Her children crayoned and painted murals on the exterior walls. Flower gardens filled with monsters and friends. Why did children always begin their botanical observations by drawing composite flowers with a central circle face surrounded by a corolla of orbicular petals? How did nature highlight for them the bull's eye importance of the inflorescence? She made salty biscuits out of Play-Doh but her children were full with cookies and neglected to pretend nibble on them. She didn't resent their disinterest. The old times of bright yellow and purple and red Play-Doh biscuits were not better. When her children had grown out of that cardboard home, what had once been large seemed very small, even to her. She placed the box in her studio and it became again the right size.

Generations of instinct. Thousands of years of homes.

Healthy animals keep their nests in a state of repair.

In her dreams she has sometimes been in a house that is a home-coming absent of welcome. The more deeply she enters into it, the more it becomes increasingly ramshackle and dark, finally disconcertingly so, sharp angles skewing as much toward each other as they can without the endlessly multiplying halls, rooms and stairs collapsing altogether. Probably everyone has been in such a house in their dreams. Perhaps the contorted dream house is based on a house in which one has lived and it was a perfectly normal house, or at least had seemed halfway normal, perhaps a few good memories were had which one wanted to preserve, prize and love but to not revisit. The past should stay glued to the past. What was beautiful should remain so, even if, in order to be protected, the moment must be shut away from recollection so joy doesn't turn into a crushing condemnation of innocence revealed and to be reviled as naiveté.

"If there's anything you can trust about the future, it's that it will pile on the present like garbage and turn the past into a dump," her daughter has said.

"You're too young to be so cynical," she'd replied, though she'd thought her daughter astute. As for her own retort on that cynicism, she vaguely remembered with some irritation having heard it before. What she'd said, she couldn't place the where or the who, but knew it was unoriginal, plucked from other lips, and not only from a movie or television or a book, though she's sure she'd confronted it here and there in those mediums because it was that kind of quip, mouthed by elders to youth from generation to generation, to be repeatedly memorialized in fiction. You're too young to be so cynical. Someone had no doubt said it to her and she'd probably thought them condescending but wondered if they knew something she didn't or if they were right because she had come up in the world in an all wrong way that had been to her detriment. No doubt of that last bit, she was to her own detriment, but everyone had binary bad and good pole stars by which they navigated their life ships through siren-singing rocks, straits, and open water. "There are many things for which one is too young, no matter how old one is," she'd added.

There were always things for which one was too young. From the moment of one's birth, the sterile snipping of the umbilical cord. The teeth would have initially done the work of gnawing through

the clue. Was the first stone tool with edges chipped thin to a sharp blade for the purpose of warfare, hunting, or for the initiation of the newly born into this world.

Her daughter had been twelve, and, crossing over from the land of childhood to adulthood, had been as perplexed and confounded and alarmed by the mysteries involved as the next youth who struggled with an irretrievable exchange of credulity for insecure sexual maturity and the pressures of giving birth to one's future, but had been too proud to admit it.

"If there's anything you can trust about the future, it's that it will pile on the present like garbage and turn the past into a dump."

Astute, pithy, whatever had been the context. Worldly disillusionment or familial disappointment?

Her own experience of childhood, of puberty, unlucky thirteen, had been a hundred times as difficult as her daughter's.

There were things she'd never discussed with her children, as with most parents.

There may be many things for which one is too young, no matter how old one is, but, given time, nothing is inviolate.

Decay is a matter of law. Decay is the essential companion of growth. Even knowledgeable of this, decay seems to her careless and sad unless it is an impersonal tourist destination or a temporary state of transition awaiting renovation. As an inescapable, ever encroaching assailant, decay is a certain oracle of deadly loss. A monster from which there is no salvation, no plot twist reprieve, a final page that is as good as the zeta bequeathed by the alpha.

So why stick around for the denouement?

When her children had been small, with shadow hands she'd composed rabbits and ducks and deer for them. As she'd never learned shadow hand puppets as a child, she'd had to educate herself, and had studied how to make the figures from a bright yellow book decorated with black shadow hand puppet silhouettes on the cover. When she physically articulated them for her children, she'd never let on this was new for her and not part of a personal store of common-to-all traditional knowledge. Maybe this was why neither of her children had seemed particularly entertained. Perhaps they had been aware that this art wasn't, for her, natural and intrinsic. It was false. Mother didn't know everything after all, she could fail, and she knew she had failed them in a thousand million ways of

which they were unaware and would probably never guess, not even as adults deconstructing her deity, its many cons and few pros as they saw them. That perfection was impossible was no consolation, nor was the kind encouragement that one could only do their best any comfort, not when the lives of others were at stake.

Her children had recognized all the shadow figures. They had spontaneously named each one's likeness, no need for her to identify them. As they'd grown up, all things they'd seen perhaps only a single time, even if in books or on the television, rather than in the flesh, were from then on remembered and recognized, even rabbits and ducks and deer which had nothing to do with their everyday urban existences. Not only did they recognize them, they immediately saw similitude in unrelated things, such as in the glyphs of shadow hand puppets that with a single minor adjustment or change in perspective morphed from one appearance to another. They knew from their oven and stove and refrigerator how to recognize other ovens and stoves and refrigerators even if they looked very different. A refrigerator could be black, white or brushed gray metal, could have one door or four, could be small or large, square or rectangular, could stand horizontally or vertically, and still her children had intuited, from place to place, "refrigerator". Despite differences in design, she hadn't had to teach them "refrigerator" in every new environment.

This was ordinary, of course, not a remarkable achievement for humans who had probably been making hand shadow puppets since the morning they woke up, went looking for breakfast, and recognized their twin in the familiar of the shadow image walking alongside them as the sun rose. They waved, their twin waved back, and hand shadow puppets were born.

Newly hatched ducks instinctively flee in a panic from shadows mimicking hawks.

Her sister had known dozens of hand shadow puppets by heart.

When her eldest was preschool age she had been in her twenties, in her early thirties when the second child literally tripped up the school's stairs to kindergarten. Though she'd been appreciative of the two children as individuals, she had been not very amazed by evolution's blueprints as regards her own species, even as she'd noted with more than the requisite attention their growth, physically, emotionally and intellectually.

Despite the fact of her having questioned and rebelled against rules, she'd not wholly shed society's expectations, and her confidence in her children had been guided by cultural standards.

She had taken much for granted.

Because she'd not been as free a person as she'd believed herself to be, she'd been proud when society applauded and approved of her children, and she'd been anxious and disappointed when they didn't measure up to society's templates. She'd anticipated and accepted rebellion, but when rebellion turned out to be instead unreasonable insensibility she was swamped by fear and dread.

At least she'd thought it to be unreasonable insensibility.

She had expected them to be like her, only a much better version of her, without any of her failings. She'd hoped for them to be unlike her in all the ways she'd wished she'd not been her past self, she hoped for them to be unlike her in all the ways she wished she was not her present self, she prayed for them to be unaffected by the failures and betrayals of her future self.

Had any one of her grandparents said it she'd have paid no attention, but when she was about eighteen or nineteen she'd read that individuals in their twenties and early thirties have an elitist view on what is remarkable, which is different from living in fear of questioning the comfortable commonplace, though more related to it than most in their twenties and early thirties would like to admit. Had any one of her grandparents said, "The young have an elitist view on what is remarkable", she would have thought they were leaking bitter jealousy of youth, but her grandparents would never have spoken of questioning the comfortable commonplace. Instead, they would have said, "Just wait, one day you'll be my age", and what they would have meant was, "My curse is that you should enjoy nothing ever." Which is what her father's mother had said, not gently, not hopeful, not assuring of coming wisdom, not a blessing for longevity, but praying upon her a life of salt-blasted, fruitless earth, empty hands and an insatiate, dehydrated husk of a heart. "Just wait, one day you'll be my age." Her mother, too, had repeated the same curse. As had most of her elders. Living wills daily tattooed on the brain, passed off as universal messages of popular wisdom but their true kinship was with vengeful spells. Love bites that stripped their pound of flesh clear down to the personal bone.

Her plan had been to always tell her children the truth, but then she learned how convenient it was to lie to trusting minds that desired to believe in a fat elf that delivered rewards, one night a year, to all the righteous in the world, and magically knew if you were bad or good.

No, even earlier than that she had learned the convenience of lying to her children if only by omission rather than reconstruction or denial. One had to sometimes lie to young, fragile minds that had limited comprehension and reasoning skills.

Truth telling is not a simple matter, and the decision to lie is not always unequivocally bad. Indeed, independence, self-awareness and self-possession in children is tied to their learning they can make choices in what to reveal and what to conceal and what facts to bend.

One of the more difficult complications is whether or not individuals might even desire the truth.

Even more difficult is what is truth.

She used to tell her daughter, when she was careless with math and arraigning it as useless, that numbers were daily a matter of life and death. She had done so with humor, but had been serious. A wrong calculation and astronauts are thrown toward the sun instead of the moon. A wrong calculation and cement crumbles and buildings fall. Don't run with scissors. Don't play with matches. Look both ways before crossing the street. Don't text while driving. Make sure to cut off the burner and the iron and never leave unattended candles lit because a fire could start, you could be killed. You could burn down the block. Think of the havoc, the grief, the devastation you can wreck with a single accident, by being naturally careless rather than unnaturally concerned and ever anticipating consequences. Potential tragedies surrounded. There had been everything in the world to warn her children about, the list was endless, and no means of protecting them as they grew and grow older.

Refocus, Athine. Pull it together.

There were things she'd never discussed with her children, as with most parents. Some didn't talk because they would never talk. Some didn't talk because they were waiting for the appropriate age and then for the appropriate time.

The appropriate time was ever elusive.

How had her sister known dozens of hand shadow puppets by heart while she recollected none from her childhood. The forms would flow from her sister's hands gracefully, naturally, easily, and the children had been mesmerized by the stories she told with them. For which reason the books and her own attempt to learn, not to compete but to replace her sister when she wasn't there, and the results were clumsy and unacceptable, lacking in charm because they were uninspired, second-hand.

No matter brilliant, irreproachable facades, no one can be good or even competent at all things. One has weaknesses and strengths, successes and failures.

There were things at which she'd been good with her children.

Refocus. To reflect on the past is to be set solitarily adrift on a blinding white ice sheet. Anywhere. Not only in the middle of the ocean. The ice sheet can form while she's driving down the highway, when she's working, on a walk, fixing dinner, when she lies down to rest or is waking. The cold isolates her and freezes all life. The white becomes as a movie screen on which cycle ad infinitum home movies that are memories of memories of memories becoming ever more removed from source if not from emotional or sentimental entrapment. To keep moving forward instead is essential, lest one becomes trapped and freezes to death. Refocus and throw off the ice as it crystallizes.

In the best of worlds, history would reside in boxes she might occasionally open to see how much has brittle to dust until finally, eventually, the boxes are empty and all that remains is a brief description on the cover of what was once contained. Bones sapped of their marrow.

But she has never been very good at making memories either, not the kind that resonate nostalgia.

Look forward, not back, lest one become a pillar of salt. She prefers to not look back even to catch again a glimpse of the good. As it waves goodbye, she watches, only to find the memory, the person, the place has already disappeared into the vanishing point and what she is viewing is loss.

Even in the present possessive is the grief of the future past when one is left with nothing.

Yearly she has her pilgrimage--which is within a few days. That is the extent to which she willingly gives in to memory. She should

refocus and think of that pilgrimage instead, what she has left to do to prepare.

The photos she takes, for artistic or personal use, of course there is memory invested in them. And in things like the cardboard box which had been the play home of her children, the home in a home, which she now keeps in her office.

Their baby teeth. Their drawings. Their first baby blankets, ivory striped blue and deep rouge pink at the edges, which she sometimes takes out of the drawer, holds them to her nose and finds in them, remarkably, the precious fragrance of their infancy. The caps they wore home from the hospital. The first trimmed lock of hair, bound with elastic. Their umbilical cord stumps.

Her children. She does hold onto memories of her children, sometimes reluctantly, for to look back brings the pain of loss even though she tried to hold the passing present lightly, to not favor it over the future. She would not will the world to stop for sake of her own selfishness. (And yet she does. She begs the future to at least pause so she may enjoy a little longer what is good. She begs the future to slow its progress when she would sooner turn and walk away from what advances.) Especially when anxiety mounts it is painful to look back; she has lost so much of her children already, even willingly, indisposed to sentimentally cling to the past rather than keep abreast with them in the present. But she has been losing them in the here and now and that is perturbing. Or maybe it is as it should be, for their sake. That they step into another room, close the door, and are worlds away. Perhaps there's a good reason for her feeling as if they've crossed a broad ocean, never to return to the continent she inhabits. Not exactly out of sight out of mind, for they sometimes disappear into the future even as they stand before her. She once carried them under her heart, nearly as intimate to her as her very soul, imprinted in each cell of her body, now sloughed away so that she's a house with walls filled with empty places where there once were living portraits. She should have perfect photographic memory of those children, of all those she has loved, should be able to visualize them down to their fingerprints. What color are their eyes is something she shouldn't have to think about.

Not yet accustomed to the fact of her return, that she is here once again, there is a period of adjustment as she acclimates to being.

"I'm back. Why am I back?"

Is it a mystery or does she already know and has lost sight of the reason. Was she born knowing? Were her children born knowing but had no idea they possessed the answer to the question of the ages, a knowing suffocated before they had words to express those insights. A paradisiacal intuition from which they were separated by all that comprises initiation into family, into culture, even perhaps by the limitations of those words which were supposed to open the world to them. Was that intuition lost even as they passed through the door of the womb into the light.

Is mystery only a genre? Where is it? Outside? Within? On the opposite side of the door, beyond an external wood or stone threshold, even a line scratched in the earth, which magically activates an internal corresponding crossover mechanism that erases memory of intent as one transcends the mundane boundary, so that we are left on the other side looking down at the empty, flesh palms of our hands to wonder why am I here, what was I, am I doing? Is the mysterious an arrangement of events or does it happen within the neural circuitry zip-zapping the mind? Is it necessarily personal, the arousal of curiosity, or does it belong to what is in possession of the facts? Does mystery spontaneously arise of its own accord, like Aphrodite serendipitously discovered with sea shells and other cryptic treasures on the numinous wave froth edge of ocean and sodden sandpaper beach, or is it manufactured by means of the realization of a question for which there is no answer but a searching gaze that returns empty with the conjoined shrug of a shoulder. Does mystery hide in a way that makes an independent entity of the question or is the question itself the DNA of the unidentified?

Refocus. How long has she lain staring at the wall. If life is a game board then each day she finds herself again on the opening square, only today there are the bones neatly stacked around her on the ice floe.

Her door is closed and she hears no activity without it. Then there is. She'd heard Maja enter late in the night. The opening and shutting of a door. Soft shuffle pad of footsteps down the wood floor of the hall. The opening and shutting of another door. Soon thereafter, the flush of the toilet. Running water that is then silenced. The bathroom door is opened and closed. Footsteps recede back down the hall. Her daughter's bedroom door opens and closes again. Though Maja has graduated from college (English degree,

unenthusiastically pursued) and has her own place, she sometimes still sleeps in her old room when her roommate has a boyfriend staying over or they need a break from one another. She suspects, too, that Maja sleeps in her old room because it has still the feeling of home for her and has been a decent home, maybe even a good home, and she's had no reason to run from it. She returns for days, sometimes for weeks. Even if not sleeping in her room she will not infrequently stop by for dinner and to pass the time when not working (web/mobile educational content production for teens, okay but not what she had planned) or out with friends. Then she will become involved romantically and will rarely be seen.

Had Maja stopped outside her door, had she called to her, she would have answered and the ice spell would have been broken. As it is, that brief sound of another in the apartment is enough to initiate the thaw that will release Athine this morning.

She's not on square one, of course. Not all feelings are valid and she is not on square one. Physically, in a world of time and chapters of a life's story delineated by a succession of reflective mileage markers at the side of the highway, hourglass sands chronologically drowning days, her earthly allotment of years framed as a continent of greenhorn fertile hopes swamped by desert, she is a personal universe of sand dunes removed from square one. She is the Sahara.

She has not accomplished what she wanted.

Though lacking any talent for making hand shadow puppets, she'd spent a year filming and photographing shadows, the daily journey of their intercourse with light across the walls, how the diurnal conversation of the sun changed through the seasons. Being neither an astronomer nor an astrologer, she only vaguely understood the concrete science and even less the disputable zodiacal influences of the gas giant's mechanical progress from Southern Solstice to Equinox, Northern Solstice, Equinox, back to Southern Solstice. Perihelion to Aphelion. From stillness to stillness, those extremities of indecision when the sun appeared to pause in the sky before reversing. Only time wasn't exactly like the sun's elliptic cycles. And it wasn't linear. Time was more a spiral of overlaying rounds. Which was the story of shadows she typically related, allured by their aesthetic magic, so one would have no idea of other stories of shadows she could tell, such as the dread of them unhinged from any light source, autonomous, which she'd never

mentioned to her son and yet he held, from his childhood, the same anxiety, and had insisted for several years, as a young child, upon their presence in the household. Despite being practical and grounded, as a teen he still slept with the ceiling lamp on, understandable to her as she was reluctant to enter a dark room alone unless a light switch was within immediate reach of the entrance.

She had no such panic outside in the night, the square angles humans built around themselves seeming to be the origin of her anxiety rather than the dark.

No one knew she held a reluctant fear of the dark as no one ever asked. Adults were past such childish indulgences.

Her son should be rising soon. When he was young, in the morning he would toss himself on the bed greeting her in gregarious, enthusiastic reception of each new day, positive that hidden between the folds of the hours were endless epiphanies of things new and wonderful waiting to open themselves to him and reveal mysteries that were everyone's natural birthright but his especially as he lived for them. He wasn't fearless. He didn't trust either natural or man-made environments not to intentionally trip him up, nor did he have the confidence to catch himself mid-fall. But he had believed around each corner was a winged dragon and that the congratulatory partner of every dragon was a treasure. Then he had grown up to be a teenager who knew nothing about the world and believed he knew everything, as it was with all youth in their freshly-minted adult garment that was as unnatural and dark to them as that flesh was confident in its magical, god-like super powers. He and his sister had undergone the rite of passage of the high school diploma that promised them a fundamental grasp of the mechanics of the universe, history and social sciences choicely manipulated in the truths they'd been taught. In the case of most of these souls in their newly minted adult garments, the diploma was instead more a testament to the completion of basic training in the pecking order, their thirteen years as subservient votaries. Along the way, their dragons had transformed into those less archetypal and fantastic than environmentally engineered by influences inside the home and without, flavored less by in-general inheritance than personal. She knew who these children of hers were, and didn't, just as they knew who she was yet knew even less about her than she about them. They were, each of them, as with all people, dark ponds

of peculiar indulgences populated by fish whose eyes never shut, always in motion. But her children believed in life whereas she believed in death.

Athine was, herself, a dragon. Had she always been one or was it a transmutation that happened with age wasn't certain, but all indications were this dragon she secretly was had transpired over time.

When a child she had been fascinated by the tale of a bone flute, the music of which was the voice of the man to whom the bone had belonged, an individual who had battled and killed a marvelous, frightening dragon, but whose victory had been short-lived. Not long after, the man had himself been murdered. His bone song was to reveal that which is hidden, the one who had slain him. A problem was that she had mixed things up so she thought this bone was also that of the ancient dragon, never questioning how it belonged to both the slain and the slayer.

She was this same order of dragon. The bone that belonged to the skeleton of the slain dragon as well as the skeleton of the slayer. It made little worldly sense but she'd learned not to question certain peculiar disorders.

Rather than being horrified or surprised by the bones in her walls, she mentally reviews her schedule for the day, which is wholly her own and flexible, though she has a deadline. She has always worked well with deadlines. When there wasn't a deadline she would set one for herself. She will take a quick shower before she dresses, brush her teeth, have a little breakfast then head out, or perhaps she could instead grab a pastry at a coffee shop. Then she will continue on as before. Working. Meeting deadlines.

Or maybe not.

No, the bones don't bother her so much. They are a matter-of-fact spreadsheet of the indebtedness of all building materials to neglected history.

The wave, however, is another matter. She should keep her eyes on the bones rather than turn and see the wave of loss and regret at her back, its massive weight demanding a constant clarity of presence which is the delicate balance between feigned ignorance and fight or flight super-perception continually testing for whatever will be the hair's breadth of a change that signals the descent of final judgment, away from which she imagines she will try to sprint. She

will dive under a desk or bed even as the miles high tsunami crashes down upon her.

Again, not yet accustomed to the fact of her return, that she is here once again, there is a period of adjustment as she acclimates to being. She was nowhere and then she is back. But “she is back” means she has been away. Where?



While she slept, the clouds above didn't freeze in the sky as in photographic images or paintings, waiting release from a prison imposed by her suspended consciousness, anymore than the eye of a camera could hold a scene in suspended animation between the press and release of the shutter. With a near perverse insistence, the world was in constant motion. Propelled by air currents circling the globe, the clouds were ferried along, combined and separated in ever changing configurations, dissipated, releasing their moisture. New clouds formed, incognizant of her existence, as was almost all of creation. Time traveled on even without the rigorous tick of the clock to carry her, on its resolute train, down parallel tracks that converged in the vanishing point of the deep horizon. When she was a child how many times had she drawn these converging lines, not as a metaphor but as an exercise on perspective.

When her children were little, as they slept she would clean up their playthings (wasn't everything a toy then) but there were some she didn't put away, which were exempt from reservations of the shelves, the toy box, the closet, such as the small pseudo-dragon dinosaurs with which her son played that were all the colors of the rainbow, she would place them instead on his low play table in a lively, attentive line so when he rose they would seem already waiting for him and new adventures. Dedicated companions. So it seemed the way of the world, when she was a young child, that it fell asleep even as she did, and as the world slept an invisible hand wiped the slate clean, rearranging all the elements in her life to be just so when she woke and the rest of the world with her. The sun, moon, stars, people, clouds, all were like toys, possessing something akin to cranks which her eyelids wound up as their curtains parted in the morning, setting their refreshed gears in motion. Sometimes

the invisible hand which went about rearranging things at night had sun and clear blue skies planned for her when the world's sleep-refreshed stage came into view in the morning. Other times it had planned cottony white fluffy clouds that materialized at one far end of her street and dematerialized at the other, for the world was small when she was small in months, its map no larger than a few blocks. It was cloud that also compelled her mind to escape those boundaries, the violence of a racing storm that entranced her young eyes with its oceanic power, enlarging her horizons with its uncontainable force. The impersonal fury that propelled it forward magnetized her to it. She had wished the storm would pour its electric knowledge into her heart, for it seemed that kind of power must know not only present but before and after and everything. The storm knew what was west and east of the confines of her street.

Different clouds ferried different emotions. Humans only cry tears of sadness because they saw a metaphor for the derangement of grief in some ponderous, sorrowful deluge and taught their bodies to cry in mimicry of rain. They only cry tears of joy because, again, the skies taught them with softer showers to which the earth responded with the bloom of sweet-scented flowers.

Unseen forces still went about rearranging the world while Athine slept.

Catastrophes have occurred while she slept. Fellow humans have died in terrible ways. Found in the wrong place at the wrong time, they have been murdered by nature. They have been slain by people they had never previously met, people who they never imagined to exist. War has mercilessly smashed them. Blood has been ferociously let between loved ones, spouse upon spouse, parent upon child, friend upon friend. While she slept, others were silenced by disease. Breath left age-worn bodies behind. Survivors are crying, their lives forever changed, and time moves on, its relentless current sweeping all away from their dead. In a few minutes she will learn of these things, she will be beckoned to care about them all, to have pity for the multitudes not as ideas of people but individuals with distinctive faces, to remember their names. Nature reflecting on itself and attempting to care

Sometimes the bit of dream sand left on the threshold of sleep helps her transition, its remains turning to soft ash cremains in the

daylight, a sacred scent is released and buoys her. Other times the sand is the pomegranate seed that strands her amid ghosts that refuse to relinquish her. The shadow of that sand is the one remaining clue in a maze that daily reorients her position within it as to which way the soul's moon was burning as she slept and the direction in which her soul's sun shines as she wakes and is returned to volatile world time, a current which only rarely meets with egoless universal time.

She rises. She showers, washes her hair, grooms, dresses, not in black as today she is working in the studio. She decides against returning any phone calls or texts, certainly not emails, until after breakfast.

She takes a couple of photos from a folder on a bedside table and puts them up on the freezer door in the kitchen. She runs herself a glass of water from the tap.

Management must be doing repairs on the neighboring apartment as there is already non-stop drilling and banging heard through the kitchen wall, which has been ongoing for several days, and a year of renovations on a high-rise behind their building makes the air even more metal percussive and active with men on scaffolding, unseen beyond her windows, yelling back and forth at one another, almost always urgent and caustic, sometimes enraged, the lone worker who would quell the volcanic eruptions with his melodious Portuguese song gone now for months. His music had been as otherworldly a surprise as the afternoon she lived upon an operatic stage created by the tenor who practiced an aria for several hours with his balcony doors open. Why are such gifts rarely repeated? Why were the streets so stingy with art? She is in the kitchen, listening to the clang bang of metal on metal, thinking of making toast, there are two slices of bread left, when Maja enters and gives her "Good morning" a hug, complaining all the while about the noise, she has a couple of days off and wanted to sleep in but can't now and can't sleep in at her apartment either as construction is going on there as well and is even worse, she says, besides which her roommate's boyfriend never goes home, though that won't be a problem much longer as they've decided to move in together so they're saving up for a deposit and rent on a place for themselves, good riddance. He spends hours soaking in the tub with an oak board laid over it to serve as desk while he writes

revolutionary words, she taunts and teases him about being Jean-Paul Marat awaiting bloody immortalization at the hand of Charlotte Corday, which sounds uncongenially sarcastic on her part as he's a great guy, a smart guy, he takes out the trash, bakes fresh bread, and he actually only soaks for an hour when he gets off work, she shouldn't be so harsh on him and over dramatize. Still, she'll be happy to get her bathroom back, except that Ayesha was about the only person her age she's been able to talk news with and not be frustrated and enraged over a lack of interest and narrow views, why doesn't anyone care about what's going on in the world, maybe it's due the overwhelming malaise that comes with feeling powerless. She'll miss Ayesha because she is an overall great roommate, clean and competent and she cares about others instead of just pretending. What's she going to do? Before you even mention Alex as a possibility, don't, you know better than that, without mom as arbitrator they'd kill each other, you know that's true. Did you check out the news this morning yet? She's starting to think maybe living in a tiny house would be a great idea, she could do 350 square feet, maybe in a friend's back yard? She saw the best design yet yesterday, here it is, she saved the post on her phone. It even has a bathroom and many tiny houses she has liked don't. She'd have to have a bathroom. She can't see living comfortably without a bathroom or a little kitchen. How can you live securely without tea and warm toast, and a toilet, especially when you're on your period. There is a post on, can you imagine this, a mother and daughter living together in a tiny house that manages to somehow have two bedrooms. She could see doing that in an alternative life, like maybe if they decided to start over and picked up and moved to a piece of land in Oregon where they could daily enjoy the sun setting over the ocean beyond the rocky Oregon beach. She's always wanted to live in Oregon or northern California. And she could build her own tiny house next to the one they shared and when she settled down with a long-term relationship boyfriend they could live in that second tiny house and if they wanted children they could build maybe a larger, real house and one of the tiny houses could even be turned into a vacation rental. Or maybe she should instead get one of those small, old camper trailers with a kitchen and bath and refurbish it? She'd love to travel up to Alaska and down to Patagonia and meet all kinds of people. Preferably with a

boyfriend, though. Except that would present problems if she met someone on the trip, or if he met someone. Or, hell, maybe Athine would travel with her. Mother and daughter. That would actually be great. They're lucky that they get along so well, right? Imagine the things they'd see, the memories they'd build together. Except for the studio, you wouldn't want to leave the studio, would you, the business you've spent decades building, though there's still time if you wanted you could start again in Oregon. Are you listening to me? I'm sorry, I'm talking nonstop and you're not even awake yet. I'm just dreaming. I can't leave what I'm doing right now, I'm on my way to making some decent money in the foreseeable future. There's nothing for me in Oregon but scenic views and mildew and penury. We should just go on vacation together for a couple of weeks instead of you always going by yourself? This time, they could go together. I can take a couple of weeks. I can say it's an emergency. Think about it. I can understand you wanting to get some private time away when we were kids, but it's different now. Are you hungry? I'm hungry. Is there anything to eat for breakfast? Do you mind if I use these last two slices of bread for toast? You haven't made coffee. I'm going to have tea. Do you want me to make your coffee? Organic, free trade, I need to start paying more attention to coffee, these are nice oily beans, isn't it fun to run your fingers through oily coffee beans? Isn't it odd the things that are pleasurable? Which comes off as perhaps more manic a conversation than it is, the daughter still drowsy, laconic, wandering slowly about the kitchen in her gray jersey sleep pants (western style, made in Vietnam) and pink top decorated with cheerful black and white kittens (western style, made in China), an ancient flannel shirt with a ripped elbow she'd borrowed from her mother's closet. She slides the bread in the toaster, runs water in the kettle, puts the kettle on the stovetop and settles down on the floor. Her mother pats the top of her head, undoes a tangle in her curls. The sun has passed under clouds where it will hide its face for the rest of the day and the light in the kitchen is muted.

You will find a roommate with no problem, like last time. I wasn't going to suggest Alex. Tiny houses are cute but are so expensive I think they're mostly playhouses for rich people. But, yes, that tiny house is lovely and looks well designed. It would be wonderful to travel from Alaska to Patagonia together. I would love

to see Argentina, the Salinas Grandes, El Cono de Arita. I would love to travel the great Patagonian deserts. Life on the Oregon coast is a beautiful dream to have and we probably would live together just fine in a tiny house, we have lived well in a fairly small apartment together, but in order to live we need work. We have no savings to go anywhere and build even tiny homes. You must have dreams though. Don't let go of your dreams. Do what you can to realize them. You're just starting out. You're young. You still have flexibility, you're only responsible for yourself. One day I won't be around any longer but you will be and it's your future for which you have to prepare, your present that you have to make the most of in preparing for that future. Go ahead and check out Oregon if you want, look around, see if there's work available. No, I've not seen the news yet. I'll pick up some coffee on the way to the studio.

You wouldn't miss me?

Of course I would miss you. Will you be here for dinner tonight?

No, but I'll be spending the night again. Maybe I'll bring you breakfast in bed, she laughs. We can continue our talk.

If you still feel like it tomorrow.

Forget I said that. You shouldn't expect anything from me. Not that I don't want to be reliable, I want to be reliable, but I don't want to be predictable yet and I hate making promises and breaking them. Maybe I'll meet someone tonight and we'll drive to the coast just to watch the sun rise. I won't but I like to keep my options open. I wish I could see into the future, don't you? With every decision I make every moment of my life I wish I could see the consequences years from now. I believe that where you end up is pretty much how you plan it, but what if you don't have a plan? She groans and puts her head between her knees and her hands over her head. I don't have a plan and I don't want to have one. Oh, god, what am I going to do with my life?

You're doing. Don't worry.

Her daughter, she knows, is still figuring things out.

"You'll figure things out. And then it will all come tumbling down and you'll figure things out again."

"If that's the way it always is there wouldn't be philosophy or religion or math or science. That's what fundamental truths are for. They give us guides for building lives that don't collapse. They're the bedrock of civilization."

The mother begins to respond then decides not to, not today.

Most everyone is figuring things out on a second-to-second basis, even those who believe they have a firm footing in their long plan however their short-term plans might change. She would be an example of such a person.

Pay attention only to the blind philosophers who speak in reluctant riddles, those who seek neither notoriety nor followers.

"Alex isn't up yet?" she wonders aloud, her maternal instincts realizing and becoming anxious over his silence.

Appearing behind her, "I'm up yet," he says.

Maja grabs his ankle and trips him, is partly successful, he catches himself against the refrigerator-freezer, no harm done. All in play.

"I haven't seen these." Alex takes down from the freezer door two black-and-white photographs fixed there with old dinosaur magnets. He and Maja in a park, picturesque. Lush and beautiful grayscale. He and Maja, moments later, both flashing a bird at the camera. "I look like such a kid," he observes. "How old was I? Thirteen?"

The surprise of ever-ongoing self-discovery. Was I that then? I know what I am now. Or do I? If I keep changing, what will I become?

"I was looking for some other photos last night from the same outing. I thought these were good of you two. Fun. So I printed them out. You don't remember that day?"

"Yeah, I do. It was nice. You haven't taken photos of us in years. I kind of miss it."

"You two haven't let me in years. You rebelled."

"Pay me a modeling fee and you can take all the photos you want," Maja says.

"I would like to take some more photos of you both while we're still together."

"While we're still together?" Maja says.

Sit here, on the bench, she'd told Maja and Alex. Look at me, and she'd shot the series that had ended with them flipping birds at her camera. It had been a good day. They had joked. Eaten ice cream. Alex unfailingly had chocolate. Athine took photos of the park's lake. She loved the expressions on their faces, seeming tensionless, carefree.

She loved their faces.

"It was never easy getting a photo of you together. Alone, yes. Up to around that time I got some good photos of you both solo. But when I put you together you'd make it a point to gang up and do battle with the camera."

"Did we?" Alex asks.

"You don't remember."

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Then, when you were teenagers, you both would throw up your hands. You didn't want me to photograph you at all. You made yourselves off-limits. The only photos of you I have as teens are blurs of you fleeing with hands in front of your faces."

"Like this." Alex hunches his shoulders, turning away, blocking his face with his hands.

"That looks familiar," she says as he gives her a quick, laughing, conciliatory hug. Will she ever become accustomed to the difference between hugging the child, which felt so good and natural how her arms protectively encompassed the magical being who fiercely embraced her with such love and trust, as versus the towering adult, which is overwhelming. He is proud and secure in that height, how his chin crests the top of her head. She looks up. He smiles down at her. Which is its own kind of natural magic, that he was once small and vulnerable and is still somehow the same individual whose confidantes were once a plush *Tyrannosaurus rex* and the wind.

"You have to admit some of those are pretty cool," he says. "You should do a series of people fleeing the camera."

"You're the only two who ever have fled my camera." Athine only now realizes this. Is it odd? Does it speak for or against her?

The blot on the memory which still made her uncomfortable was a younger man who, toward the end, had followed them from where they'd purchased the ice cream to some benches, his attention focused on Athine, seeming to make himself ever more conspicuous, purposefully obvious to her alone, yet also secretive, reticent. She'd intentionally captured him in the background of one shot of Maja and Alex, to examine later and make certain. Sit here, on the bench. Look at me. They'd adopted a pose. Stiff, deadpan, inscrutable. Wonderful. Side by side about eighteen inches apart. They'd composed themselves beautifully, feet flat on the ground,

hands in their laps. (Oh, if only she had done one such photo of them every year, returning always to that same park bench, Maja and Alex in that same pose. Regret that she hasn't, for a plan that hadn't occurred until that moment. Regret as she envisions these photos that could have been but aren't and can never be made. Regret so hard that it hurts.) And in the background, about thirty feet to the rear, stood the man between them, staring at Athine when he was assured her children couldn't see. He was in that one shot only, but he was why she'd taken the shots on the bench, playfully keeping their attention on her. She had known what he would do and that she'd get a record of him. She hadn't told Maja and Alex. She hadn't wanted them to take notice. This was between the man and her, though she'd pretended ignorant nonchalance. Immediately after she'd said let's leave. When she magnified the photo on her computer, in her photo-editing program, his eyes were hard on her. If she'd been mistaken and instead found his eyes on either Maja or Alex she would have been horrified, heart racing, rush of adrenaline to the head surround-and-protect-your-young terrified, which was one of the reasons she'd said let's leave, though his eyes were on her she didn't want him near them. He'd been like a presence that had escaped a dream, perhaps because of the intensity of the shadowy interaction. If it had been a dream she'd have woken up wondering what he represented, what hidden meaning he encapsulated.

Who is this person? Who is the me they believe that I am, who they are watching?

"Or you are tiny, in the distance. Your backs to me." It was funny how even from a great distance she could distinguish them in isolation or in a crowd. By form, by gesture, how they walked and held themselves. "You wouldn't know I was photographing you and I'd grab a shot. Then you'd turn around and say no, even from a distance. I realized you were serious and forgot all about taking photos of you. The shots I was getting weren't good anymore anyway. It was all right if your friends took photos, just not your mother." She'd understood that, and why.

Maja jokes, "I thought teenagers earned their keep being obnoxious with their parents."

"It's nature's way of ensuring you'll give your children the boot or be ready for them to leave when the time comes," Alex says.

"Waffles sound good. I want waffles. Do we have frozen waffles?" he asks.

"We have waffles but we're out of syrup," Maja says.

But it may have been he was only doing that, watching, wanting not to be intrusive, interested in their activity and capturing it in his head rather than in a camera, the way certain people attract a street photographer's notice. The one with the camera takes their candid shots hoping to be as unobtrusive as possible rather than deceitful, freedom of speech frames of lives in the public landscape, and the intention is art not poisonous stalking. She knew about this. She carried a camera wherever she went, seeking, waiting. She wrestled with the guilt that came with street photography's furtive nature, the pretense of paying no attention, emboldened only by the knowledge that yes, there, the marvelous was happening, beautiful synchronicity, mysterious conjugations she mustn't let slip away. As an artist it was her obligation to keep an eye open to the magic in the mundane. Or she told herself it was an obligation when instead it simply was what she'd always done, the watching, she transfixed by what was before her, the transpiring of the now, the whatever and however which had been the beginning of everything and had taken nearly and patiently forever to give rise to this, don't you feel it? She would watch too hard the beauty and what was in the becoming all around her and even her own children would sometimes say what are you staring at, why are you staring at me. Not even they felt the unity of that tireless becoming of which they were, which bound them together not only in the moment but forever. She would try to peer beyond the surface into the eternal well of that becoming but only skried scant micrometers. She would watch too hard individuals she didn't know, studying their faces their movements what made them different from everyone else. She watched too hard buildings that appeared out of the ether to become what they momentarily were and would soon become something else. Examined what we who had become were choosing to make.

She watched the continual becoming. Don't be afraid of me, ignore me, I'm watching everything becoming, how remarkable it all is, she wanted to communicate but without words, put at ease without words, only a nonthreatening telepathy of her body in seamless and unobtrusive intersection with the space around her.

For we are individuals separated by taboos, disparate conflicting and similar experience, boundaries. So was she and she too was wary.

Because she watched didn't mean she trusted. She could love and not trust. Humans are sly and selfish animals. Be always circumspect, vigilant.

She was aware of the irony. But hunger demolishes a peaceable kingdom and the lambs that lie down with sleepy lions are devoured by those lions when they wake. To be innocent of this was to be in denial of what one was watching.

To wish for perfect invisibility would be too akin to surveillance and the voyeur.

"We're out of milk," Alex says.

She was interested in the dialogue of the parts of the landscape as a whole as well as the people who entered into that conversation, their bodies their voice in relationship to it. Even when young she had decided it was best to make herself obvious with her camera and relied on that mix of forthrightness and nonchalance to disarm suspicion and dissuade potential approbation. She read body language and knew when she could take her time. She knew when she needed to be fast, one shot opportunity only, they will meet your eye after, choose by their eye whether to nod and smile pleasantly, ignore and walk on, or fire off a number of pretend shots in a 180 degree scan of the area. This was how she often caught her shots of people anyway when she knew she couldn't frame. She'd scan and shoot, click, click, click, click, acting as though her targets weren't there, camouflaging herself. She didn't ask permission because she knew people and they would naturally pose which was to act unnaturally unless one was an actor. She didn't ask permission unless it was to request a formal posed shot, which was rare. In photography she relied on what was arranged by nature rather than staged.

One couldn't simply say, in response to suspicion, I don't mean to intrude but you are part of something bigger and a bewildering, wonderful coherence of it into the particular of you and it was this I was photographing.

Artists are selfish, many said, even artists themselves.

She often just watched, was she less selfish then? Was it less selfish only to be? Photography, for her, wasn't a compulsion. It

was art. It was business. Was it less selfish only to be all about business?

Take care. Some questions were like vampires that drained vitality's confidence, leaving an insensible husk.

"I'll get milk on the way home this evening," Athine says.

"I can go to the market this afternoon," Alex tells her. "Send me a list of what you need."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah. Can I keep this one?"

It's the photo of Maja and Alex perfectly posed on the bench, not the one of them flipping birds.

"Sure."

"I'm going to get it framed. It needs a frame."

It had been years before she returned to that folder on her computer to work on any of the pictures from that day because he was in there watching her, dressed in his plaid shirt, knapsack on his back. She'd wanted to forget him, forget she'd kept his presence a secret, forget how she'd used Maja and Alex to surreptitiously get a shot of him.

And, still, it had been a good day. Beautiful day. Alex and Maja happy. Oblivious.

The question mark of him was unusual as she was always the watcher rather than the watched.

Her eye open for the hidden. This was why she moved her body, pursuing, hunting, dancing with becoming, in love with it. Her body woke her and opened her eyes in the morning. This was habit. This was the physical mechanism of her still running, the hands of its beating tick-tock clock still turning. She got out of bed because she was obligated to do so as she breathed and had responsibilities. Then she'd open her eyes a second time—for one must open them at least twice, there are other inner eyelids beneath the outer flesh—and she'd fall in love again.

To be in love with the world was painful. Inebriating. The beloved is here, is there. The beloved hides. She glimpses and tries to catch its form in light and shadow. The beloved hides again. The beloved was sometimes everywhere and that was overwhelming. She would race along beside in an attempt to keep up with it. She would burn out. She would look at her photos and think what I love has fled again behind the veil, shunning her attempt at capturing

and fixing it in place and time for others to see. Sometimes the beloved stepped behind a curtain and wouldn't emerge for weeks or months.

"I really like this picture," Alex says.

"I'm feeling down. I think I'll go shopping today," Maja says, standing. New shoes might cheer her up. "Give me a kiss," and she hugs her mother.

Do you remember, we had family who went out to Oregon in the 1800s? Athine would say but she knows Maja would freeze up and ask what does that have to do with anything, the 1800s are ancient history, it doesn't have anything to do with us, it doesn't have anything to do with me.

Irrelevant.

And she'd be right.

There were photographs. A giant tree stump in the sand of a beach and a man standing alongside. Another photo of men, women, children in nineteenth century daily attire standing on a barren, wood porch, staring back at the camera. Who had been the photographer. There was no record of that. The photographer often disappeared. All that remained was the subject and the camera.

Extraneous knowledge is a burden for most. A story had come to mind but it needn't be told.

She leaves her apartment building, threading her way through the dog-walkers to her car. She drives to the coffee shop that is most reliable. How are you today? I'm fine, thanks. But has she ever told the barista she wasn't okay? I'm fine, I'm good, I'm okay means I wish you well, for this moment we're together in this vehicle called life and systems are go to safely conduct and govern us through this interaction to the next intersection. She orders an Americano. And she'll have a blueberry scone. While she waits, she examines the current art hanging on the wall, a new show every four weeks, this month's artist a woman, ten black-and-white photographic images of busy street intersections, all of long shadows on the pavement of pedestrians crossing, and the photographer and her camera shown in each, shadow of the box of the camera held up to the shadow face, an intentional capture of the artist as observer and shadow both but so marginal as to be easily passed over in each photo. She looks at the travel mugs on display. The one she has is old and a fresh cup of coffee in it hasn't tasted of fresh coffee in a long while,

instead it tastes like the mug clinging to the memory of an insipid, bitter but tenacious brew that possessed the magic molecule to taint all subsequent brews with which it came into contact. She tests different cups, the practical and tactile aesthetics of them, those tactile aesthetics being nearly as important as the practical. Tomorrow, she decides, she will make her purchase at the same time she places her order.

Coffee and scone in hand, as she exits she hesitates at the door, looks at all the cars in the parking lot, then turns back into the shop to sit and eat her scone and watch who comes and goes and who stays. Because she's not ready for the studio. Not yet. And maybe she will go ahead and purchase that replacement tumbler today.

Taking a seat at the counter, she watches the baristas as they work. Four of them. Two behind the counter. Two occasionally coming out from the rear of the shop. Something seems peculiar about the scene so that her eye repeatedly measures each person up and down before she realizes what is irregular is all are of the same body type and height and coloring, builds so slight they are almost delicate, both male and female, perhaps of about average height but because there is no one taller they collectively seem shorter than the norm, all white with straight dark brown hair. She is so focused upon them, wondering who does the hiring and how their personal preference for appearance has perhaps unconsciously built this homogenous crew that she doesn't notice the woman approaching from behind until she is upon her saying, "Is it you? It is! How are you? It's been so long! How are you, Athine?"

Despite the genial greeting, she doesn't rise, not matching the woman's enthusiasm as she feels a long tug from many years past restricting her, encouraging restraint. "Yes, it has been. A long time." She hadn't noticed her at any of the tables, hadn't noticed her entering. She had thought she could see everyone from where she was seated but apparently not.

"I was just talking about you the other day, I swear it, wondering how you were doing." The woman speaks with a rising intonation, a question.

"I'm fine. How are you?" She struggles for the name of the woman's spouse. "How's Russ?"

"We're wonderful. Things are fabulous. They couldn't be better. We're getting our business and personal affairs in order to take a

month off and go hike El Camino Santiago, you know, The Way of St. James in Spain. It's a journey that's been taken by pilgrims for thousands of years and is supposed to change your life."

"For the better?"

The woman laughs. "For the better, of course."

"For the better or for the worse, it's sometimes indistinguishable at first." Athine's restraint becomes an inscrutable impassivity.

"Russ decided we had to do it after he saw the film *The Way*. You should see it if you haven't."

"I've seen it."

"A man's son dies hiking the trail so he hikes it for him, taking his son's ashes along."

"Yes, I know the film," she reiterates. "I liked it. I know you'll have a wonderful experience."

"Have you read Paulo Coelho's *The Pilgrimage*? Russ was convinced by the movie. I was convinced by the book."

"I've heard of it but I haven't read it."

"If you ever think of taking the walk yourself, you must read it. You should read it even if you're not thinking of taking the walk yourself."

No, she wouldn't be hiking El Camino Santiago. No, she wouldn't be reading Paulo Coelho.

"I'll keep it in mind, Gill."

She had no intention of seeking approval or intimacy.

When they had met, she hadn't liked the name Gill. For some reason, she had never liked any individual she had met who bore the name. She knew her prejudice was irrational and unfair toward all the Gills of the world and was uncertain if her predisposition to not liking Gills had subtly influenced their attitude toward her for the worse.

Then they had become friends and she had forgotten not liking the name Gill.

The first Gill she'd ever known had been in fourth grade, a girl with curly blond hair, scornful of her for no reason she could ever divine, as if it was destined, who she always remembered as dressed in a navy blue dress with a white collar and a red-and-white polka-dot tie.

It was unfair how first impressions could last a lifetime. Upon their first face-to-face meeting, even when she wished otherwise,

some people might not feel comfortable with her, they might need to become used to her, which she'd not practiced but had found, when young, to be safe. Distance was preferable.

"We were hiking the Appalachian Trail. The Way will be easy in comparison, physically I mean."

"I would think all hiking has the potential to be a life-altering pilgrimage."

"If enlightenment is as accessible as that, then why not spend a month walking down to the end of the block and back?"

They hadn't been friends, then they were for a month or three, a friend of whom she'd been cautious. So, had they ever been friends. Sometimes it was fairly easy to recollect the timelines. Sometimes it wasn't. They were scrambled and incomplete.

Everything collapses eventually. Friendships. Ends came gently and slowly, or hard and fast. Sometimes gently and quickly, or with great difficulty and for a protracted period.

Every individual walks away with a little part of one's story. Their story. What may or may not be one's story. Not at all one's story. One had to release and let go of all those stories over which one had no control.

"Oh," Athine laughs, "you're expecting to return not just with a life-altering experience but enlightened." Even as she speaks, watching herself through the woman's reaction to her, she considers if this is confrontational to the point of pugilistic, rather than exacting, but it isn't a departure from her typical banter.

She has tried to be amenable.

She knows amenability can backfire and so she doesn't try too hard.

"Well, they're one in the same I think."

"Does The Way come with a guarantee so that you can get your money back if you're not satisfied?"

"Of course the right attitude is everything." Her remark is stepped over. "Besides, The Way has a spiritual heritage. I'm not saying the Appalachians aren't lovely—I love them, I've written a number of articles about my travels in them—but visiting a cement block Baptist church or picking up a magic candle at the metaphysical store isn't going to be the same event as the Notre Dame Cathedral. America isn't old enough, it hasn't the sense of ancient spirits."

The coy nature of their conversations. The same coyness that had been in the past is there in the present and she feels she cheats herself by any pretense of amenability.

"Haven't the Americas been inhabited for nearly twenty thousand years? Maybe longer?"

"It's not the same. They're newer here, the spirits, unorganized and placental, like a building constructed of green, raw wood instead of ancient stone. I've walked the maze at Notre Dame and it has no relationship to the canvas maze the Unitarian church rolls out once a month. We don't have the benefit of thousands of years of culture here. No matter how many skyscrapers are thrown up, we're still the equivalent of a frontier colony on Mars."

"I suppose you're going to write about your pilgrimage."

"Yes."

"Do spirits precede or follow humans?"

"Well, they precede," the woman answers, but her eyes flicker a momentary glitch in her certainties. "Of course, they precede. They are everywhere, in everything."

"Then what makes the difference from one continent to another? Why would they be raw and green here and ancient in Europe?"

"People who go on time-honored pilgrimages in Europe don't disappear into the wilds or die like that poor soul in Alaska who has gained so much notoriety. You've heard of him, certainly?"

The woman had paused, intentionally, before the word *disappear*. She was making a point.

She was referring to a young man who had starved to death on a remote bus in which he'd lived for several months.

Athine recollects more clearly now a conversation they'd had, many years prior, which had wound down a different path toward the subject of Christopher McCandless, a person beyond reach of themselves and the world, whom neither had met and had nothing to do with them, yet was a discreet third angle of a now irrefutable triangle which had been present in the conversation from its beginning and was now confirmed by his admission.

He was the substitution conforming an invisible other, much like the proxy scapegoat. But then how many relationships and conversations were constructed entirely of metaphoric angles serving as shadow substitutes never to be openly addressed. Veils upon veils that may never be comprehended as mirrors.

"I thought we were discussing a movie in which Martin Sheen hikes The Way because his movie son died in a snow storm while he was walking it," Athine says.

They are on opposite sides of an invisible line that marks the difference between with and against. As with most individuals who end up standing on opposite sides of that line, she didn't always have a clear idea why and how it ever happened, only that it did, sometimes upon a very first meeting, before any exchange of words. She and the other might stand upon the line for a while and only later migrate to one side or another, into empathy or antipathy. She and the woman make a pretense of behaving as though they aren't on opposite sides of the line, but they are. Nearly everyone is on one side or the other of this line or on their way to one side or the other. In the spirit of attempting to find common ground, there are often several such lines in a relationship, but with she and this other woman there is only this one line between them that has everything to do with social alliances and Athine being long out of favor with the powerful.

"That's fiction," the woman points out. "The Alaskan tragedy was real life."

"McCandless." Athine pulls the name out of thin air.

"That's the name, McCandless. I've read that visiting the McCandless Alaska death camp has become a popular pilgrimage for many Europeans."

"Are you saying their pilgrimage to his camp is their version of The Way?"

"It's a mystifying corruption of The Way, isn't it? He's been transformed into a veritable hero, even a saint, a martyr, for divorcing himself from civilization and starving to death. One can't compare deluded self-sacrifice and real spiritual experience. There's no equivalency."

"No equivalency."

Athine could be wrong, but she doubted any American Indians made the pilgrimage out to the bus in the Denali wilderness.

"Do you imagine he was mentally ill and suicidal?" the woman asks.

In the asking is a challenge.

"How should I know to judge?"

"Isn't it preposterous he should be awarded the status of a

modern prophet or messiah?"

"Many of the supposed Christian saints and martyrs are equally preposterous."

"Well, some places have a deadly, self-deluding energy and attract people who are susceptible to self delusion. That isn't The Way."

"I can't judge McCandless, but for those who make the pilgrimage to his bus, it seems he's their Actaeon who saw Artemis naked in the wood and paid the consequence for it."

Or maybe he'd run into a two-faced cannibal spirit who took its time feeding off him. Perhaps he'd met it years before the few months of his prophet-like sojourn in the cleansing wilderness. From what she'd read (and she had read about him, of course she had read about him, several times, occasionally seeking any new information that may have come to light, that would make sense of what had happened for once and for all, that would remove any question of what had been accidental) he was in a number of wilderness misadventures that he was lucky to survive before his ill-fated journey to Alaska.

He had departed the road. Crossed over a river that was later impassable.

But she'd no desire to continue, with this woman, a conversation that she would never normally have initiated with her, not after they were no longer supposed friends.

She was ready to be at the studio.

"What do you plan to write?" she asks. "An article? A book?"

"I'll come back with enough material for a book."

"Will it be fiction or non-fiction?"

"I haven't decided yet. I've always written non-fiction. Maybe non-fiction."

"Fiction. You've already decided what you'll write."

"Of course I know what I'm going to write about. I'm going to write about The Path."

"Whatever you write it's going to conform with your expectations, however you think the journey should be," Athine says. "You already have the plot in mind. That doesn't allow for nature to get a word in edge-wise."

"You always have been a contrarian, playing the Devil's Advocate."

"You know me, Gill, I'm just rude sometimes, often unintentionally so."

You know me. No, you don't know me. I don't want you to know me.

Would the first humans on Mars find spirits there? Would they feel their presence on the mountains, in the storms? When they scaled Olympus Mons, would they face Zeus on his sky throne, Hera at his side? Or would it be barren, without cause for either Wakinyan or Elohim.

"Then it's like a disability or a personality defect rather than honesty," Gill laughs.

"I didn't mean to get into this involved a discussion. I should have just wished you a wonderful time and left it at that."

"I don't know what you're talking about. We ought to make plans to get together sometime, maybe after we return from our trip."

They both know this will not happen. The brief friendship they'd had many years beforehand had only been due Athine's misinterpreting information gathering for a mutual concern. Which would never be admitted. Most people on opposite sides of the line that marked for or against never allowed that such a line existed and determined all their actions.

"I hope you have a wonderful trip."

The conversation continues in the wrong direction in all the right, expected ways.

"You moved away for a while, didn't you? Out of town?"

"No, I didn't move out of town," Athine says.

"How's Jacob?"

She probably knows already how Jacob is. Athine knows that she would.

"We're no longer together but he's fine."

"I knew you weren't together. For some reason I thought you'd moved away for a while after your marriage broke up, maybe it's because we never run into you."

"I'm still around."

"That's good."

She was at a loss as to how to respond to that.

"How are Alex and Maja?"

"They're good. They're fine."

"They'd be full-fledged adults now. I probably wouldn't recognize them if I passed them on the street."

"Probably not."

"I never could decide if Alex took after you or Jacob. He changed day to day like a little chameleon."

"Alex takes after Alex."

"Do you have a photo?"

Athine takes out her phone and flicks to a recent photo of Alex and Maja sent to her by Alex. Complying because it is less trouble than not.

"Imagine! That's Alex and Maja? I feel so old now. Alex has his own look, I see what you mean, but he has Jacob's nose and his build. Maybe your eyes and cheekbones." The pleasure of Athine recognized in her children will not be had in this conversation. "Odd as it may sound, Maja always reminded me of Helen, probably because of her light hair, but something in her disposition as well."

Athine puts her phone away. Her breath subtly quickens.

"I know you're proud of them."

"I am," Athine says.

"Of course. Aren't all parents proud of their children? At least they say they are."

Athine's throat clenches.

"Well, I should be getting along," the woman says, even as Athine opens her mouth to say the same.

"I should be," Athine echoes.

"It was wonderful seeing you again."

"I'm glad you're doing well."

"How are you? You didn't say."

"I didn't? I'm fine."

The woman lingers.

"And everything?" she asks.

"Going well," Athine answers.

"Have we left anything out? Who knows when we'll run into each other again."

"I don't think so."

What has been left out since they last spoke? Everything. The rape of her daughter when she was nineteen. The bullying of her son and his automobile wreck. The powerlessness of her being

unable to protect them. The millions and millions of people who have everything and nothing to do with their lives, who coagulate the world out of which she and her children and their father have been formed and in which they have carved a niche that isn't static and firm but ever in danger of collapsing, disintegrating already no matter constant reparations, and neither Maja nor Alex aware yet of this because the seasons are still novel and cycling in place rather than moving down the road, they still mistaking existence for permanence. Even though ten years beforehand they were not at all as they are now, were but children, with their initiation into the realm of youthful adults it seems to them they have crossed a threshold into a place of frozen and everlasting virtues. They are as the unborn gods, never to change. And so they think, too, of their parents, though a generation removed and thus more primal and less vigorous progenitors of their everlasting youth. Cronus who is reluctant to retreat from his place of power, but must always regurgitate the children he's devoured and be muted with infertility, is their grandfather, and the castrated Uranus and his partner Gaia, even more remote, the great-grandparents who never entered their lives but as sky and earth, as space and matter, 0 and 1.

"Oh, I know what I wanted to ask about," the woman, having taken a step away, turns and says. "Have you had any news?"

The woman already knows there has been no news. Had there been news, it would have traveled.

"No."

"How many years has it been?"

The heart quickens with the breath. She's cold. Hot. Shivers. Her underarms sweat. Her body speeding forward toward a cliff, she tries to bring it under control before she pitches over the edge but fails. Panic. She is freefalling, directionless. The woman standing before her, she knows, is unable to see she is in the dizzying, stomach-dropping, nauseating whirl, distracted by her adept mask of detached calm.

As she controls her breath it only elastically stretches to eternity the time with which she has to monitor the untenable.

One must learn to live with the untenable, to suffer and withstand that which can't be endured, the questions for which there are no answers, this is how she and everyone else are alike--the woman standing before her, the baristas and patrons of the

coffee shop, everyone in the parking lot, the pedestrians in the crosswalks, coming and going, those in their cars and those on foot navigating their way from one point to another. They must learn to tolerate co-existence with the shadow of the untenable, unimaginable unknown.

2

THE
SILENCE
OF THE
SINGING
BONE