

EMBARKATIONS (OR, BOATING FOR BEGINNERS): A NOVEL

by

Marcos L. Martínez

A Thesis

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of

Master of Fine Arts

Creative Writing

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## **DEDICATION**

To my muses this time:  
Wayne,  
Cindy, and  
Richard.  
For you, because of you.

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## ABSTRACT

EMBARKATIONS (OR, BOATING FOR BEGINNERS): A NOVEL

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In this contemporary recasting of the Great Flood, two couples—Noah and his wife Sarah, Abel and his husband Caine—board Noah’s boat for their usual Fourth of July jaunt. Smooth sailing until Noah and Caine, two married men who have been friends for over a decade, discover comfort in one another’s arms and engage in an affair that affects all their lives. Trouble ensues. Climate change, melting glaciers, broken ice sheets all conflate: the world’s tides rise as these two marriages flounder. In this newly deluged world, how will any of their relationships survive? While *Embarkations* circles around two men embarking on an affair, this book is less about sexual identity and more about two souls who find comfort in one another. At its heart, *Embarkations (or, Boating for Beginners)* is a love story set in a drowning world.



## PART I: THE BOOK OF CAINE

Flood myths are very potent things; humankind can't resist them. I knew this was going to happen right from the start. Don't you know that men always pee on the fire? That's why they were sent out to hunt in the old days, and much more sensible it was too; but now, have you ever known anyone have the power and not use it?

*Boating for Beginners* – Jeanette Winterson

## CHAPTER 1: TO THE LIGHTHOUSE

The Joan of Ark pitched its song endlessly as we scudded towards the Bay Bridge. We felt Whitman's "Ships at Sea" working under our bare heels, the roiling motion, the ebb and flow and long pulsation as we set out onto the Chesapeake Bay where the waters had risen five feet in a year. July 4, 2020. We left River Run Marina that morning, dropped off Jonah at Camp Potomac, then headed towards a harbor off Edgewater for a better view of the fireworks. Rain, thunder, lightning all last night had given way and cleared the sky to a bright clean blue. Blue as Noah's eyes, pale as the cloudless sky on this sunlit afternoon.

Earlier, while our spouses loaded supplies and prepped the boat, Noah and I led Jonah up past the cattails and paw paw trees to Camp Potomac. Through the forest—the thin-needled loblolly pines, the mitten-leaved sassafras, tall white cedar, short shadbush—the path shifted from reedy banks to clumps of ferns unfurling amidst fallen leaves. As the path unwound its way higher towards firmer ground, I felt a sudden surge: I should have been a father.

Affection welled-up as Jonah walked alongside us, his bright red hair bobbing among the leaves, and I imagined him to be the son my husband Abel and I had always intended having. The son we'd put off adopting ten years ago after Sarah and Noah had tried and miscarried three times.

“Uncle Caine,” Jonah said to me as we crossed the fort-like camp gate, “I’ll play the drums around the campfire tonight. If you hear drums, it’s cause I’m thinking of that poem you read to me.”

Marching to the beat of a different drummer—step to the music you hear no matter how far away. Was that the one? Or was it Beat! beat! drums! – blow! bugles! blow!?! Thoreau? Whitman? I couldn’t remember. So many poems I’d read to Jonah by the time he’d turned nine.

“That’s great, buddy. I’ll keep an ear out for those drums.”

We scuttled Jonah over to camp, waved farewell, and I found it hard to believe we wouldn’t see the little guy again ‘til the next day, long after all the fireworks.

Fireworks.

As we made our way back down the path to shore, Noah stopped at a sycamore tree, plucked one of its seed leaves, the small twin ovals quivering in his fingers. “I love how these float to the ground,” he said, “the way the leaves act like little helicopter blades.” He handed the propeller seed leaf to me, and as our fingers met, the leaf fell in the air between us, got caught up in a slight breeze, rose up eye-level. Our eyes locked as our hands clasped together.

There are moments when the world shifts underfoot, when tides deluge land. As we stood among cordgrass, Noah smiled, reached over and hugged me. Our necks pressed tightly against one another, like cranes embracing. We held each other beneath the foliage, knowing we’d need to let go, needed to get back to our spouses, needed to step away from whatever strange new shore lay ahead of us.

We motored the dinghy back to the Joan of Ark, weighed anchor with our spouses, propelled past the cove, and made our way just around the bend from Keel Island, past where High Island once rose. High Island had already washed itself out and sunk underwater. Big Island had begun to erode away, while Small Island still held itself above the water's surface despite the earthquake that struck the Mid-Atlantic a few years back. The earthquake that Noah had insisted had deluged and drowned High Island.

“But Noah, what about the polar icecaps?” I'd asked. The melting of Antarctic glaciers, couldn't that raise troubled waters? “Mightn't there be some other cause and effect?” Some reciprocity of reverberations, some shifting of tides not fully accounted for? Some other reason the Chesapeake Bay now sprawled farther out than it once did?

Water water everywhere. Sunken islands, receding coasts. The Bay no longer lay as it did when Abel and I first boarded Noah's other boat over a decade ago. The Chesapeake no longer churned in tight eddies. It now swirled and spanned a semi-un-landed expanse that blurred the difference between the Atlantic Ocean and the Bay.

“It's hard to say,” Noah had acquiesced. “Tides swell and subsume. Continental plates graze and bust apart.”

Bodies meet then break away. Both above and below the nautical horizon, earth shifts.

“Can't always tell how things will flow. How they'll get swallowed up,” he said.

But for now, we scudded towards the Bay Bridge as Noah throttled and thrust the boat deep into the Chesapeake. The fiberglass white prow of the Ark rose from the water as the wake behind us attracted seagulls desperate for an upscooping of fish shoals. We

rushed past schooners, tall ships, flocks of sailboats, a yawl rig. We arrived at Thomas Point Lighthouse just before noon.

Sally below, fixing drinks in the galley.

Abel and I next to Noah: three men abreast against the salt breeze.

Two looming cargo ships bloated the horizon, a jumbled geometry of black and steel jutting from waves to sky.

Then: just past Thomas Point Lighthouse, the engines gave out. We slowed.

Then: the Ark trolled along, at sailboat speed now. Sally jangling her turquoise earrings and bracelets as she came up from below deck. Startlingly beautiful with her wine dark hair, the electric green of her hazel eyes, the cutting tone of her voice: “Noah? What’s wrong? We’re not there already, are we?”

“Oh, shit,” he said. “Boat controls again.” He cast his blue eyes across the Ark’s console. His calloused carpenter’s fingers flicked switches and pressed reset buttons. He took a drag from his cigarette then tried the engines again.

Nothing.

The waves sloshed against the hull as we teetered ever slower. Row, row, row. Drift gently down stream. Merrily, steadily, drunkenly, wantonly, touch is but a— dream? The Ark downshifted its endless tune; its engine’s cadence mellowed as we altered course.

“We’ll have to turn around,” he said. “Can’t risk heading out to Edgewater like this.”

“The boat controls have been on the fritz lately,” Sally told Abel and me before darting her gaze at her husband. “I figured you’d have it all fixed by now.” She could’ve had his head on a platter with the glare she flung his way.

“Well, I’ve asked Pete at the marina to research what’s the best replacement.”

“Pete? Hell! We’ll be lucky to have new controls next decade. By then the whole East Coast will be underwater. Dammit!”

“We’ll just make our way back towards the marina, anchor up in the cove close to Camp Potomac, settle in for a spell. That way we can dinghy over and pick Jonah up in the morning.”

Now we’d never make it to the Bay Bridge, let alone the far harbor. The bridge wasn’t even our destination, just a speedy rush through water, a joy-ride, a lark. Now we wouldn’t get to see the fireworks from Edgewater, would have to moor at a distance, between Keel Island and the Smithsonian Preserve.

A failed trip leading to an unexpected journey.

When we embarked the Ark this morning, two by two (Noah and Sally, Abel and Caine), we all boarded not knowing that later—past the bobbing waves and Fourth of July fireworks, deep into the afterglow of evening—only you and I would emerge, Noah. Your wife, exhausted, had drifted to sleep below deck. My husband was also asleep having reached the end of his line for the night, leaving you and me exposed under the full moon’s glare and the occasional blaze from some leftover spark of gunpowder, just enough glow to guide us towards each other.

And there are coasts and strands and rifts and waves and riptides and backwashes and currents and tentacle-fine filaments of things I try to remember but they drift waft swirl away and back towards memory. Buoyant as a dream.

The last waking eddies, shoals, and shudders of a dream.

When we reached across one another, on the grooved white bow of your boat, after the fireworks had settled, we ignited something. The soot-filled sky hung heavy with sulphur, aluminum, phosphorous, magnesium, and zinc: propellant, sparks, glow, brilliance, and smoke. We thought: what a waste of light and horizon, what a waste of beauty and possibility, what an obscuration of the full moon and stars, constellations racing and swirling about us as the boat nestled and settled.

And we drifted.

Our fingers wandered, seeking out some semblance of ourselves, trying to feel out that warped mirror we saw in the water earlier that day, looking over-deck, searching out jellyfish—better forewarned than stung—and seeing some dizzied vision of ourselves wavering across the waves. And it was like that, touching one another, fingering out the furls of fur swirling around nipples, fetching us forward, guiding us downward, happy trail circling around navel and further. South.

Your right hand stroked my nipples, grazed my belly, glanced across that sensitive spot just above the leftmost edge of my waist and I flinched. A shooting star darted west to east. Then I echoed your motions. Fingers along waistlines, swimtrunks unknotted, you rung back around again and I relaxed, eased open.

“Our spouses,” you said. “I don’t want to hurt our spouses. I don’t want Abel to catch us and wallop me.”

“He wouldn’t.” Why should he care? After all, he’d hardly touched me in the two years since we’d officially gotten married: a Spring Equinox wedding, with you as our best man.

“Sally, Jonah—what would they think?” You didn’t want to capsize your family. “And I don’t want to destroy our friendships. All four of us.”

“I don’t want that either,” I said. “You and Sally and Jonah all mean the world to me.”

But the world was changing, waters rising. And all the while we spoke, our hands drifted over one another.

Then you swirled back about like waves sloshing slowly along the slurried edge of the shore and that next time I grew still and hard and hungry and wanted you to circle back and you did, lower and lower, past the edge of swimtrunks. And I massaged your chest, gripped you tight under my fingers, fur and nipples and pecs and breastplate heaving under my palm, and so I thought fuck-it and swerved my body across you, moored my lips onto your right nipple, your chest-hair rough on my tongue as I flicked and kissed and suckled.

The faintest moan uncurled beneath your sigh as you stretched your body open, welcomed me.

And despite the stiffness along my neck and shoulder brought on by throwing my back out a couple of weeks ago while wrenching the dinghy out of the water onto the



dock—despite the twinge of nerve pain—I leaned across you, rested the weight of my torso on my left forearm as I took you into my mouth. Swallowed you. Your calloused palm stroking the back of my head, massaging my neck, your fingers working their way down my spine past my waist, your hand cupping me, fingers slipping between my cheeks.

Then as I came up for air our hands groped one another. We stroked each other in time with the splash and jostle of waves swaying the boat.

Afterwards: the two of us spent, the taste of you rich as a spray of bay-water diluted by a fresh rainstorm, our lips met, the menthol tang of nicotine thick on your mustache.

Then I lay my head on your chest, your arms gripped tight around me, my pulse beating and thumping like a drum, my heart thudding so goddamned fast I figured it would burst or leap or give flight to some new unfathomable creature that beat its wings as heavy as the drumbeats bouncing off the water calling to us from Camp Potomac across the waves.

## CHAPTER 2: THE RUBE-GOLDBERG EQUATION

Was everything OK between them since that crazy, fumbled night two weeks ago when they'd lain naked on the bow of Noah's boat? Something still sparked between them, yes. But how the hell to ask such a simple question?

"What is it?" Noah asked. "Spit it out – you can ask anything. Say anything."

"Are we good?" Caine pointed from Noah's chest to back to his own, an uneven falter and uptilt to his voice.

"Aww, Caine," Noah said. He smiled, then reached over and grabbed Caine, slipped him tight towards his own self, their heights flat even. Noah's calloused fingers rubbed rough yet soothing along Caine's ribcage and lats. What couldn't be good about this wonder of wonders of? Touch.

And yet, and yet.

"I was worried I took advantage of you," Caine said. And what did that even mean, advantage? A move forward, a caress. A fingering, palming, and groping ahead. To what end?

"Took advantage of me?" Noah laughed, a low muffled chuckle that anyone else might have mistaken for a scoff. A laugh Caine found warm. A laugh that made him glow. Caine drowned himself in it. "Sure, we had a few drinks." But nothing slurred,

Noah insisted. Caine hadn't *turned* him. "I knew what I was doing. What *we* were doing."

"I want to explore this," Caine said. This swirling, swelling thing – how to push this further? He pressed his index finger back and forth between their chests again, ribcages tight and close, muscles tensed beneath shirts as they stood by the bar in Noah's finished basement.

"I'm worried. My wife, your husband," Noah said. "I don't want to unravel it all. And I don't want to lose half my stuff." Their martinis glinted and refracted the overhead halogen lights. Fractals danced between their eyes, sparkled from blue to brown and back again.

"I want to see what's there. Spend some time – just the two of us – and see what's *here*."

Noah smiled, his copper-golden mustache glinting the light. He pressed Caine closer, then released him. Took a sip of his martini.

"You could come over sometime, before you head out to the marina," Caine said.

"Oh yeah? What about Abel?" Their shoulders brushed up against one another.

"He's not around most mornings past eight. Just call ahead." Caine lifted his martini, got caught up in Noah's azure eyes, set his glass back on the bar, unable to take a sip. "Or Thursday – you could swing by anytime Thursday. I'm off. We could spend the day together. Hang out. See what happens."

"Thursday, huh?" Noah said. "Thursday might be bad. I'm not sure. We'll see." He took another sip from his martini.

“So, did he call?” asked Dr. Goldberg as Caine sat in his therapist’s office in Georgetown.

“No.”

Thursday came and went. Then that Saturday, he and Noah drew back close to one another on the Ark.

“I don’t want an affair,” Noah said.

“Affair?” Caine responded. He let go of Noah’s calves for a brief moment, stood still and penned Noah in against his captain’s chair. Who said anything about an affair, Caine wondered. Wait – affair? How did they even come to this subject? “I don’t want that either.”

As Noah took a drag from his cigarette, the serene milky blue hue of his eyes darted away from Caine. Their spouses lay out on the water, rafted away from them, far enough to see but not hear. Noah and Caine drew close but not too close. Hidden by benches and bulwarks, their hands tensioned away from and towards each other: bodies like magnets whose poles flip and slip and switch, poles that attempt to repel but then pull near and draw one another tight close. The salty air hovered taut between them.

“But I enjoy touching you,” Caine said. “And I think you enjoy that too.”

“I do.”

“I just figured you could come over, hang out, let whatever happens happen. Or not. No pressure. Besides, I like it when you touch me.”

“I like that too. But I don’t want to lose half of my stuff.”

“No,” Caine repeated to Dr. Goldberg, “he didn’t call. Which makes me think I’m the idiot in all this. And yet every time we’re together, we gravitate towards one another. Touch. Kiss. Hold.”

“Ah, mixed signals. So what I’m hearing is: you need clarification. You need clear delineations in your relationship with Noah. You need to set parameters.”

Dr. Goldberg uncrossed his legs, raised his head up from the notes he’d been jotting down on a green-lined spiral notepad. A beam of afternoon sunlight managed to slip past the dark wood blinds and penetrate the room; the light caught Goldberg’s gold-rimmed glasses and illuminated his blue eyes. Not the rich, deep blue of Noah’s eyes. Still, Caine had never noticed his therapist’s eyes before, and even this minor glint of sun upon irises steered him back to his longing for Noah.

Goldberg leaned forward. “I think the simplest solution would be for you to *not* spend time alone together.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” A sigh. The thought of not touching Noah undid him. “But I don’t want that.”

“Wants versus needs. You need to weigh wants against needs. Do you *need* Noah or do you each need to salvage your marriages?”

Silence. Even the traffic off Wisconsin Avenue seemed to draw to a stop.

“You’re right.” Caine paused, pressed his index finger to his lips. “But how are we supposed to *not* be alone with each other? Abel and I hang out with Sally and Noah

all the time. There are just these ... moments when Noah and I happen to hover in the same space, with no one else around: the basement, the den, the kitchen. His office, the patio, his garage. The yard. Hell, don't even get me started on the boat. You'd think a 38-foot boat would offer less privacy than a three-and-a-half-story house, but it's the opposite. And when we're alone it just feels so natural to reach out, for our fingers to weave together."

"Let's put this another way. Look at it from a different perspective. Think of it as a formula – an equation if you will:

*An infinite number of indiscretions + 1 dalliance discovered = \_\_\_\_\_?"*

"OK. I get it. All it takes is getting caught one time and there'd be hell to pay. But I just figured we could find some other way, chart some course that's different from before."

"And if you *were* caught, who do you think would be hurt the most?"

"Well, Sally. She'd never forgive me. Never forgive either of us. And hurting Sally would hurt Noah, which would destroy Jonah's world. And losing them would hurt Abel. And me. But it would all come crashing down on *me*. *My* fault. Shit!" Caine needed to chart a new course, try to predict future tides, stray away from cliffs and calamities, secure safe harbor.

"OK. So hold onto that. Keep that as a horizon, a mapping of cause and effect and keep yourself anchored. Harbor your emotions away."

### CHAPTER 3: THE CREST AND CRASH OF WHITE CAPS

It was never the boat.

“Caine, sweetheart,” Sally said, “what’s it gonna take for you to be comfortable on the boat?”

She and Caine lay listless on the new raft her sister Naomi had gotten her as an early birthday present. “It’s a Floating Island – room enough for four!” Sally had exclaimed as they first inflated the raft that July Fourth afternoon. On the raft, as the warm Bay waters swirled about them, she and Caine tossed-back their iced-tea vodkas. He massaged her temples; the crimson strands of her hair lay all wet and clumped up, reminding him of the red-tide seaweed that shored up along the South Texas Gulf Coast beaches of his youth.

“It’s not about the boat. I mean, I get seasick easy enough – you know that. But the Dramamine’s made a huge difference.” How to skirt past the issue? After all, he’d been set for the Naval Academy, would’ve spent a lifetime on boats and seas and. Men. That was the trouble. Back before Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, when being gay without having gay sex was enough to expel any military academy cadet. No, he’d decided to be true to himself, true to his heart, not hide who he was, not flinch away from desire. But the could’ve beens and should’ve beens of Annapolis still haunted him, lurked and slurried

about him, lapped against his dreams at night. By night. By water. Noah Artemio Bywater.

It was never the boat.

“Well I’m glad the Dramamine has helped,” Sally said. “But it’s been nearly a decade since we first invited you onto the Joan of Ark. And you’re still more likely to stay below deck reading a book than join us out here on the water.”

“Yeah, well, you know me. I like my quiet downtime.”

“Is it the water? I know you can float. I’ve seen you float on your back.” She eyed him the way a heron eyes an approaching skiff. “You *can* swim, right?” She fluttered her fingers across the water the way a seagull might grace the surface. “Wait – don’t you like swimming?” She took a sip from her drink, darted her focus away.

“Noah!” she shouted. “Cigarette!”

“I can swim,” Caine told her. “Hell I used to be on the swim team in high school.” He shifted his gaze from the Smithsonian Preserve towards the stern of the Ark, anticipated Noah’s approach. “Granted, I wasn’t very good. But I can swim. It’s just—”

“Just... The company?”

“No, of course not. I love you guys.”

“Well, what am I to make of it? I don’t have fingers enough to count the number of times you’ve cancelled on us.”



Boat outings proposed, accepted, then abandoned. Of course, Abel hadn't helped matters, having always wanted to go on the boat, blaming Caine for the cancellations, never understanding why. Never knowing it was never the boat.

"I'm sorry," Caine said before taking a sip of his cocktail. "I know, I get weird sometimes. It's just ..."

"Just what? Spit it out. I'm listening."

It was never the boat.

"Just that I'd rather swim in a clear blue chlorinated pool, you know? See what I'm dealing with and all. Be able to touch bottom from time to time without worrying what all is swirling around me."

"Ah – jellyfish and murk. Well I can appreciate that. God knows I've hounded Noah for years: 'A pool! All I want is a pool! It can be one of those little infinity pools, I don't care, just get me a pool.' What's he do instead? Buys an ever bigger goddamned boat."

"Is that why the old boat is still sitting in your driveway?" Paint all flaked off. Hull rotting and rusting away.

"You bet your ass. If I can't get a pool, I'm keeping the old boat. Noah can kiss my ass if his big blue Ford doesn't fit in the driveway 'coz *my* boat's in the way."

Noah approached, leaned over the gunnel. “Uh-oh – my ears are burning.” He passed Sally a lit cigarette. “Am I in trouble again?” he asked in a half-joking tone, his copper hair catching the sunlight in sparks.

“Whaddya think,” Sally said as she winked. “Thanks for the cigarette. It’s about time.”

“Aargh!”

“Ha!” she laughed. “You’re so easy!”

“Where’s Abel?” Caine asked, aiming to distract, hoping to still the waters.

“Taking a nap inside,” Noah replied as he scratched the thick tuft of golden-red hair on his belly. “I think it’s about time for me to get in the water,” he said as he clambered up onto the gunnel. “Cannonball!” He leapt into the air – curled his knees into his chest – and splashed into the Bay, spraying Sally and Caine with water.

“Goddammit! My cigarette!” Sally shrieked.

“It’s OK – I salvaged your drink,” Caine said as he handed her the tumbler he’d lidded with his palm.

“Well at least *one* of you is good for something.”

It was never the boat.

Noah frolicked in the water a bit, his arms chopping through the waves, broad freckled shoulders rising and falling and glistening pink in the sun. He swam out a length

towards the shore, then lapped his way back onto the boat, dried himself off, then strapped on a life-vest and headed out on the dinghy.

“Great! He’s off again,” Sally said. “I just don’t understand.” She sighed, defeated.

“Did you talk to him? I mean, about last weekend and all?”

During their last boat trip, Noah had taken off on the dinghy and stopped to talk with one, two, three neighboring boat captains. Friends, strangers, it hardly mattered. Sally had fumed and pouted all afternoon ‘til she cried.

“Oh, we had it out. I just don’t get it, why he so readily leaves and ignores me. The least he could do is invite me along.”

“But sweetie,” Caine interjected, “I’ve gotta say—you don’t much enjoy going on the dinghy. And when he gets to talking about boating conditions and best fishing spots, well, you’re not terribly interested, are you?” Not only intolerant, he figured, just plain antagonistic.

“Well, there’s that. But I just— Why can’t he just be happy spending time with me?”

“But he *is* happy spending time with you. And god knows he loves you. I can see it in the way he looks at you. Hugs you. And you’ve gotta admit, half the time you just push him away.”

“Yack yack yack. What are you, a girl? I need my space. What’s wrong with that?! He gets so damned clingy sometimes. Suffocates me.”

And Caine could only wonder at the possibility of what that might be like. His own husband—affectionate enough in his own way—hadn't bear-hugged him in ages, hadn't spontaneously gripped his hand and twirled him around to kiss him, hadn't hardly touched him at all. And those times Caine had tried reaching out to Abel, tried to caress, engage, embrace... Stillness on a good day. A stone cold stillness. But mostly Caine's advances were met with a pat on the back, peck on the cheek, a quick hug undone by Abel's constant pulling away.

Had he grown so flabby, so unattractive, so flaccid and mundane to Abel? Caine knew that time was a factor: after twenty years together, things had simply lulled to a stop. And there was the drop in Abel's hormones. But what was worse was Abel's neglect, his refusal to continue Testosterone treatments, his shrugging off of physical needs. "Do it for me," Caine had pleaded. "Please. Make love to me. Touch me." No response.

It was never the boat.

"Remember that time, some two or three years back, you invited me to spend a few midweek days on the boat?" Caine asked Sally. "Abel was traveling out west for work; Jonah was away at summer camp; it would've been just the three of us, a few nights on the boat..." Caine massaged Sally's temples, her neck, her shoulders; brown fingers fanning along pale skin.

“Oh yeah, I remember. I was disappointed when you cancelled.”

“I know.” He sighed and pulled his fingers away from her. How to explain without telling it all true? “I heard it in your voice, how deflated you were. I’m sorry.” Had he blamed the boat? No. He’d laid a lie. Hungover, he’d insisted, couldn’t make the trip out to the Bay.

“I wasn’t hungover. Was all packed, ready to go.”

“Then why? Why didn’t you join us?”

It was never the boat. Merely the proximity, the closeness, the nearness he’d have to Noah, the fear he’d overstep some invisible boundary and crush their friendships apart like waves crashing and busting up against beachhead, waves pulping rocks into sand. How to explain without overtelling? How to make sense without mucking this all up?

“I don’t know.”

It was never the boat.

“There was this one time Sally invited me onto the boat—just the three of us, midweek, while the Bay lay most quiet,” Caine told Noah. Caine had swung by, knowing full well Sally was away for the week, tending to an aunt in Vermont. He’d simply wanted to talk, to make sense of things. Hadn’t expected things to unravel so readily.

“Um, OK. I can’t say as I recall—” Noah’s eyes glinted bright as lapis lazuli illuminated under the basement halogen lights. His smile warmed Caine’s heart.

“That’s fine. Not really important. The point is, I cancelled. Last minute. Had my overnight bag all packed. Was excited, had been looking forward to the trip. But with Abel out of town and Jonah away at camp... It would’ve been just the three of us for a couple of nights. And then sometime past two in the morning I jolted wide awake and thought, Oh shit! Just the three of us. On the boat. Overnight. No escape. No way out. And what if I do something, reach out towards something, graze my fingers along your clavicle. What if I reach out to caress you against your better leanings. There would be only me and you and Sally: and me bearing all the weight of incursion.”

Yet there they sat, days and months and years and a decade of having known each other later. Transgressions. That bridge had been crossed, the bow of Noah’s boat had cleaved those waters clean apart even as the Ark merely rocked and lulled and swayed while Caine and Noah –Caine and Noah, a fragmentary phrase whose existence had never before been wrought in either’s mind – Noah and Caine had clutched and clung and clasped close to each other’s bodies, unwilling to cleave apart.

It was never the boat. Just Caine Lance Calletano’s fear of breaking vows.

## CHAPTER 4: TWO CONVERSATIONS, FIVE MILES APART

Maybe it was the rain that did us in, that started our spouses wondering. We'd taken your new Golden Labrador, Shiloh, for a walk, let him have the run of his leash out in the open field near the baseball park, the Masonic Temple glowing in the distance like the memory of that ancient Lighthouse of Alexandria.

First a wisp, then a sputter, then a peal of thunder, flash of lightning, a torrent of rain down on us. Poor Shiloh quivering in his soaked golden coat, straining at his leash, hoping to run home and be out of the rain.

"Easy, boy," you told the dog. "No use in running – this rain isn't going away anytime soon. We'll just have to suffer it out." You held him steady, kept us walking at your normal pace, the rain soaking our shirts, our shoulders wet and visible beneath cotton, wet shoulders jostling in the rain as we walked through the neighborhood into your yard.

"When I fantasized about showering with you," I said, "this wasn't exactly what I had in mind."

You laughed, slapped me on the back, wet hand reaching up and squeezing my neck.

Once in the shelter of your back patio, we yanked off our shirts, stood bare-chested as Sally offered us towels, you and me laughing like a couple of kids just come in

from splashing about in the rain. Then you gave me one of your old fishing t-shirts.

“Keep it,” you said. The giving of a shirt, such a small gesture.

Why should this worry our spouses so?

“So I gotta ask,” said Abel, “what’s up with you and Noah?”

We’d settled back home later that night. I paused a second too long, looked up into his green eyes, tilted my head slightly in puzzlement.

“Whadda ya mean?” What could he have seen, I wondered. And even if he saw it, why would he care, or else why not ask me then – at that moment, at your house? And besides, we hadn’t even done anything that night. We just got caught in a sudden downpour.

“I mean you and Noah, tied at the hip. What’s up with that?”

“Tied at the hip? What are you talking about?” After all, we’d been tighter last week as we toasted martinis, Abel and Sally in the kitchen, you and I in the basement when I asked you: “Are we good?” I’d pointed to your chest and mine and smiled.

“Yeah we’re good,” you’d replied, then reached over and held me, slipped me besides you, your calloused fingers rough yet soothing along my ribcage as you sighed my name. In that moment, I felt young and warm and comforted again, the two of us leaning into each other, the way I felt afterwards on the bow of your boat as you held me tight against your chest, my heart flapping like the wings of some unfathomable new creature we’d



created. Then there we were, a week later – making sure all was good between us – and while at the time it seemed to our spouses that nothing had changed, well, in fact everything had changed. So why should Abel notice a change now, weeks after our coupling?

“How exactly are we tied at the hip?” I asked.

“Whenever he walks the dog, whenever he feeds the cats, whenever he’s out in the garage working on one of his projects, there you are, tagging along. Need I go on?”

“Oh, that. Well, I just want Shiloh to get used to my presence – he’s still not trained, you’ve seen that. Same with the kittens, still skittish when we’re around, figure the best time to bond with them is while they’re getting fed. The garage? I’m just curious about his woodworking stuff, wanna see how he pieces things together.” All true. And yet. “Is that OK?”

“Yeah. That’s all fine. I was just wondering. Things seem different between you two.”

Only later would you and I swap stories, on the stern of the boat while Sally and Abel played UNO down below.

“What’s up with you and Caine?” Sally had asked you the same evening Abel had confronted me.

“What do you mean?” I imagined you shrugged your shoulders, gave her that big blue-eyed puppy-dog stare you sometimes have.

“The two of you are so ... chummy all of a sudden. What’s up with that?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” you insisted. “He mentioned you’d asked him what it would take for him to get comfortable with the boat and all. So he’s trying to get comfortable – just learning about the boat.”

“So you’re talking... About the boat?”

“Yeah, you know, the engines and mechanics and function of it all. I guess he’s gotta understand a thing in order to be at ease with it. And he *is* genuinely curious. You know, all that crap you hate hearing me talk about.”

She rolled her eyes. Threw up her hands. “Yes, I know. Bores the hell out of me. Can’t imagine what you and your boating buddies can possibly go on about all day. But if he wants to learn— All right. Sure, whatever. Just ... be careful.”

“Careful? Of Caine? Come on, we’ve known him for ages.”

“I know. I’ve known him a lot longer than you, remember. I just don’t want him getting the wrong idea.”

But ideas are all we have, all we share. Thoughts and memories and occasional embraces.

When you first spoke of not wanting an affair: I didn’t realize then that my asking you to visit, to spend a morning or afternoon with me, the invitation to explore the

possible tendrils of this ... thing ... constituted more than just friends hanging around and feeling our way through. Didn't realize it meant forethought of illicit action, it meant sneaking around and telling our spouses stories, it meant an affair.

And what have we wrought in its place?

Sneaking embraces when we're alone in a room; my fingers massaging your feet on the bow of your boat, fingers creeping up along ankle to calf to the undersides of knees then fanning out along your thighs; laying out on the raft together, holding hands underwater. What sort of newfangled affair do we not imagine we've carved out for ourselves?

## CHAPTER 5: THE SPAR DECK BY STARLIGHT

The four lay on the bow of Noah's Ark, starboard to port they lay sprawled out like this: Abel (58), Sally (52), Noah (48), Caine (40).

Caine: last to join them.

He'd come up from the galley cupping four cocktails, making his way cautiously along gunnel and grab rails.

As he handed everyone their drinks he found the only space left for him was to lie next to Noah.

As Abel, Sally, and Noah watched the swirl and haze of the Milky Way.

As Caine lay down on the spar deck and made sure to keep a few inches of space between his body and Noah's.

As Noah reached his left arm around Caine's shoulder and pulled him in.

There they lay.

Noah with one arm around his wife, another arm around Caine.

Caine rested his head in the crook of Noah's shoulder. Their left hands found each other, gripped one another, danced and stroked and caressed. The heat, Caine was amazed by the heat, as if all the fusion reactions from those distant twinkling stars had filtered down and coalesced into Noah's body.

Caine had always been told his own body temperature ran hot. Even Abel had to wear pajamas to bed as a barrier to Caine's radiant heat, Caine always naked in bed, preferring to let his skin cool itself against sheets or air. Now he finally understood what his own naked embrace must feel like, felt Noah's bare shoulder burn against his cheek, felt the sides of their bodies bake as if all the sunning they'd done during the day had remained transfixed to the surface of their skin. He hadn't remembered Noah's skin feeling so hot on the Fourth of July, hadn't felt his skin so warm during their recent illicit embraces, and he thought Burn, let it burn, let me blaze in this. Their hands still working, fingers massaging palms and wrists, feeling out the tufts of fur on forearms, whole bodies expressed through their hands.

"Well, I better make the beds." Sally broke their reverie. Noah let go and Caine slid half a foot away as Sally rose up from the deck.

"I'll help you," Abel offered and carried both their empty glasses down to the galley.

Noah and Caine sat up, looked out towards the dark water with its wavering reflection of stars and masthead lights. They listened for the galley door to slide closed, could hear their spouses' voices seep out of the open starboard porthole.

No words between them, Caine and Noah simply slid towards one another, wrapped their arms around each other's shoulders. Caine's lips against Noah's neck, cheek, lips. Fingers caressing then pinching nipples; tongues feeding each other's hunger.

Abel's voice from down below deck: "I think it's sweet how close Caine and Noah have become. Don't you?"

"It's fine," Sally's voice wafted up, followed by a heaving sigh. "As long as he doesn't touch my husband."

Caine unclasped Noah, pulled himself apart.

Earlier that evening: Noah had flexed his right shoulder, twisted and stretched out his arm like a seagull flapping its broken wing, unable to take flight.

"You OK?" Caine had asked while Sally puffed on a cigarette and read a magazine.

"Rotator cuff," Noah said. "It's been bugging me for a while – must've strained it while working on the retaining wall project last week."

"Muscle? Or pinched nerve?"

"Not sure. Do you mind working on it?"

Caine had stood next to Noah, massaged his right shoulder, arm, and scapula, could feel the tension in his muscles.

"I'm going to check on Abel," Sally muttered. "You boys behave."

"Mind doing the other side now?" Noah had asked once Caine had worked out a few knots.

"Not at all. Here, let me just settle in." Caine propped himself behind Noah, worked his fingers along Noah's thick neck, both shoulders, massaged his left arm. They could see Sally in the galley, her back to them as she and Abel chatted. Caine pressed his

lips against the back of Noah's neck then wrapped his arms around him. Noah chuckled, caressed Caine's hands as his fingers stroked his chest. And as Sally turned to come back up the steps to join them, they unclasped. Caine merely massaging Noah's left shoulder.

Sally sighed. "OK. I'm uncomfortable now." Her hazel eyes drilled into them both.

Caine patted Noah's back. "All right. I'm stopping. Hope that helped your shoulder."

"Yeah," Noah said. "Feels better. Thanks. Drinks?" He made his way down to the galley to fix another round.

Now: Noah leaned over to get a view of the galley from the deck sunroof. Abel and Sally busy fixing the beds. Noah sat back, pulled Caine back into an embrace, their hands massaging each other's necks as they felt the push and pull and tug of war straining at them both from within and without.

## CHAPTER 6: CANYONS

Mid-August. Sally's birthday. A tense, quiet stillness in the air whenever we were alone, both of us avoiding proximity as if circling a house of cards, afraid one stray breath would topple it all. One stray touch.

Then, after dinner: Sally fed the animals on the third floor as you and I sat on the back patio, shared a cigarette. The rough feel of your fingers brushing up against mine kept jolting me as we passed your cigarette back and forth. Back and forth, touch and graze. Your touch kept shooting electric vibrations through the nerves in my fingertips.

Sally roaming above. We could hear her treading, her path traceable by the squeaking floorboards: from the feral cat she'd recently rescued, to the dove she'd saved from a hawk last year, to the mouse she'd wrenched from her kittens' paws last winter. Meanwhile, Abel too was upstairs reading Jonah a bedtime story. We'd always taken turns – I'd read Jonah poetry, and Abel would share ghost and sports and camping stories – and tonight just happened to be Abel's turn with the little guy.

In the dark lamp-post-lit patio, nestled in the dim balmy silence of late summer – still warm enough for us to wear shorts – I cupped my hand out towards your legs and your left foot sprung up in the air, arched towards me. My fingers rubbed your heel as I drew closer to you. I slid from my patio seat down to the bamboo mat floor, reeled



myself in towards you as you tossed Shiloh his ball. The dog knew well enough to avoid us, ran circles around us, didn't thrust through the bridge we'd newly framed: my hands on both your feet now, working from heels to arches, massaging each toe.

My need to know interrupted the darkness. Was I the only fool in this? Word without echo, call without response? Silly really. I didn't want to be that idiot waiting on an improbable phone call, the desperate one hoping for a ring, yet I was. Waiting.

"Back last month, mid to late July, did you ever think about calling? Did you contemplate, weigh it in your mind, think about the possibilities?" My fingers kept circling your heels, your ankles, brushed up against your calves.

"Yeah, I did," you responded instantly. "I thought, This is *new*, this is *exciting!* I want *more*." Your rush of words startled me, bound me closer. Despite the dimness, I could see your face glow, a smile big as the moon, your blue eyes twinkling a fierce, pale brightness. "Then I thought, Wait – this is *cheating*."

I rubbed and stroked each of your toes in my hands: little pinkies, the lengthening mid-toes, big toes, balls of feet to arches – stroking arches, working and kneading arches. Your face beamed down to me as I worked past heels to ankles and calves, the hair along your legs as thick and rich as my own.

"OK. I just needed to know." Good, I'm not the lone desperate idiot in this I thought as I looked up to your face in the deepening darkness.

And that resolved it all. Kept you from calling. Kept us from coalescing further, stopped us from settling into some eddy of hunger and feed, the slurry of hover and heed,

fingers lingering along ribcages then threading their way about the hair on our chests, nipples, waists, thighs, and all that lies between.

All that lay between us once.

All that lay between us once was nothing but a canyon now, a flat shelf of horizon ripped apart, collapsed, eroded, hollowed out.

Labor Day. Abel and I flew to Utah, spent another reunion with the Blackfield family at a cabin near Cedar City.

“The quakeys,” I said, “I want to see the quakeys. Want to stand amidst an aspen grove.”

So on the drive from Cedar Breaks to the cabin, we pulled over to the side of the road so I could meander among the aspens. Communing with nature, I insisted. Abel walked up a trail that delved deeper into the lava-rock-ringed forest, he took a piss while I wandered from tree to tree, aspen to aspen, envisioning the network of their roots weaving beneath the earth, stretching out for miles, linking grove to grove. I imagined a satellite array of aspen roots linking across the continent.

Pressing my fingertips against their white bark, surprised to discover the rough yet delicate fur of their outer layers, the texture of tree trunks reminding me of your calves your thighs your arms, yes, as I closed my eyes and stood still for a moment – listened to the aspen leaves shimmer and quake the air, fluttering green / silver / green in the breeze – I thought I felt the fur on your muscular thighs, the hair along your firm

arms; even the breaks in the bark – places where tree trunks lay spliced open from broken branches – those rougher sections felt like the callouses of your fingers, palms, and heels.

“Carry a message,” I whispered to the aspens, “ferry word underground along rivers up to the Atlantic Coast, ship the murmur of a kiss to Noah.”

Trees and water, light and air, earth and quakes: I invoked each to each to take this message out to you, tremor it ahead and shimmer my thoughts to your heart, your mind, your soul. Bind us. Join us. Remind us. Tell you: *I wish you were here.*

Later: a walk with nieces and nephews and their kids, strolling along Strawberry Point, snapping pictures of the family against the copper, fuchsia, ochre, magenta backdrop of arches and canyons. I had just returned from the canyon when Sally texted me: *Out on the Bay. Wish you were here.*

Abel joined another branch of the Blackfield clan as they headed out on ATVs, a throng of towheads tearing down the dirt road, off on another adventure. *Wish I was there too*, I texted back Sally. *Miss you all.*

The Bay. Why was my head drifting off to the Chesapeake Bay even as I wandered here among the pines and firs and aspens clustered about the cabin? Why was I longing for those murky grey-green salt-waters when I had a fresh wide-open field of bright green in front of me, a lolling stretch of land sloping down towards a creek then rising back up again, a verdant gradient grappling up to greet the horizon of aspen groves gathered against the sky? Why was I daydreaming of the Bay when I sat surrounded by

the layers and minerals and contours and colors of canyons and arches just a stone's throw and crow's flight away from me?

Then: antelope, a cluster of antelope herding their way down and over the creek, ambling my way until they saw me. Stopped. Nibbled and nuzzled at the grass.

Noah. Must call Noah.

“Hey Caine,” you answered. “How's it going?”

“Good. Just looking out at the aspen trees. There's a herd of antelope staring at me. I keep crouching closer. They're not sure what to make of me.”

“Ha!” Your deep-bellied laugh. “Well, as long as they don't stampede your way.”

“Nah, they seem pretty docile.” A pause. I heard you take a puff of your cigarette, heard the Bay breeze whistle through your copper hair, heard your breath. “So Sally texted that you've made it to the Bay?”

“Yep. Just anchored. Weather's good – a little balmy and sticky, but you know. No storms. Can't complain.”

“Yeah. It's a crisp 67° here. Sky's clear. It's bright, really bright. How's Jonah?”

“Good! He's at Camp. Heck, by the time I anchored, he and his buddies were canoeing back from Keel Island. Good form to his paddlestroke. He's a Bywater through and through.”

“Well, tell him I said howdy.” A sigh. “It's gorgeous out here. But. I wish I was there.”

“Yeah. Me too.” A sudden cacophony in the background, a restless rustle among the antelope: from coastline to canyonland, a quiver and quake and shift. “Ah, duty calls. The taskmaster’s hollering at me. Time to fix drinks for her and Naomi. Listen, enjoy yourself out there, OK? Have a good time.”

Summer winding down. Nearing the Autumnal Equinox. A week since Abel and I had returned from Utah. A week of Sally dodging our calls, too busy or distracted or tired to see us.

Then: a Friday night visit. Martinis, steaks, the gifting over of souvenirs from Utah: quartz, turquoise, sandstone, and a dreamcatcher for Jonah.

Then: Abel playing video games with Jonah while Sally cleared the table and you and I walked your Golden Lab.

Daylight winked away as the gloaming enveloped us. Shiloh frenzied as usual as we worked from cul-de-sac to turf, walking in tandem, steady pace, left foot right foot in sync, the dog prancing between us, there past the baseball field, the sparrows coming to roost among the thick tribe of bamboo as dark weighed in. We leaned into one another, pine trees shuddered about and covered us as our shoulders shrugged and bounced against one another, like magnets attracting and repelling of their own confused accord. And all those suppressed desires between us unfurled.

“I missed you,” I said. A last quiver of sunset drifted dully ahead of the Golden Lab. “I know that sounds stupid, it’s only been a couple of weeks—”

“No, it’s not stupid. I missed you too.” You switched the leash to your left hand, wrapped your right arm around my shoulders, drew me close.

“Did you really? Miss me? You’re not just saying that?” I asked half-teasing but mostly true.

You squeezed my right shoulder as we stopped under the cover of pine and you simply repeated, “I missed you. Am glad to see you.” Your deep voice bore the steady stoicism of someone accustomed to safely guiding ships ashore through squalls.

My left hand wrapped around you, reached for your left hand, the dog’s leash clasped tight between our fingers, until Shiloh stirred and lurched forward, anxious as another neighbor with his dog bolted down the road.

We unclasped slowly, unembraced gently, strode forward away from the green and copper tent of trees, away from the overhang cover and shade of branches, stepped back onto the side of the road, our bodies still close but drifting slowly apart to a respectable distance, Shiloh once again between us and trying to run and cavort past us, your firm calloused hands keeping him at bay, my cadenced steps reminding the dog of how he should follow just a fraction behind your hip, let you lead us ahead.

Later, sitting next to you, cradling against you in your loveseat. “Here’s Cedar Breaks,” I said as I swiped photo after photo before you, naming the minerals that gave each striation its color – iron / manganese / calcium / gypsum / silica / chalk – pointing out the soft dark cover of ash beneath pinyons, the height and depth and breadth of canyons breaking underfoot. “And here’s Bryce Canyon.” Rust-red arches buttressed the cerulean sky. *I thought of you at every spot* I wanted to tell you. But didn’t need to say.

Didn't need to speak. Your knuckles massaging my upper right thigh while I cradled the iPad between us, my right hand caressing the rough rust-dark fur along your inner thigh. So happy. So exquisite. So subtly hidden from view of my husband and Jonah as they sat on the sofa next to us and watched TV, while your wife took a smoke break outside on the patio, our intimacy tight and huddled and secluded from view.

But is anything hidden from view? Do our spouses glean some sense by the look that flares between our eyes? Blue to brown like sky to land or sea to coast. Do they wonder at our incessant proximity? "You all want to come along?" you'd asked of our spouses and Jonah before we'd walked the dog. "Nah" they'd responded. And I'd thought I didn't care but had suddenly found myself relieved. Figured I'd never draw near you out there in the wide-open fields of your youth, neighbors all about, people who had known you and your wife for years, figured we'd never touch out there in the open but I was wrong. And never imagined.

"I never expected this," I'd tell you weeks later.

But hadn't I? Hadn't we been building up to this for years, for a decade?

## CHAPTER 7. THE WAVES

There is no going back to before embarkation. I know that now. And even if there were, I wouldn't want it, wouldn't want to undo the knots and binds we've woven ourselves into.

But I'm trying to put this away.

Trying to set this at bay.

Trying to dock the past.

But it won't.

It flings adrift. Seizes each shift in barometric pressure until it dizzies me, wings itself to the lull and rise of tides—the crest and fall of white caps—surfs and rocks me back to you, Noah.

We've been flirting around the edges of this, skirting past the needs and wants of it all, tracing a line that follows the contours of desire without actually sailing the path.

Aboard the Joan of Ark, the boat you named after your mother, I stand beside you.

You sit on your captain's seat, smoking a cigarette.



And somehow there at the helm our hands meet, ring finger entwines about ring finger, knuckles trying to twist, weave, and work into some new, previously unfathomed knot; hand resting, relaxing, then gripping hand; fingers kneading behind your captain's chair, secure from our spouse's eyes as they nap down below. You set down your cigarette in the ashtray next to the steering wheel. Gray smoke rises and wafts between us.

Our hands unclasp and I cup my palm towards you. Your legs unfurl. Your left foot springs up in the air, points towards me as if on an invisible tether that I've reeled in. I work and knead my way up your rough calloused heels to arches, busting past the thick layers of skin down to muscle, ligament, and bone, then work further up from your calves to your thighs. We face different directions yet look out towards the same long shoreline that cups and nestles us in.

A monarch flutters between us, its bright orange wings hinting at fall just around the bend. For a moment, the butterfly gets caught against the inside of your windshield, hovers near the GPS screen, then finds an out, flutters past the bow of the boat, heads south. You glance up at me. Our eyes lock: blue to brown. Brown to blue: no horizon but our glance. And I sense something's shifted, like a taut fishing line gone suddenly slack.

You reach over, embrace me, break the hold I have on your thighs, clench me close.

"You want me to stop?" I ask. My hands release you. We stand cleaved.

"Mostly no, I don't want to stop. But we *need* to stop."

“OK. I get it. It’s just that I enjoy touching you, had hoped we could at least have this.”

“I know—me too. Your hands are amazing. And when we touch...” You hold my gaze, then look away out towards Camp Potomac. “But cheating is cheating. I can’t.”

“I just figured since they’re napping, we could have some time together.”

“With my luck, Sally would wake up and catch us.” All kinds of hell to pay.

A rabble of monarchs swarms past us now as you take one last drag of your cigarette before you crush it out in the ashtray.

And it ending, as the monarchs keep sweeping and floating and flurrying and flying further south away from us. You saw monarchs migrating from Canada once. I saw them migrating through Texas once, in the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge, monarchs fluttering their way down over the Rio Grande and across the border. And come October, in a couple of weeks, these same monarchs will land and hover and flutter the pine and oyamel fir treelimits of Michoacán, Mexico for a few months before copulating, before regenerating, before regrouping the air and reflurrying the low-lying clouds.

And it ending: your wife having confronted you.

“She harangued me about you massaging my feet the other night,” you say. “She was all, ‘What the hell?! Caine’s hands were on your feet—he was all over you!’ And I was like, ‘Was he? Massaging my feet? Huh, I didn’t notice. Must’ve dozed off.’”

As if that answer could ever possibly go over well.

As if you could lay so inebriated in your recliner that you'd be unaware of someone's hands on your heels, your calves, touching you in ways she never touches you.

As if touch were something so easily forgotten, so easily neglected, a truth so easily skirted and skimmed past. You must've smiled it off, guilty but ready to write it all off. But I'm not so willing, can't let go, can't voice the fact that that lie to your wife was as weak as my willpower around you. We couldn't admit to ourselves that she knew. Must have known. Must now know. Must have sussed something out, pieced some part of it all together. Because desire is its own equation: needs versus wants doesn't play into this at all. It's all hunger over need, passion over logic, heart over head.

"Shit, I'm sorry." It had happened after Labor Day, near the Equinox, that night after first seeing you since Abel and I'd returned from Utah. I hadn't intended it to happen—my hands on your feet as we sat in the living room; hadn't meant for her to see us, figured I'd hear her come back from the bathroom in time for me to pull away; hadn't meant to get caught, was simply reveling in the warm boozy afterglow of knowing you'd missed me as much as I'd missed you. "Quit touching my husband," she'd said, her voice leaden, deflated. A tired, resigned sigh, or so I'd hoped.

"It's just too risky," you say. "Besides, I've gotta pick Jonah up from Camp soon. Before sunset. You can tag along on the dinghy."

"Sure." I can't help but look away, glance towards shore, wonder where this leaves us. You follow my gaze.

“Wanna go for a swim?” you ask. You point to the temperature and depth gauges on the Ark’s console. “Water’s still warm.”

Then off the stern of the Ark we dive.

Green, blue, the brown of silt rustles and rises up to greet white of foam cresting above aqua-green-blue-grey, the slosh and roll and curl of waves. The Bay embraces us, fins and fondles us. Brown thrusts against white, pale slaps along tan, no lines anymore where we meet beneath the surface, legs wrestling underwater, arms splashing and embracing, circling behind your boat.

And we dive, the salty blur and swirl of sloshing waves obscuring shades of sunkissed skin slipping against sundrenched skin. Sunbronzed skin brushing along sunburnt skin.

We dive.

## CHAPTER 8. UNDERTOWS

Your wife said I'm blooming. "Candy-Caine," she said, yoking both versions of my name together—Caine and Lance—into some sweet new creation, "you're blossoming! Don't you guys agree?" You and my husband laughed alongside me. "No, really," Sally insisted, "over the past year, it's like you've *arrived*. You so open, receptive to everything."

I chuckled and looked away from her, but really I was looking at you, our eyes locking and the smile on my face telegraphing a secret message to you alone: *If only they knew. It's you that's changed me, Noah, and it hasn't been a year, just a couple of months*. I weighed Sally's words.

I'd later remember that it *had* been a year, a year since my fingers first caressed your legs, out there on the bow of the boat on a moonlit night similar to the night we shared back in July.

"Caine, oh Caine," you moaned as my hands massaged your feet, ankles, and calves.

We've been writing this story for a long time.

If all I do all day is slap black marks on the page, arrange all these tiny letters into some frazzled terrain that is greater than the sum of what fragments and parts I've roped

together; if all you do all day is measure and mark, trench wooden posts into earth, join beams and walls to joists, transform mere wood into pergolas, doorframes, and sheds; then all we've done these random few nights over the past year is build some new creation constructed not of nail, wood, or words: we've built something from touch.

"Candy-Caine," Sally persisted, again invoking both my names, binding public to private, "listen. I'm paying you a compliment." She smiled, stroked the side of my face with her polished fingernails, her turquoise rings mirroring the blue of horizon, blue of your eyes.

I shook my head, tried to keep my shit-eating grin from her view.

"You've embarrassed him," Abel interjected, "he doesn't like people talking about him."

And that may be true of what was once me, my other self that prefers skulking alone in the dark, left to my scribblings; but this bright new version of what I've become, I don't mind.

"I don't care," I said, "you can discuss me all you want. What can I say? I'm just ..." and I pondered which word to use, waited for some fragment of poetry to land and help me write my next line. None arrived.

Truth, I thought, speak true: "I'm just happy."

And what I meant by that, what I wanted to whisper in your ear was, *You've made me happy. You've boosted my self-esteem and I'll be forever grateful for that.*

But Noah, I can't say that any more than I can wrap you in my arms during daylight.

## CHAPTER 9: ANOTHER GOLDBERG VARIATION (SALLY & RACH)

“I got you a Riesling,” Rachel told her sister as they sat at their mother’s house after mom had gone to bed. “I know how Merlot upsets your stomach.”

“Right now even water upsets my stomach,” Sally said. “I’m all knotted up inside. But I appreciate the Riesling. God knows I could probably down the whole bottle and then some.”

“So what’s all this trouble between you and Caine? You mentioned he was at your house, but he and Abel are always at your house, so what’s new?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t there. Neither was Abel. It was just the two of them, Caine and Noah, alone, drinking. And the way they’ve been acting these past few months—”

“Acting how? Everything seemed perfectly usual when we were on the boat for your birthday last month.”

“I mean Caine is *all over* Noah. I caught him giving Noah a foot rub the other night, just before I took Jonah to Vermont. And I snapped. ‘Get your hands off my husband.’ ”

“So what did he do?”

“He stopped. He and Noah acted like nothing even happened, like it was no big deal. But I feel like I keep having to police them, you know? And I’ve told Caine time and again, I don’t share.”

“You can say that again.” Rachel toasted her Merlot to Sally’s Riesling.

“What can I say? I’m territorial,” Sally said. “Is that so bad?”

“It is when you’re territorial for no apparent reason.”

“What are you even talking about, Rach?”

“10<sup>th</sup> grade. Zachary Glass. Well, *my* 10<sup>th</sup> grade and my should-have-been boyfriend. You were what, a senior?”

“Oh God. That. I told you I hate myself for all that. I was stupid, immature, and—”

“Possessive?” Rachel took a sip of wine, the red coating her lips, then set her glass down as if to say *Checkmate*. “You’d dumped the poor guy, said you didn’t care if he wanted to see me, and three months later when it was clear I was hooked, you seduced him.”

“Shit. I remember. It was nasty and mean-spirited. I just thought you could do better.”

“No,” Rachel replied. “That’s bullshit. It was never about *my* interests or *my* feelings. You just wanted to prove you could reel Zack back in. And you did.”

“Then when he got too clingy, I dumped him all over again.” Sally shook her head and stifled a sob. “I’m sorry. It’s just my own damned insecurity.”



“Pure malice if you ask me. Poor Zack wouldn’t even look at me after that. But whatever, I moved on, got over it, and learned my lesson: steer clear of my sister’s exes. That isn’t even my point. My point dear sister is, are you sure you’re not overreacting here? Are you sure you’re not just being territorial for no valid reason?”

“No, I’m *not* sure,” Sally said. “I’m not sure of anything anymore. That’s the problem. I feel paranoid and afraid, and can’t help feeling like we’re playing a hand of Uno except the rules in the card game have changed and nobody bothered to tell me.”

“Sal, you always hold *all* the cards. Everyone around you knows that. What I don’t understand is why you think Noah would even want to fool around with Caine. Your husband’s as straight as they come. Besides, he’s never cheated on you... Has he?”

“You *do* remember that we were both married when we met, when we started sleeping together.”

Rachel raised her eyebrows, took another sip of wine, nodded her head and listened.

“If there’s anything I learned when Noah and I were first dating was that a.) we’re both sluts – fooling around and meeting in parks was ... exciting; and b.) he’s all about affection. Give and take: shower him with attention, and then pull away – it always leaves him wanting more. It was like a game we played, and we’ve kept playing versions of it these last twenty years. He seeks, I hide. We fight, we make up. Except lately, he seems happiest when Caine is around – regardless of where I am or what I’m doing. It’s like they’ve built their own private little world and it scares me.”

“I see. You’re threatened because their friendship has grown. And there’s a joy that excludes you. Do you feel like you’re losing a friend just as Noah gains one? Is that even a fair assessment of your relationships?”

Sally sighed. “I don’t know.”

“So what if Noah and Caine were at your house, alone? I still don’t see the big deal. How did you find out about Caine being there anyway?” Rachel dipped a cracker in some spinach dip, swirled it around before bringing the snack to her lips.

“I called Noah to let him know how Aunt Salome’s cataract surgery went. And he sounded happy, downright giddy, so I asked if he was enjoying a Jack & Coke.”

“Well, since you won’t let him have his favorite drink when you’re around…”

“He can have all the vodka martinis he wants, but that damn Jack Daniels shit just stinks. I can’t even stand to kiss him when he reeks of the stuff.”

“So he denied enjoying a Jack & Coke while you were out of town?”

“No, not at all. He said, ‘Yep. Caine stopped by, we were just about to have a sip.’ ”

“So he *admits* to enjoying a drink, and tells you right off that Caine is there. Sally, honey, don’t you think if there were something going on he’d make some attempt to hide the fact he’s got company?”

“Why am *I* the one being cross-examined here?”

“Because you said it yourself, nothing Caine said that night made you feel any more at ease. He stopped by to hang out, right? No big deal.”

“Rach, I knew letting you run off and get your law degree at Harvard was going to bite me in the ass someday.”

“It’s just the way my brain processes information: facts, evidence, proof. Here, take a look.” Rachel swiped her iPad awake, pulled up a photo album labeled simply “Sally”, and handed it to her sister. She scrolled from a photo of Abel, Noah, and Caine holding up a 34” rockfish they’d caught on Noah’s birthday last year, to a scanned 10-year-old picture of Abel and Caine cradling newborn Jonah as if he was their own. “Funny thing that the photo album about my beloved big sister contains pictures of everyone *but* her.”

“You know how I hate pictures of myself. I’m always either too tall, too heavy, or all of the above.”

“Oh Sally, you’re you. How will my kids remember their favorite aunt once you’re gone?”

Sally just shook her head. “Let’s not—”

“Fine. Here: Exhibit A.” Rachel brought up an even older scanned photograph of Noah sitting on a barstool in the den while Caine stood behind him and massaged his shoulders. Noah smiled, eyes closed, body relaxed, while Caine laughed into the camera, his fingers gripping Noah tightly. “This was before Jonah, so it had to be, what, 12 years ago?”

Sally bit her lip and nodded.

“Now on to Exhibit B.” Rachel swiped back to more recent images on her camera roll. “Your birthday last month.” The sun glinted off three bodies sprawled on a giant

white and red float adrift on the Chesapeake Bay: Sally and Noah, with Caine's dark brown figure laying between and slightly above them, his right hand massaging Sally's temple, left hand working Noah's brow.

"Rach! You took a goddamned picture of me?" Sally grumbled.

"Sis, that's not the point. See, Caine is being his usual affectionate self. I thought it was funny, so I snapped a picture. Abel just thought it was sweet." Rachel pinched and zoomed the image. "See how relaxed you all three are? Just another outing on the Bay. So now you're trying to change the rules in your friendship. You realize that isn't easy for him, right? You're asking Caine to change behavior that you've all accepted as perfectly normal, year after year. Until now."

"But that's the point, isn't it? Things *have* to change because I'm trying to prevent something from happening before it even starts."

"And yet everything you say makes it sound like something's already begun... Oh, Sal, there isn't a trusting bone in your body. You're hard and tough that way."

"But it means I'm difficult. Unlovable. Oh God, I wish they'd just all reject me, make me know I'm in the right in this."

"You talk like right and wrong are absolutes. Like there's no line between thought and action. As if desire and touch are one and the same."

"But aren't they?" Sally wondered aloud.

"You're still the best big sister anyone could ever dream of. You know that, right? So what are you going to tell Caine? Come on, imagine I'm him." Rachel ran her

fingers through her blond hair, sat up with her fingers locked around her knees, and directed her attention towards her sister. “Hit me. What’ve you got to say?”

“The truth. I’ll start with the truth: ‘Sweetie, I love you, but your behavior lately...’”. Sally hesitated, for once at a loss for words.

“OK. Again. Go.”

“Sweetie, you know how much I love you, right? But I feel like we need rules, we need boundaries.”

“Try again. What’s your stance and what do you want?”

~ ~ ~

“Sweetie,” Sally said as Caine walked into the room. She threw her arms out, hugged him, kissed him on the lips. A motherly or sisterly sort of kiss.

Caine tensed within her grip, pulled away but held Sally’s hands. “Sally, I—”

“I love you, Caine. You know that, right? Your friendship means so much to me – to both of us. But lately I feel like you’ve disregarded my feelings. You aren’t respecting my relationship with my husband. You’re making me uncomfortable.” Sally glanced at Noah sitting in his recliner, his elbows on his knees, his eyes darting from Abel to Caine. “You’re making us *both* uncomfortable. And that’s gotta stop. We need to set some boundaries.”

## CHAPTER 10: A CONFRONTATION: THE CONSTRUCTION OF BOUNDARIES

I needed to understand what changed. How you had moved on so easily, had truncated your affection for me. Sally had taken Jonah up to Baltimore, to visit an aunt and cousins. When I called and asked if I could come over, you didn't hesitate. *Working late*, I texted my husband. I didn't know what to expect, seeing you alone, and when we hugged there was only joy between us.

"Mind fixing us a drink while I finish feeding the animals?" The Hatfields and McCoys I'd dubbed them: two clans of cats Sally had finally separated into different parts of the house to preserve some sanity.

When the phone rang, as I sat next to you on your recliner, I knew I should have stopped you from telling Sally I was there. "Caine's with you?" I heard her say. "Let me talk to him."

"What are you doing there?" Murder in Sally's voice.

"Just stopped by from work. Having a drink."

"I don't want you in my house when I'm not there. You need to leave!"

"Sally, we're just talking."

"You can talk on the phone."

"OK, as soon as I finish this drink—"

“No. Get out of my house. Now.”

After you hung-up, I stood to leave.

“No, stay,” you insisted. “I’m not good with ultimatums. Besides. This is my house too. You’re my friend too. Stay.” A deep quelling comfort to your voice. “Have another drink.”

As we stood in the kitchen, serving up Jack-&-Cokes, my hemming and hawing.

“What?” you prodded. “It’s OK. You can say anything.”

“It’s just. When I saw you after Utah, there was... affection. I felt affection from you. And suddenly, a week later, it’s your birthday, and you’d pulled away. And I wanted to ask why—but I guess I see why. It’s all laid out pretty clearly.”

“Yeah—you see what I’m dealing with.” You reached over and embraced me. Our hands met, curled into one another. How I wanted to kiss you. How my heartbeat still felt rattled from Sally’s call. How I didn’t know how to be.

“I still care about you,” you said. “Care for you. But I’ve got my home to think about. My family.”

Two drinks later, the hugging and leaving as I said, “I’m sorry.”

“No. *I’m* sorry.” Shouldering the weight of this all upon your self. “Take care of yourself.”

Final words, I wondered. Was that a farewell, a so long—thanks—but so much for us?

Two weeks later we finally all four met again. I arrived last; Abel already nestled into your new leather sofa, you in your new leather loveseat, Sally in her antiquated burgundy Queen Anne chair. I skirted past you, avoided your glance, your touch. Noah: if this is it I don't want to touch you ever again, I want our last farewell and your "Take care of yourself" to be my last sense memory. But Sally stood up and reached over, held me, and I held her too, crushed her as tight as I would've crushed you if I could have. And we sighed and clenched. "I love you," she said. "I love you too." But as I said that I pulled away, and still couldn't look you in the eye. And I sat on the same couch as Abel but a body's length apart. And listened. And talked.

Suffice to say charades were maintained. Suffice to say I "accepted" that my physicality and affections had crossed boundaries with both you and Sally, had made you uncomfortable.

Though we both knew better. Because in truth comfort was all you and I ever offered one another. The pure, simple comfort of desire reveled in and revealed via touch.

You and I flitted glances across to each other and I understood: there were certain things you'd had to say to keep your marriage in tact.

"I'm sorry. I crossed the line, made Noah uncomfortable—made you both uncomfortable."

But we both knew better.



And I suppose that knowing is the toughest part. Knowing I have to redraw my boundaries. I'm an affectionate, physical person, I explained.

"You can be that with me," Sally insisted, "can touch *me* all you want. Just *not* my husband."

Irony of ironies that she should let me touch her when half the time she bristles at your touch.

Abel figured she was overcompensating. And she was. But Abel also didn't realize how much I'd lost, how much I was hoping to cling to by reconfiguring the boundaries of who I touched and how.

"Is a hug OK?" Abel asked of Sally.

"Of course, that greeting and parting hug. That's normal."

But of the myriad other little hugs and embraces you and I have become accustomed to, well, that's settled. No more. My hand trembled and I pulled it in towards my stomach, crossed my legs, huddled into myself a bit. You simply looked at me and your strong, sturdy frame sagged, slumped. No more.

"And can Noah pop Caine's back later tonight? Is that OK? Because he hasn't slept well in days."

A rope thrown.

Surprise flickered in both your eyes and mine.

"Of course! That's different," Sally said.

But as the conversation settled, Sally asked if she and I would be OK.

“We’ll be OK,” I said. But I couldn’t look her in the eye. Tried to pull away as she drew near.

“Can you live with these new boundaries?” she asked.

“I’ll try,” I said. “All I can do is try.”

I held her tight, stared at you over her shoulder, wanted to tell you that all two of us was over for the sake of all four of us having a chance at still remaining friends.

“I’ll do my best,” I said, “because I don’t want to lose you.”

Some crying, martinis, less drama, animated conversation, a walking away from things. It felt like a walking away from things. It still felt like bits of an ending.

It feels like an ending.

Now how to begin anew?

## CHAPTER 11. INLETS

As we drove past the last few inlets towards Cape Hatteras, I kept thinking how wonderful it would be to spend a week together, just the four of us celebrating Noah and Sally's 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Storms loomed off the coast, lightning dancing across the water, and I realized it could all go terribly wrong too.

"You know you'll have to sit down and talk to Sally," Abel said as he drove through Avon down to Frisco. "I talked to her a couple of nights ago, and I finally got her to admit that you're not the problem in this. She just doesn't trust her husband."

"Doesn't trust Noah?" I asked. "She said that?" What would Abel think if he knew his reasonable attempt to protect me had cast a shadow on Noah when really I was equally to blame, perhaps more. After all, it was my hands Sally saw, my hands caressing Noah's calves and thighs, me she caught red-handed.

So there we sat on the deck of a rental house. "I'll leave you two to talk," Abel said as he walked down the stairs to the pool. "If we're going to get through this week without too much drama, you both need to air some stuff out." I stared at the broad living room windows, watched the reflection of Abel disappearing, his blond head of hair dipping out of view as a storm cloud unveiled the moon for a moment. I could see Noah

asleep on the sofa – how I wanted to kneel beside him, run my fingers through his hair, avoid this conversation.

Sally lit a cigarette and looked past my shoulder, towards the Sound. “Drama? Me? Why I never,” she said with a laugh. I’d always admired her ability to recognize herself for who she was, a bull in a china shop, smashing up emotions as easily as glassware – not out of malice, just honesty. Her eyes focused on me, hazel irises transformed into an electric green by the play of light between the lightning and the moon.

“You know, I really don’t want to hash this out all over again,” I said as I lit my cigarette off the tip of hers. “I just want to move past this, put things back the way they were before.” It was a half-truth: I didn’t want to talk, but I still wanted Noah.

“Well, I just feel like you’re walking on eggshells around me,” Sally said. “We don’t talk the way we used to, and it upsets me.”

Eggshells, I thought, all true. “I’m doing my best to be careful around you and Noah, to not do anything you might misconstrue, or that might upset you. I haven’t laid a hand on him –” since Valentine’s I thought but bit my tongue. Had it only been three months?

“I know,” Sally said, “I’ve watched you, and you’ve respected my wishes.”

“So you *are* watching me, keeping vigilant? So it’s fair if I feel like I *do* have to walk on eggshells, be hyper-aware of my actions around you?”

“Sweetie, I’m sorry. I don’t want you to have to second-guess every move you make. I want you to feel comfortable around us. I just don’t want you touching my husband.”

“Sally, this is me we’re talking about. I’m an affectionate person. How many times have I given you a foot rub or a neck massage?” All facts, but some reptilian part of my brain thought how strange it is that the spark of arousal only takes when I touch the heat of Noah’s skin.

“Yeah, but that’s me,” Sally said, “you can touch *me* all you want. And I know you’re a physical person. I found a picture from years ago of you giving Noah a massage. There’s evidence that this has gone on a long time – but it needs to stop. I just don’t think anyone should touch my husband in ways only I should touch him.”

“But you don’t.” There it was, a knife slipped in just below the ribcage, deep enough to wound but not to kill. Evidence, that was the trigger. She’d been observing, amassing proof.

Sally slapped the wooden table with her left hand while she pointed her glowing cigarette in my face. “How dare you judge my marriage. You don’t know how I touch Noah. And it’s none of your goddamned business – you have no right.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to imply,” I backpedaled. Of course I knew everything, just as Noah knew all about Abel and myself. It wasn’t the details that mattered so much as the intent, the easy giving and receiving of affection. “I just mean that you brush him off so often. Just tonight, when he reached up from the couch to hold your hand, you walked away, left him hanging there.”

We took a drag from our cigarettes in unison, waited to see how the conversation might turn. “When you and Abel aren’t around, when we’re alone, we are constantly affectionate. Regardless, that’s my relationship. I don’t want anyone touching Noah, especially a Potential Sexual Partner. He’s my husband, and I don’t share.”

So it all came back to that. How could I dissuade her from fearing my presence? “Sally, in what world am I a *potential sexual partner* for your husband? This is Noah we’re talking about: I’m missing a lot up here and have too much going on below the belt.” I thought of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 20, “Til Nature ... by addition me of thee defeated, / by adding one thing to my purpose nothing.”

“In my world,” Sally said.

“You still don’t trust me then. I’d never make a pass – I don’t want Noah to slug me.”

“It’s not you – this is about me. It’s all this shit in my head. I’m jealous and overprotective, and I don’t trust my husband with anyone that has the slightest attraction to him. And yes, in my world you are a potential partner. I don’t know how he’d respond to an advance from you, but I don’t want to put any of us in a position to find out.”

## CHAPTER 12: ALL GOOD THINGS

All good.

“Are we good?”

“We’re good.”

The linger, length, and timbre of our embrace resounds past the equilibrium of anything our spouses might register as normal. Our touch reverberates, tolls us nearer.

We hold true.

All good things.

The touch and cradle of each other alongside the slurry and slosh of waves.

My head nestled into the crook of your shoulder.

Our hands wrestling and wrangling and fishing each other out underwater.

Your blue eyes my brown eyes igniting the atmosphere between us; our lips realigning ions and atoms and magnetic pulls until our compasses swing towards ourselves, then flail against one another, then bob and swirl back and forth with the transfixed confusion of a ship threading the path of a new-discovered world, new waters to be charted, some new shore to be strolled, measured, mapped.

Tread, trudge, troll: let us walk together out onto this strange unknown terrain.

All good things must.

How can this not be good?

Embracing beneath the glimmer and stammer and stutter of stars.

A falling star illuminates the stir and stroke of our senses.

The touch and cradle of each other against the tide reverberates our nerve-  
endings, ripples the dark glittered Atlantic waters beneath the night sky.

All good things must end.

How to end this? How to draw it all to a close?

Draw you close, if I could only draw you close once more.

But I can't.

We can't.

Mustn't.

Can't ever draw near and close and tight again.

Never again my bronze hands feathering through your copper hair.

Never again my fingertips tracing the perfectly melded angles of your ears tightly  
cinched to your jawline.

Never again my lips pressing against your neck.

Never again the clear surf-tang taste of you on my tongue.

Noah, my beloved friend Noah:



Tell me how to tie a cleat hitch, an anchor hitch, a bowline.

Tell me how to loop and weave and circle and knot us back.

Tell me how to secure your Ark to its dock.

Tell me of flood myths.

Tell me of ice caps melting and coastal waters rising.

Tell me anything.

Tell me again the story of Gilgamesh and his dear friend Enkidu.

Tell me of those ancient Sumerian tablets that accounted for grain while recounting accounts of adventures and heroes and journeys.

Tell me a tale—any tale. Or else tell me how to construct some new story of our own making.

Tell me how they built the massive walls of Uruk.

Tell me how the gardens of Babylon were scaffolded and hung.

Tell me anything, but do not tell me this is the end.

“It’s over,” you say. “I’ve gotta move on.”

## **CHAPTER 13: MUST END AS ALL THINGS**

### **(INTERLUDES FROM THE JOURNALS OF CAINE LANCE CALLETANO)**

#### **I. How The Composition of American Cents Changed**

Noah has mentioned on occasion how the copper commodities market has surged. Pennies don't plink from heaven: earth isn't sucking down from clouds a rain of minerals mined from cooled magma: nickel, zinc, copper. "Electrical wiring's getting ripped off all over." He lights a cigarette and the copper stubble along his jawline glints. "There was a subdivision out near DC," he says between puffs, "all the copper got stripped overnight."

Caine brushes his suntanned fingers against his friend's cheek, as if trying to collect this particular array of copper filaments. Caine can't let go of the past, stockpiles memories like a man expecting calamity: how his lips once pressed onto Noah's shoulder, his spine, the small of his back.

"I heard about these penny hoarders," Caine says, breaking reverie. "Coin roll hunters. There's this newlywed couple, they sit and drink merlot while sorting through rolls and rolls of pennies..."

Noah explains that minting a penny costs two cents so the composition of cents changed in 1982: what once was mostly copper is now mostly zinc. That's why that couple arranges the years into the before and after of alloys: hearkening to the ding of cents, listening for the deeper bass-bling of copper as opposed to the lighter-pitched clink of zinc. "You can hear the difference in weight."

"Yeah, I'd noticed that," Caine nods, "guess I never stopped to consider why."

Cents don't realize something fundamental has altered in their makeup, that their value has changed from surface worth to some deeper value prospectors seek. Ask a penny's exchange rate? Better to ask how birds define flight or fish swim: it's nothing to them more than movement. And what's walking but falling and constantly catching heel against concrete? What's falling in love but unhinging the theory of gravity, thrusting against the expected channels of friendship until some new mapping gets laid, like copper wires unspooled, aligned, coupled, connected into powergrids all lit up.

## II. Thundersnow

Sally caught herself observing her husband and her best friend more and more. After dinner as she rinsed the dishes and scrubbed the pans before putting them in the dishwasher, she would look out the kitchen window – the one just above the sink with a clear view into the adjoining back patio – and watch as Noah and Caine talked. She could hear the animated tones as their voices rose and fell, though she couldn't make out the words. The glow of their cigarettes illuminated their faces occasionally as they sat across from one another, and she found this oddly comforting. Though she felt most at ease when Abel joined the two, at least she could make out the distance between the two men. Some nights they sat next to one another, under the window, just outside her scope, and she found this oddly disconcerting, was liable to nestle dishes the wrong way, or forget to add a fistful of forks before starting the dishwasher. When had she begun feeling so unsettled?

Perhaps she was just missing Caine's company. He always used to join Sally in the kitchen, hover about and ask how he might help. Over the years, she'd learned to let go a little, to allow Caine to set the dining room table, fill glasses with ice water, toss and serve the salad. True, it had taken time. Matching placemats to tablecloth, the proper order of silverware: Sally was particular about these details. Caine still had to ask her if he'd set the table correctly, couldn't seem to remember where knife sat in relation to dinner fork, salad fork, spoon – even though it had only taken a couple of weekends with Noah this past summer before he had memorized how to cinch five different types of knots. Of late, Caine seemed too caught-up chatting with Noah to offer to help in the

kitchen and dining room. True, Abel had stepped-in, filled the gap by helping set the table, but it was like teaching a new student all over again. Simpler to do it herself, Sally reasoned.

This particular evening, an unseasonably cold March, the four had stood at the bar in the den and enjoyed an after-dinner martini once Jonah had gone to bed. The clock struck 11 and played the snippet of a song from Disney's *The Little Mermaid*. Her namesake, Aunt Sarah, had shipped the wall clock from Vermont as a gift for Jonah's tenth birthday. Whether Aunt Sarah had shipped the wrong gifts to her nieces and nephews this year, or had simply not realized how radically boys' interests alter from year to year, Sally was never sure. "How lovely, dolphins leaping under starlight," she'd told her son as he inspected the unwrapped gift. The thought, she reminded him, was what counted.

Jonah had stood somberly, looking down at the glimmering stars and silver dolphins on the clock face on his bed, ran his fingers through the bright red mop of his hair – so much like his father assessing a construction problem – then said simply, "Yes, but it's not really my taste, is it?" Sally had been relieved he hadn't called the clock too childish or, worse, "girly." She had patted her son on the shoulder and said, "Well, it'll liven up the den. We'll send a Thank You card first thing tomorrow."

As the 11 o'clock musical chime faded away, Noah and Caine spun off on a conversation about hoists.

"A new chain fall," Noah said.

"What's the point of a falling chain?" Caine asked.

“What are you two going on about now,” Sally said. As Noah began to respond, Sally mimed pressing pause on the TV remote. In the lull she’d created, she took a lengthy swig of her martini, enough to down the last third of her drink. Abel followed suit.

“Another martini?” Abel offered as he scooped up Sally’s glass and stepped around the bar.

“Sure,” Sally said. She clamped her right hand open and shut like a duck’s quacking bill, then walked back up to the kitchen. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Noah and Caine shrug it off, take a sip from their barely touched drinks, and then heard them resume talking.

Sally wiped down the kitchen counters while she listened to the dishwasher, waiting for its hum and swish to reach that just-right pitch. Everything in its proper place, she walked back down to the den as Abel poured her a Ketel One martini – nice and cold, no vermouth, with just enough bits of ice floating in the vodka to look like Swarovski crystals suspended in air.

“Where’s Noah?” she asked as Caine took a sip from his now-warm martini. Just then, her husband bounded into the room, skipping with the same bright energy Jonah displayed when he’d pieced together an especially tricky model train. Noah set a carpentry supply catalog on the bar next to Caine, and quickly rifled through the pages.

“Here,” Noah said as he pointed to a variety of pulley and chain hoist systems. Sally watched as the two men’s index fingers followed the page in tandem, almost as if

reading braille, their fingers a mere millimeter apart. “Aw, hell, I’ll just show you the one I’ve got in the garage.”

As the two bundled themselves in coats and made their way outside, Sally and Abel put on sweaters and made their way out to the back patio. She and Abel sat side by side, watched as Noah and Caine walked into the garage. “What do those two get so engrossed about?” she wondered aloud idly.

“I think Caine sees the brother he never had,” Abel said. “Maybe they both do.” They sipped their drinks, the cold martini warming their throats. Just then, thick, clumpy flakes of snow drifted down onto the driveway. As the garage lights caught the snow, she heard Noah and Caine laughing, and for a moment Sally imagined herself caught in a just-shaken snowglobe, children laughing in the near distance just outside her reach.

Sally thought she heard the clock again, a lullaby fading away. “Did you hear that?” she asked Abel.

He looked at her and shrugged. “Just them talking,” he said.

“I think the clock just struck midnight,” she said. She’d have to disable that feature, she reminded herself. Let the clock chime each hour in silence.

Before Abel could respond, they heard a gravelly roar like a salt truck grinding its gears, then the sky flashed brightly, the heavy clouds illuminated from above.

“Snow lightning,” Abel said. “How strange.”

In the aftereffect of the brightness, emblazoned into her retinas, Sally could swear she saw the afterimage of that lightning, Noah and Caine standing shoulder to shoulder in

the garage, their hands clasped together raising and lowering the chain fall hoist, their backs to the night, unfazed by the thundersnow.



### III. Snow Lightning

Desire: the perfidious moonlight gleams into the patio, illuminates us like a flash of treacherous lightning that just struck. All that's left to do is count and wait after the strike for the sound of hunger. One-one-thousand, two-one-thousand, three then four: the thunderous growl stirs the Labrador's slumber.

Read the distance between us there, on the patio, shrinking. The black stubble on my check against the copper stubble on yours, the scuffed scrape of desire like fine sandpaper we've roughed between us. The glow of your face as you lean in, envelop me the way snowclouds snuggle sky: who needs moonlight to guide grip? An electrostatic discharge all our own.

Strange how our bodies sometimes align smooth as a plane sheering a plank. But like all friction, it's the stopping that undoes us, wood shavings and sawdust strewing the ground. What use desire?

We let go. You flick a cigarette, our shoulders still lean-to as our spouses slosh onto the patio, heady with evening.

"What are you two up to?" my husband asks as you light your wife's cigarette, ember up to tip.

"Just looking at the moon," you say and as I point: snow drifts, lightning flares horizon, clouds muffle thunder. The golden Labrador, skittish, wags his tail. Currents, sap, steam; a burst trunk cracks: ions clutter the air. Somewhere in the field behind your yard an oak stands shorn, the strike too much to bear. Now the skittish crazed dog is a black cat curling its electromagnetically puffed up tail around our ankles.

I step out onto the sidewalk for a breath, wonder if the flame that slammed into the oak's torso will catch, or if the melt will tamp it down. It's Valentine's and the snow won't quit and I can't even steal a kiss. There's a headlong rush as I kick the frozen air, impact of boot against ice—a granite-like-chunk hidden beneath the fluff of snowdust—and I've slipped, am on all fours, left knee scraped against concrete, the sharp bloodied strike of nerve against bone as I long for you once more. What use?

#### IV. Abel's Version

Abel had called his husband, left a message reminding him to pick up supplies on his way home, in case Hurricane Iris really did make landfall. Odd that Caine hadn't answered his phone, as tied to it as he always was. Probably in a meeting, making emergency plans in case the hurricane hit DC and shows at Studio Theatre had to be cancelled. Still, he usually at least sent a "Can't talk now. Will call back later," text. So Abel had made the rounds himself after leaving Ft. Belvoir early. As he pulled into the driveway, he was surprised to see Noah's new Ford truck in the driveway: *Big Blue*, Noah had nicknamed it.

As Abel hiked the crate of bottled water up to the front door, his neighbor, Michael, came bounding from across the lawn next door.

"Need a hand?" Michael said as he reached out for the water.

"Nah, I'm good," Abel said.

"Well, here, let me ring the doorbell since your hands are full."

"That's OK, it looks like Caine is home, so the front door should be unlocked."

"Yeah, he and your buddy were boarding up the back windows. I saw them as I was moving potted plants in from the front patio. Nice new truck your friend got."

"Yeah, Big Blue. How'd you know it was new?"

"License plate tags," Michael pointed, then paused. "He used to have a maroon truck, right? Your friend, what's his name?"

"Noah. How did you know his old truck was maroon?"

“He’s about the same height as Caine, a bit wider in the shoulders. Reminds me of a rugby player.”

“Yeah,” Abel said, “that’s him.”

“Well, he comes around pretty regular. I figured you guys were getting bids, thinking of doing some home improvement. You’ll have to let me know how your remodeling project goes.”

Remodeling. That was something he and Caine had long discussed. But that’s all it’d been—talk, like their plans to take a vacation and see Shanghai before it was too late, before it got washed out same as Hong Kong.

“Sure,” Abel said a bit distractedly. “I’ll let you know how it goes.”

He watched Michael make his way back across his yard. The air pressure seemed to adjust, feel sort of flat. Was that ions in the air he smelled, that particular breeze scent that warns of rain? He hoisted the carton of water on one shoulder, twisted the door handle, only to find it locked. Once he’d rummaged for his keys, and opened the front door, he noticed how dark the house seemed with all those windows boarded up. Laughter, he heard laughter, and the sound of running water. Must be the TV in the bedroom.

He set the water down on the granite kitchen counter, and called out for his husband. “Caine? You in here?” As he made his way down the hall, he placed the sound of water: the shower. “I noticed Noah’s truck in the driveway,” Abel continued. Just as he neared the bathroom with its door wide open, Caine popped into view, his waist wrapped in a towel.

“Hon, you’re home early,” Caine said in a high, clear voice.

“Is Noah here?” Abel asked. He noticed that Caine had shut the bathroom door when he stepped out to greet him. He never shut the door while showering: let the humidity vent.

“Uh, yeah. We were just battening down the hatches, in case Iris hits.”

“So, where is he?”

“Oh. Uhm, he’s in the shower. We were having coffee, spilled a cup all over ourselves.”

“But you were just in the shower,” Abel said.

“Yeah, I was checking on the laundry, and just brought in a towel for him.”

Just then the bathroom door opened and Noah stepped out. Abel found himself surrounded in towel-clad men.

“Abel, hi,” Noah said. “I was, uh... We were, uh... I was just about to head out.”

“Laundry should be ready,” Caine said. “I’ll run and check.”

“I thought you just checked on the laundry,” Abel said.

“Hon, I can explain,” Caine said.

“Abel,” Noah added, “we can explain. Here, let’s sit down. You’re looking a little pale.”

“No, I’m,” Abel said, then stopped. “Explain what? That you’ve been coming around while I’m at work?”

The air pressure shifted inside his house, and that strange electric taste in the air filtered in even here. There was a whooshing in his ears. Had they turned off the shower? Was the water still running? TV must still be on, somebody in the background kept asking over and over “How long has this been going on?”

“I need some air,” Abel said as he lumbered down the hallway, out the front door, made his way to the front yard.

Michael stood there, on the sidewalk. “Abel,” he said as he gripped him by the shoulders and guided him up his neighbor’s front steps, “you don’t look so good. Come in, let’s get you settled down.”

“Michael?” Abel turned to his neighbor, “where did you come from?”

“I heard some hollering, thought I’d check on you guys.”

“Oh that, just the TV,” Abel said in a near whisper. His throat felt dry.

“Come on,” Michael said, “looks like you could use a drink.”

As he sat there on his neighbor’s sofa, he kept hearing a voice asking, “How long?” Michael’s mouth hadn’t moved. And when had it started raining? Why were there raindrops on his cheek? Why did the phrase *How long* keep ringing in his ears like wind chimes that keep getting jangled in a storm? How long how long how long.

## V. Epistles to Reinaldo Arenas

Estimado Reinaldo,

Seasons in my country have begun to migrate like monarchs. (Not royalty: butterflies. Imagine a worm that mandibles two hundred times its weight in milkweed, then curls itself into a silken basket, only to emerge with bright orange wings the color of sunshine slices.) Now we get snow in April as easily as October, and hurricanes keep waltzing further north of the Mid-Atlantic. I don't know if the monarchs will know which way to go in a generation or two.

We have wide swathes of terrain designations known as Hardiness Zones. Zone 6 (Mid-Atlantic) is now zone 8 (South); zone 8 is now 10 (Tropical). You wouldn't believe: at this rate we'll be able to grow sugarcane in cornfields. It's not that the ground itself has shifted or been terraformed; something in the atmosphere has altered.

Sea levels keep rising, but segments of the population keep refusing to recognize the change in our climate. Just south of me, the Carolinas have disposed of a 30-year study in favor of an 8-year projection in order to prevent land values from sinking. As if looking away from an incoming onslaught could reverse the dodo's fate.

In my country, the hurricanes named after females are taken with less seriousness than masculinely nomenclatured storms. Frida, Beulah, Katrina all get disregarded while Adam, Isaac, Dennis send cars into tailspins and traffic jams along coastal byways.

Levees and inlets hear no difference in names: they fail at a whim whenever the wind whips an overly frothy howl.

~ ~ ~

Bad news today, Reinaldo. Dr. Tesoro says my white blood cell count has spiked. But I've been careful, haven't been with anyone but Abel. And Noah. I can't be pos—

No, not a virus: glioblastoma multiforme. Just the body turning in on itself.

“Here,” Dr. Tesoro handed me a referral, “see Moody—he’s a friend, a great oncologist. Should I call Abel, let him know?”

I say no—I'll tell him myself. It's bad enough he discovered Noah and I the way he did. Bad enough Sally won't speak to me. Bad enough that I've lost her and Noah and Jonah. Bad enough I've fucked up and don't know how to fix this. Bad enough I feel broken.

~ ~ ~

After the oncologist's news, I dreamed that I was invited to your apartment, Reinaldo Arenas, in a country that could have been the United States, in a city that might have been called Nueva York, bearing in mind that parts of the US and blocks of New York once looked like Hell, a semblance that—in the bowels of some underground realm of the real gritty city and the dazzling lights of the fantasy city—will eternally remain.



Of course, I knew that you were dead, had wasted away from AIDS and decided to call it a day decades ago; but when the party at the Limelight invited to introduce me, I didn't hesitate. Sure, it could have been a joke, or some miracle might have transpired to bring you back. I didn't think about it too much—just went with the invitation.

We came to a bar in a skyscraper that seemed much too tall for Greenwich Village, a sleek building piercing the night sky that would've been more at home in Times Square, but I didn't worry too much about that either, was simply eager to join you and the Arenas-groupies at a booth in the Stonewall Inn. I hardly recognized you at first—not the face I'd seen in books or obituaries; you'd grown more muscular (felt as firm as Noah embracing me), had put on just enough weight, were younger, handsomer, your hair thicker, and your eyes were even brighter and more magnetic than I recalled, much more intense than the black-and-white eyes in the book jacket snapshots.

And if you didn't look quite like you—if Arenas didn't look like Arenas at all, looked more like some newly discovered Telemundo star—who was I to argue? The spirit was there, the same old feist and provocation, the Reinaldo Arenas who told it like it was no matter the audience or sentence.

“I can't believe that *puto* Castro will outlive me,” you wrote me once. We'd corresponded after I'd discovered you in a bookstore in San Nacimiento, Texas. Not you physically, just your novels. And so I wrote to you in New York. You'd invited me to visit, but somehow I never planned the trip. Too afraid the man might not meet the myth I had woven, I suppose. And yet here we sat, twenty-odd years later, still talking about Cuba, still discussing the damned Castros.

“But if the people remain passive, who am I to argue,” you said.

“Still can’t understand why the US keeps these silly travel embargoes,” I added.

If only the borders would open up, then the world would unfurl and set all people free.

At least that’s what I imagined, what I hoped I and the Reinaldo Arenas I idolized could agree on.

“As for all this marriage,” you swiveled topics as we took an elevator to the 47<sup>th</sup> floor, “I don’t see why all you muchachos need to go around getting married. Why not keep it like in my day, grab a taste of any man you meet along the street. Too stifling, this wedded-ness.”

The times have changed, I tried to explain, and maybe we’ve changed too.

Maybe we don’t see ourselves forever wandering streets like Calletanos; maybe we want to build a nest of our own.

You shook your head as we entered your apartment. I draped my arms around your shoulders, feeling the musculature beneath your shirt. For a moment I thought I smelled Noah’s scent, but then the moment passed and I smelled earth.

“Time for your pills, Rey,” I reminded you.

“Fuck the pills,” you said, “I’m a dead man anyway. See?” And a blossom of blood appeared on your white shirt, as if your heart had been stabbed.

A bandage, I insisted, I’ll fix this. Because I knew you hadn’t died of a broken heart, just your cells giving way to a sustained viral attack, and then your spirit forging its way ahead of its own free will. My own shirt felt wet, tacky, smelled of iron and earth.

And as I washed your chest, the piercing healed. And as we undressed and clenched in the living room, our bodies reflected against the window pane, suddenly every window in every building in Times Square—because we were suddenly in Times Square, no longer the Village—every sleek surface reflected us back to ourselves, as if our thrusting bodies were being broadcast across a thousand high definition TVs. Then slowly, as our bodies untangled I realized your body was not your body but Noah's and I clasped flesh tighter wanting to meld into Noah, not wanting night to fall as each TV-window flickered out, like candles blown out one by one until not even our reflections in the living room window remained, only night.

## CHAPTER 14: ORIGINS

In the beginning, in that second story of you, the one found in the Pentateuch or Torah in what's commonly referred to as the Book of Beginnings (though it's really less a book than a scroll), in this second story they've fashioned us all wrong. Too much myth, too much morality, too much of Bishops' Councils editing and revising our lives.

True: like Prometheus' son, you built an ark, deluged it with creatures, carried us afloat along the Flood – you, your wife, your children; I, my wife, my children – and once the waters had crested then abated, once our birds had returned with sprigs of growth plucked from earth, once the blue sky lit up with a prised arc, you unburdened your boat, freed wild beasts to propagate the wilderness while we settled the fecund fields with the tamer harnessed herds, seeded those fields, tended grape vines, and drenched the land with wine. I helped you plot the land as I had done once before, when I first met you out in the fields of Mesopotamia, before the Great Unnamed sent signs of the coming storm to stir the air about your head.

“Headache,” you insisted, massaging your right temple from golden eyebrow to copper hair to the rust red flare of sideburn. “Damned shift in air pressure. I’m telling you Cham. There’s a storm coming even if no one believes.” Your left hand smacked

your shepherd's cane against a boulder, as if trying to ring the pained buzzing out of your skull. And despite what the stories may say, I believed. Have always believed in you.

But no. I was never your son, merely your companion, the man who helped you tend animals and steer the boat. Your first mate helping you navigate this new uncharted ocean with its peaks and valleys of mountain ranges drowned, submerged, and re-sea-terra-formed into islands.

And the two birds we sent out to certify that water had receded from land weren't a raven and a dove.

No.

We'd found a pair of seabirds swallowtailing the sky somewhere between the Great Southern Ocean and Oceania (though it was all Oceania back then, all ocean, ocean, ocean, no earth): a couple of birds: a black cormorant we named Abel and an albatross we named Caine.

(Or was it the other way around, an obverse perspective, colors of birds reversed through some nautical mirror of water against sky: Abel as light and Caine as dark? Am I the dark to your light, Noah? Or vice-versa? I can't recall, can't re-imagine. It all wavers and wafts and flickers away.)

"Well that's a bit mucked up, don't you think? Naming our birds Caine and Abel?"

"What do you mean?" My naïveté struck you even as your confusion unsteadied me.

“You know, the Word – or what I suppose will become the written word someday. After all, somebody’s gotta write it all down for posterity.” I stared at you: blank, dumb. “The stories, I mean the blasted old stories.” You flung a handful of birdseed in the air, watched it rain down over our heads. Feathers flitted all around us as if angels’ wings had huddled about, drawn close, then swooshed past our ears. Birds swooped up past the rafters, skimmed along the pitch-sealed cedar planks, dove down to the floor of the hull, then circled back up topside of the Ark for a bit of sun. Plumes ruffled the air into some language we could almost understand. Almost. If we’d only listened closer.

“I still don’t understand– OK, so tell me. Tell me a story, Noah. Tell me what’s wrong with Caine and Abel.”

And it unfurled as these stories often do. Familiar, familial, two brothers bound by love and wrenched apart by envy. Fates sealed by murderous greed.

“Oh, that sorry tale,” I said. I flung a pitchfork of hay up into the manger stalls. “Sure, I’ve heard some version of it. Not quite as you’ve explained, not so far as I remember from my Dad’s telling of it. I knew them as Gilgamesh and Enkidu: life and death. They weren’t really brothers – not exactly: they were simply created for one another. Literally made for each other, by the pantheon or YHWH—”

“You mustn’t speak that name. Out of respect. Use the Great \_ \_ \_ \_ instead. After all, that’s what’s kept us afloat so far.”

“Sorry.” A flick of the wrist as I spun an orange peel in the air, watched to see if any fowl would thrust out its beak and snatch the skin from midair, waited for a neighing

horse to kick up a fuss, anxious for it's own piece of fruit. "So the Great Unnamed fashioned the semi-divine warrior Gilgamesh, realized he'd created a bit of an unruly monster, and then molded Enkidu from clay and tears to be the first warrior's balance, his equal and opposite. A yin and yang if you will. But one didn't *kill* the other – that would've upset the divine order."

"You're making less sense than a pea-hen's brains," you said.

"All right. Consider *your* telling. Caine kills Abel. That means only Caine spreads his seed. So we are all children of Caine, the fabled sons and daughters of Abel having seeped into the fields from the bloody blow his brother struck to his head. Is that about right?" You nodded, pushed the hay about your feet back and forth as if trying to look back into history through some portal at the base of the Ark's bowels. "So would the Great \_ \_ \_ \_ honestly allow a murderer to flower the earth? Let the brother with the mark on his head spill out into future generations? Let bloody Caine be the father of us all?"

"Well. I never thought of it that way I suppose. Just figured the word's the word." You looked up, your blue eyes shifting in that way that the sky darts from deep azure to pale white-blue. "So if you're telling is different from my telling, who's to say what's what?"

"We both know what's what in this," I say as I reach my hand up to brush the fine copper filaments of your hair away from your brow. As I fall into your bright blue eyes for a moment. As I lean in, kiss you. "What's what is no great deity would ever propel the world ahead with anything but love."

We could hear activity above, our sons roaming about and swabbing the deck, the creaking of the boat, rain splattering the surface. When would it all let up?

“Come, let’s figure this out,” I insisted. “Let’s tell it all right. Set the word straight.”

After all, we bore no scrolls onto the Ark, carried no histories but those in our heads, knew no truths but those we believed. And in a world made anew, archeological remnants buried deep under miles of waves, what more truth might there ever be than the truth we set out?

We debated how best to chisel, scrawl, mark, or carve a proper Genesis along the planks of the Ark. We decided to start with the supporting beams, then work around the inner hull, hoist ourselves up using the pulleys our sons had devised for collecting eggs from the nests burrowed amidst the rafters.

But where to begin?

I said: “How about, *Once upon a time...*?”

You said: “Rather redundant, don’t you think? Isn’t Once always a Time unto itself? Isn’t Time rather murky and timeless without that marker of Once a story begins?”

“Any better ideas?” I jabbed.

“How about, *In the beginning...*?”

I said: “Meh. A bit predictable. We’re human: we’re always beginning something. Stirring up some trouble or another. Besides, doesn’t your version of the stories have that oddly muddled double-beginning? What with Adam’s two wives?”



“Oh that. Lilith and Eve. Right. Never did make sense: a woman made of clay *and* a woman made of rib. A clay rib – sure, that I could go along with. But two tangents? Weave the plot together, that’s all I ask. And don’t get me started on that apple...”

“App/pull? What’s that?” I said.

“Exactly! It’s supposed to be the forbidden fruit. Fruit of knowledge. Makes no sense to import something from an Orient we haven’t even sailed to yet – to introduce a fruit that hasn’t yet buoyed its way out to us. No. They should’ve stuck with Pomegranates.”

“Yeah – I like those. Ruby bright skin, a tuft of pollen at its crown-like top (is that its navel, I wonder?), and its flesh. Firm flesh that crunches open at a bite or a smack and reveals seed upon glorious seed, each sweet and tangy and full of it’s own succulent juice. Makes you just want to nibble and suckle and swirl them about before swallowing, then dive in for more.”

“Yup. Just like knowledge: a million seeds and your hunger’s still not sated.” You stroked the scraggly months-long fire-bright scruff of your beard, nodded your head to some voice or music I couldn’t hear, and said, “You’re right. After all, why would the Great \_ \_ \_ \_ breed us based on fratricide only to turn around and try to drown us all? We need to fix the telling, spell it out right. So how do we begin?”

We clasped our hands together, fingers gripping and massaging one another the way we sometimes did when trying to figure a thing out, trying to make sense of the

world before us, as if tracing the knot on a plank of wood to suss out an answer when the answer lies only in touch.

“*First,*” we both spoke in unison, “first when the world...”

First when the firmament was one great cymbal struck, the bang and quake reverberated atoms from out naught. Some bits of ions rung adrift and set the universe a ripple. Protons practiced the wind while neutrons stroked the vine. Comets shot past myriad notes while asteroids sung anew. Light flared out a bright mosaic in the air. The Music of the Spheres did ring the Empire of the Ear and boomed. All throughout every earth and orbit, sounds of victory of majesty of hallelujahs reached out to Heaven. Trebles and bass conceived colonies of progeny, each note uttering itself, each word demanding that some next naming follow, a strand of sounds insisting to be heard.

“And Eden – don’t forget the Garden,” you said. “Or the four rivers.”

“Easy enough,” I said.

The rivers run past Eve and Adam’s, swerved from shore to bend of bay to Eden bower and then sloshed back up against the spacious sprawl of slip. We lay washed up along the headwaters, docked between two pier-like trees. Our bodies lay and clung. Tongues wagged and named and hushed. Hushed like the whoosh of seagulls, whished like the calls of gulls, washed up near the fens and finned again past memory. Remember the rustle of that first nomenclature? The longing and clangoring and laboring of lips to give names to every last creature that bustled along our banks? Lips, the keys to the kingdom given, lost, then strung along the marsh. Away alone at last beloved we skirt

along the riverbanks of Eden, from spill of sound to curl of quay, come roaring full circle back as the rivers run past Adam and Eve's.

We scrawled and chiseled, scarred the Word into the Ark. Then, after two months the rains settled. Three more months and we sought proof of earth.

So we set our birds free, loosed cormorant (Abel) and albatross (Caine), the pair having bonded as much with each other as with us. Who would've expected either to return? Seabirds swooping merrily above the waves, the call to land merely some faint echoed summons for a place to rest, a need as easily met by a floating plank of wood, a coalesced mass of debris, an ark.

Days later, Abel swooped back through a hatch, his black feathers circled the rafters with what might have been an olive twig clutched in its beak. But it circled and circled and seeing no sign of Caine just flew back out and away into horizon.

And when that white sprawl of feathers finally landed on the bow of your boat, when our restless goony bird waddled its way towards us, when in the bright midday our albatross Caine dropped a bunch of grapes between us then flew back out into the brilliant rainbow of sky towards its missing cormorant mate, we knew the time for disembarkation lay at hand. Proof enough the earth had reclaimed its place in the world. Crimson, pink, gold, green, blue, and black grapes glistened like a constellation of gemstones laid before our feet – a cluster of juicy orbs shone polished to a radiant gleam, while others languored still dull and filmy with earth, like drowsy stones eager for the toil and sweat of hands to polish off their hazy surfaces into a ripe luster – jewels still

strapped to a tough cutting of vine lengthy enough for you to start a new, lustrous vineyard. In time we would drink a wine-red toast to our home made anew.

Our paths first crossed the fall before the Flood. I stumbled onto you as you tended sheep. There you stood, lean and muscular as a pillar in the horizon. And I – weary of my travels, having wandered westward through the wilderness, from Uruk that lay east of Eden towards the volcanic peaks of Ararat – I stepped towards you. Stopped. Stood ready to lay my burdens down.

“Cham,” you said as you passed your staff to me, “stay.”

You taught me how to herd and shear, how to flock and gather, how to love.

Perhaps it’s no wonder that some Nicene Council or another decreed it best to recast our lot as father and son: re-consider all you taught me, all the ways in which you guided me, all the ways I learned from you.

And our bodies, what to make of our bodies as our robes slipped open like tent flaps flicked up by a night wind; what to make of our bodies as we saw one another revealed by a shaft of moonlight piercing your tent – you circumcised and I not; what to make of our bodies as we wrestled and nestled, as our bodies entered each other as easily as spilled water seeps into sand; what to make of our bodies as our tongues quenched one another before thrusting into each other – fingers first – guiding whole bodies; what to make of our bodies entering, penetrating, entering, stroking, entering, releasing, exiting, resting. How casually we stepped from one world to another, hid away from the wide

unsheltered sky by thrusting through the slit of a tent – fingers first – all in search of comfort, companionship, the warm company of embrace.

After the Flood – after your vineyard had flourished to where we could lay under the vibrant green canopy of leaves filtering the sun, dappling our hands in showers of light as our fingers reached across the pliant blades of grass towards one another, palms meeting and clasping, all the passion within our cells expressed through our fingers as we lay beneath your grape vines – when your sons discovered us inebriated and naked in your tent, it was not you or the Great Unnamed that cursed my own son, but simply the envy of Shem and Japheth lording over Canaan, dividing our houses for generations to come.

I'm re-telling these tales in order to set our pasts right, re-writing our histories so that the truth of us might fly free and wild as seabirds, re-membering the many ways our bodies met so as to make room for the future. For there must be a future, some future, some bit of hope for me to believe in a future that brings us close together once more. Closes us in.

In the beginning, in that first story of you, the one unearthed in Nineveh found chiseled into what's often referred to as the Book of He Who Saw the Deep (though it's really less a book than a tablet), in this first story they've fashioned us nearly right. Too much myth, too much mortality, too much made of namable gods, too much of storytellers didacticizing our lives, our excursions.

True: you met Utnapishtim – twice – but that first time we met him together. We wanted to speak with the first man to rise above a Great Flood. Wanted to know how best to warp and shape wood into a hull, how best to bind planks to build decks, whether to rely on sails or oars or that new-fangled machination you'd named engine. We wanted to learn how to float and sail and boat. Wanted to know the world and what better way than by water?

“Boating for beginners,” Utnapishtim insisted. “Easy enough if you're willing to learn.”

And we've always been beginners in this, always learning to navigate new waters.

Then: we sailed the black waters, trudged the white-capped peaks, journeyed to Cedar Mountain to slay some beast or another, or merely to quell our desires.

Then: your rebuff of Ishtar, goddess of night and stars and sex and war. Why should war and sex be braided so? Why not the ease and touch of friendship ruffled up and frothed up into something more, something beautiful and perfect? Something free?

Then: Ishtar's bull, our slaying of that minotaur, its horn piercing my flesh.

Then: darkness.

Perhaps the Great Unnamed *did* create me for you, wild man to your lordship, the yin to your yang, my body set before you to balance the frivolity you weighed upon the world. Some called it chaos, the destructive force of an untamed you. But I know it was merely passion, a thirst for the world that no ocean could quench; a hunger for beauty only I could feed because part of the beauty you saw in me was merely a reflection of you. How else to explain the way our bodies matched one another, touch for touch,

motion for motion, spar for spar as we wrangled, laid each other bare before the beginning of the world, willing to wrestle past the end of the world, stood arm in arm in the dawn – as equals – found our hearts quelled and settled by one another. Against one another. By heaven. By earth. By water.

I see them now, medical technicians bringing me a crown, a thing as hard and cold and glimmering and bright as sunlight on a steel grey sea.

Halo brace pinned to head. Pointed sharp pain drilling into forehead despite conscious sedation. Bolts screwed into skull. No way to move.

“Do anything,” Abel had pleaded with Dr. Ishtar. “Whatever helps, for as long as it— Do whatever it takes.”

“We can salvage him,” Dr. Ishtar had replied.

Salvage. Not save. As if I were nothing but a remnant. As if my body were no more than broken boat bits rescued from the sea. As if my bones were just rotted wooden planks dredged up out of ocean. As if my cells had been so flooded and drowned out by cancer that it wasn't a matter of if but when. Just wait. Salvage and let go. Brace onto that halo until there's nothing left to hold then un-embrace.

At least there'll be no fear of that pressure of release, of unclamping as the bolts are undone leaving little drops of blood trailing from my forehead. None of that. Just darkness.

Noah, my dear Noah: I *am* the Enkidu to your Gilgamesh. Mind of my mind, heart of my heart, the dark to your light: my dear friend, may you shine radiant as I wane. Brother to my intellect, cohort to my (mis)-adventure, twin to my desire, partner to my soul: do not go out in search of immortality. Do not rail against the world for our loss. Do not bury your world in grief, do not walk with a mouthful of ash, do not drown at the thought of an ocean without me.

Love as we once loved. Love Sally as you did when we first met – as you in fact always have – and love Jonah twice enough for both you and me. Love enough to let me float and waft within your brain as a memory forever sparking across your synapses; let me glint like the ripple and shimmer of sunlight across the waves; let me linger like the infinite glare of sun spread across the endless loop of the world's one vast sea. The one true ocean.

The sea.

Yes, I can see it now, the light hitting the waves all at once, everywhere at once: the Great Southern Ocean welcoming and swallowing the Antarctic, steadily chipping it free from ice; the Arctic Ice Cap melted down to a few roaming islands of glaciers, wayward ice floes reflecting light from the bright blue-white of the ice, deflecting white from pale blue sky to the deep cobalt of ocean, refracting light along the earth's curvature back towards me, bending the heavens and seas to greet me.

True: I have one more body of water to traverse, one more bevy of waves calling out to me, one last rivulet to travel.



True: I can see the waters rising, swelling up, busting past the Styx' banks, the waves crashing towards me, reaching out to swallow and wash, river and deliver me home.

Is it you I see, Noah, standing there at the helm of the Ark? So bright, the waves and horizon so blue, blue as your eyes, no lines anymore between ocean and sky, no lines between us now.

Is that Jonah I see beside you – or just an oar in your hand? Is your Ark a canoe these days? A dinghy? A light craft skimming across the surface of our waters? A skiff?

Sunlight flares, blinding, dizzying, making my eyes water. I can't move my head, can't shield my eyes. The world glints and shimmers, dazzles and shifts, scuttles away.

Is that Abel to the other side of you Noah, or just the tall stretch of your shadow? Abel, my love, has he come back to send me off? Has he forgiven me – soul of my soul, heart of my heart? He always knew my heart was too big, room enough for two – a double-heart only faithful to love. To love and be loved and loved and love in return. All I ever sought in this world, all I ever found in Abel, and in you, Noah, unexpectedly in you: love.

Is that Abel, or your shadow, or mine own self? Am I nothing but a shadow now? No, the light is too bright, too vivid, the scattering of sun too noisy for shadows. Bright yellow like a buzzing of bees.

And Sally, is she standing there behind you, hidden by your frame? Sally, has she forgiven? Will she see me one last time? Sally? I'm sorry. Noah I'm sorry. Never meant to pain your wife. Never meant to muddle your marriage. Never meant for all of

this to unravel. I just looked into your eyes one day and drowned. Can you blame me for falling? Can the world blame either of us?

Noah, yes, I see you now, a bit taller, youthful as the day we first met, so bright, your face glows bright as a flame, the copper fire of your hair a corona blazing and shimmering in the air, and your eyes that piercing boundless blue of summer, you shine so bright as you stand at the helm with an oar in your hand and you reach your hand out to take mine, your strong calloused fingers gripping me tightly as you help me board, you've come my love you've come at last to ferry me across the water.

## PART II: THE BOOK OF JONAH

riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay, brings us by  
a commodious vicus of recirculation back .... under whitespread wings like he'd come  
from Arkangels, I sink I'd die down over his feet, humbly dumbly, only to washup. Yes,  
tid. There's where. First. We pass through grass behush the bush to. Whish! A gull.  
Gulls. Far calls. Coming, far! End here. Us then. Finn, again! Take. Bussoftlhee,  
mememormee! Till thousandsthee. Lps. The keys to. Given! A way a lone a last a  
loved a long the

*Finnegans Wake* – James Joyce

**CHAPTER 15: RIVERS, LAMENT (1885 – 2025)**

Every river has a soul

They say sometimes that this soul gets split, gets fractured into rivulets, tributaries, seasonal runoff.

Sometimes this soul gets flailed and flayed and floundered into lost streams.

Sometimes it's people that split a river's soul, by naming and renaming, flinging words like spit to see what catches hard and mean and true. To see what sticks.

Take this river south of us, my Uncle Caine once told me. We stood on La Lomita as it crested past the flat, raggedy, crabgrass stretch of his dry childhood backyard. He pointed over the little hill, to the muddied waters separating the U.S. and Mexico. What was once the feral, untamed Río Bravo is now the Rio Grande River, he explained. Such redundancy, as if the river didn't know itself. And what was it before that, back when the Tejas Indians trailed its banks?

Names lost to the river of time.

Sometimes mankind bisects rivers with bridges, bounds waterways into canals, bifurcates and reroutes channels into reservoirs. Water once free to spill over its own banks now lies chained and contained for mankind's use. In these matters, the river has no say. If it weeps or yearns or wails we seldom hear.

But if at night you draw up close and listen, if you pull up near those sage-scrawled riverbanks, then the murmurs you hear might be the Rio Grande River talking to itself, trying to remember what it once knew of itself, of its waters. Or those river-moans might be the cacophonous call of a crane to its lost mate, a bellowing heron seeking out its blue-winged counterpart, cattails reeding back and forth in a symphony of lost marshes.

Or it might be the ghostly wails of a woman who's drowned her children. Might be Alma Aguabuena. Alma Goodwater longs to reach back into the river and pull her young out, yank them free, raise them back onto the bank, push and thrust their fragile chests with all the fierce pain of labor. Push and breathe. Their little lungs floundering like fishes smacked breathless with air. Her twins' tender bodies flailing in the cool South Texas breeze of an autumn evening. But they won't resuscitate. Her children can't be put back. That Rio Grande riverbank can't unswallow the past anymore than a river can unname itself. And so Alma won't ever bring her offspring back from the river. All is lost, all hope drowned, so all she's left to do is haunt.

Follow the Gulf Coast further north towards Galveston, to that river Spanish explorers first called the River of the Arms of God, and you might hear the garbled cries of a woman. Another Alma? The same Alma? Stories slurry, slip, and wake. But sound ricochets. This Alma's grief is a gurgling rattling noise like sobs clutched tight in the throat of clanging pipes and waterworks, like the cries of a woman who drowned her kids in a bathtub and whose wails forever echo in those copper pipes.

But perhaps it isn't the sound of pipes at all, just the rattling chains of some other Alma who sought to unchain herself from misery. Some say her husband left her for another. Some say her lover spurned her because of her children. Some say she grievously never learned to love her brood. But no matter the telling, one fact holds true.

Alma Calletano Bautista took her children for an afternoon picnic, one warm spring afternoon, drove them out to a pier on the Brazos River, and after they'd eaten, after she'd lulled them to sleep in the back seat of her faded brown station wagon, after she'd taken a length of chain out of the trunk and set it onto the pier, after she'd nearly sealed the windows (leaving just a crack for the water to rush in) set the car in neutral and released the parking brake, after she'd closed and locked the doors, she chained herself to the rear bumper, gave one push and then another—as if recalling the way she'd birthed her babies—felt the car roll ahead towards the river.

But something gave, something came unhinged. Maybe rust had eaten away at the chain links and they snapped loose. Maybe the padlock broke open of its own accord—as open as her heart had busted when she smelled the scent of not-her-but-someone wafting from her husband's neck and later fingered the lipstick smudge she'd had to scrub from his collar (not even her shade, not that she'd had occasion to gussy up since the twins had been born). Or was it the scent of her children's necks that broke the chains—that innocent scent of sweat not yet old enough to turn musky? Maybe it was just plain old pain that had figured how to wend its way into the future, hurt all doubled-up and licking itself the way a river curls and laps, never satisfied, never whole, maybe it was just misery that found its way out and unchained her.

No matter the means, she just stood there, chains undone and fallen all around her, slowly rattling along the pier, chains following the station wagon into the Brazos River's open arms, chains leaving her behind. By the time she came to her senses, by the time she dove in the water, by the time she banged her fists against the window—lungs all gulped up underwater—it was too late.

And so she wept and goes on weeping. Some say Alma Calletano Bautista still trolls along the riverbank by night, follows the trail of the longest river in Texas from its headwaters at Blackwater Draw to its mouth at the Gulf of Mexico, meanders strolls and waltzes under over and back again along the river.

Skip along the Gulf Coast, slip up into one of the Mississippi's many mouths, and you might stride into a slurry stretch of water that the locals call Speed River. Once there you might hear of Aegina. Gina, as they knew her. Gina with her rust-drenched tresses. Gina who seemed to hear some song the river sang. Dear Gina, lost in a flood.

She left her heart alongside the river, because the river was the only thing that ever cradled her, comforted her, drew her in.

It drew her in so that her heart was nothing but silt and mud and banks that kept shifting and twisting and gutting the fish all about her, including that fish that kept wrangling and wiggling and wending its way towards her: Jonah. She'd hoped he'd be enough—shoulders broader than banks, his bright copper hair, eyes bluer than riverwater—enough to quell her own waters. But even after him, she kept aching for more, like a

riverbank waiting to get overrun, a riverbed waiting to shift, a rivermouth waiting to spillover and puke itself forward into some new tidalbank. What to make of this tidal force, this surge, this riverrun?

Aegina wanted to give birth within the river, but her husband refused. Sillyness, Jonah was certain. But it meant more to her than he could ever fathom. The river pulsed inside her. As spring gave way to runoff, as Speed River swelled and spilled over, Gina birthed Jonah Jr. by the riverbank.

And when Jonah Jr. was 7, a flashstorm eroded those some birth-banks just as Aegina wandered out along the rush of water. Just so, Speed River swelled and swept Gina away.

All Jr. could do was watch. Holler for Dad. Wait.

And remember.

That last lingering sloshing image of his mother, as she laughed out into the river, as the waters done dunked and downed and drowned her, her smiling face, the low pitched alto of her joy as she gave up and slipped into the waters as if slipping out of a womb into some newfangled being. Some new beginning. Birth.

If you follow the Potomac up to where it feeds and is fed by the Chesapeake Bay, you might hear a tale of some other wandering wailer, someone who's lost a thing he or she held dear.



It unfurled as these tales often do: a flung stone of discovery skipping across the surface yet rippling and troubling the depths of home waters, causing waves and wakes of consequence.

Norah stood by the skiff on the shore and told her husband, Jonah Jr.: “I’ve done seen what you’re up to.” The Bay lulled unseasonably calm while Norah’s heart thundered as she recollected.

A glint of sunlight had flinted from Jonah’s gold wedding band onto a bright silver grappling hook hanging from a rafter in the shed. This glint drew her eyes down, down from wood beams to the thick solid stance of her husband next to his trawl-mate Wally. And it wasn’t even their proximity that troubled her. Wasn’t even their stoic shoulders hunched towards one another like trestles waiting to meet but forever kept apart and at bay by beams and bridges and breaches.

No. What stuck in her craw, what kept her restless for nights on end, was the sight of her husband’s fingers woven into Wally’s, the need and hunger and ache of bodies wrestling and wrangling into one another that spelled itself out in their fingers grappling and roping and braiding. Jonah and Wally. Knotting into one another. She could see whole bodies in the way the morning sunlight slicked and shimmered off the hair on their knuckles and wrists.

Gold upon gold upon copper and bronze: Jonah’s tan and freckled fingers clashing against Wally’s darker sunbaked hand. And the sight of it blinded Norah, unsteadied her, upended her. And in that moment—light glimmering from ring to wrists

to hook—all those overnight fishing trips and camp outs and nights when Jonah would stagger in smelling a little like Jack Daniels, a little like himself, and a little like something muskier and heavier—not rank or sour as dredge but guilty with silt—those nights coalesced into something stranger and more worrisome than any riversurge could be.

Norah’s waters became troubled, riotous.

Her waters crested, then stilled.

“I’ve seen it, and there’s no denying. Just you and him keep it away from me. Keep away from my son.” Because she had Artemio to protect, her son Temo to shield. And no trawlers, fishing folk, or crabbers would shift her boy the way these two pesky perch floundered and wiggled towards one another. No son of hers would be kin to all that fishy business. No son of hers. No heart of hers.

And if Jonah was silent before—quiet and steady as the flat grey calm of waters before a clap of thunder—then he grew more silent still. Said nothing: no complaint, no defense.

So Norah gathered herself in, forced herself to fall fallow, witnessed her own red riverbed blow dry and dusty and cracked. Her husband could have his pleasure elsewhere, she figured. She didn’t need any touch of her own. But the years weighed and stretched and parched in around her. She hungered for a riverraised fish like a river hungers for its bed. Still nothing wended its way into her: no man, no joy, no life. She thought about taking her son out into the water, sinking it all, but only skimmed past the idea, knew she could never let go of her boy, her blood, her truth.

Her son grew from seven to thirteen. The dry heave of sorrow eclipsed Norah as her barrenness settled in. She drew scorn, plain old scorn, into herself. Then she led Jonah out onto the water just once more.

“Once more,” she said. “Like you used to take me, before we had Temo.” Before she’d lost their second baby. And before Wally troubled their waters.

“Why can’t I see Uncle Wally?” Artemio had asked her shortly after she’d found them out.

“Because. You just can’t. Besides, he isn’t even your Uncle. Heck his name’s not even Wally.” She’d muttered this last bit under her breath: Guadalupe, she’d thought, a woman’s name. Figures. She crunched it like gravel under tires.

“To Keel Island, out on the Bay,” she told Jonah. A glint of tenderness shimmered through her voice, a light brightness she’d denied him these past few years. “Just us, so I can remember.”

He acquiesced, not figuring the fierce angle of her heart, not imagining the serrated anger she kept buried inside her, sleek and sharp as a fish-gutting knife. And as the boat trolled along the Bay, the motor thrusting up against water and wind, halfway to Keel, at the deepest part of that slip of the cove, she said “Look, is that Artemio? Skirting into the water?”

Jonah turned, glanced sidelong past Norah’s shoulder. She lifted an oar from the bowels of their tiny boat and swung that oar around, back onto his neck, the oar’s arm cracking against his spine while the long wide curve of the blade struck his skull and

stunned him dead even, sent him flailing overboard. He lurched up against the water, but the tiller swung rogue. The boat circled round and round. As he surfaced, his head smacked the motor. Another concussion. And from there all it took was a push and a shove and it was over. He was over and churned.

And as Norah motored back to shore, there stood Artemio, lone and still as he watched his mother approach the barren dock alone.

Had she tied a chain to Jonah's ankles, weighed him down into the murkiest depths of the Chesapeake Bay? She couldn't remember. A boating accident, she told the authorities. Can't understand what happened, she murmured. Of course, they figured, an accident. Couldn't imagine this tiny woman bringing harm to her husband, could they? Couldn't perceive that the strength of women sometimes wells up from something deeper than love or loyalty, something more rotten and ruinous than distrust, something as turbulent and villainous as vengeance.

But Artemio knew. Or knew well enough. Knew that his Dad hadn't simply abandoned him. Knew enough to tell Uncle Wally, "The water's took him."

And they say a man wailed that night, long and hard, bellowed over into and under the water. That man remembered how his cousin, Alma, had wandered restless along rivers. So he searched and skulked along the Bay, followed its rivulets and streams and rivermouths in hopes of finding what he'd lost. He waved farewell to Artemio, then went lunging south, following rivers and creeks, looking for Jonah's bones, beckoning each waterway to ferry him home to his lost love.

But no river ever answered.

So he drove further south, even, back to his roots, back to the river that delivered him. Because it was said that his mother birthed him on a bridge—and that in this delivery his mother had split her soul apart. That in that lost midmost space between Mexico and Texas, Matamoros and Piedras Prietas, that no-man’s-land that marks the middle of the ever-shifting Rio Grande, one soul was drowned while another soul surfaced.

But who can ever mark a place in water? They say he was a creature of two countries, citizen of none by birth, by birth merely the river’s son left floundering. And he—this child of water—married and raised a family all his own. But unto his death, my Uncle Caine remembered hearing his grandfather some nights, weeping down by the river, wailing “Amor, amor! Perdido!”, calling after his drowned lover.

What Caine couldn’t have known—what even my father didn’t know until I rescued my great-grandmother Norah’s diaries and my grandmother Joan’s letters from our house after the flood—was the ways in which their grandfathers’ affair had bound their bloodlines together.

Maybe those rivers listened after all, remembered the spiraling reproduction of genes. Maybe the waters pooled together during the long slow lap of wave-time to conspire a reunion. Because despite the decades, the miles, whole lives played out in opposite directions, the Bywater and Calletano clans met once more. Call it destiny,

luck, or fate. Somehow the sheer shuddered madness of water spilled past riverbanks and flooded shore with silt, drew Caine and Noah close.

## CHAPTER 16: A STUDY OF THE WORLD'S FLESH

Any study of the body of the world requires time,  
distance, and the steady unflinch of somber gaze.

### I. Water : Agua Bendita (1910 - 1954)

Esperanza portaged her pregnant belly from Laguna Madre on the Mexican coast of the Gulf of Mexico overland to the banks of the Delta del Río Bravo and nearly made it across the rank brown river into Piedras Prietas, Texas before the contractions kicked in.

Her husband, José—because all men in the borderlands are burdened with that name—borrowed a friend's motorcar, buckled Esperanza into the backseat, and made his way across the brand new puente until the traffic of people, carts, and celebration snarled the route midway. He'd opted for the bridge, thinking it faster than the ferry between Matamoros and Piedras Prietas. He'd imagined flat, sleek pathways, a smooth new road, an easier way. But what he drove into was a tangle. Callejeros, bicicletas de vendedores de antojitos, niños selling Chicle, viudas mestizas vendiendo cruces de Ojo de Dios all cluttered and crowded the bridge as the lent taxi stalled as wooden as the car's door panels.

“Ahí viene,” Esperanza cried: the baby was coming.

Caught in that nebulous space where El Río Bravo transforms into the Rio Grande River, Esperanza's body bucked in the rearview mirror. The river swelled in time with her body.

Storm-surge without a hurricane, riverwaters cresting, a flash-flood on a clear day eroding banks on either side of the border, straining the bridge's pylons, cracking the cement walkway, wrenching the railings and shredding the razor-wire-fences: strange that water should cause such destruction.

"Bendíganos, nuestra Señora de Guadalupe," José prayed, his palms at the steering wheel. He wrenched the taxi doors open, eased his wife out of the backseat, slipped her into the water as the river parted open like Esperanza's cervix, and waded her across to shore. There on the dank banks of Piedras Prietas, Esperanza gave one last empuje, her body burst into foam and silt, leaving nothing but a boy puckered on the river.

Strange that water should be the source of such desolation: José, a widower now, left alone to raise his son: José Guadalupe's first steps were finnings; he never learned to crawl.

Strange, that water.

José thought the birth a blessing. Named his son after La Virgincita. After all, he'd witnessed his wife transubstantiated, wafted bodily to heaven by way of the river.



The *Piedras Prietas Herald* dated 13 December 1910 recorded the event as the christening of a new world: “International Bridge Subsumes Flood.” A lock in the port at Boca Chica hadn’t been let out quite right, had gotten stuck during the washing out of the water and freeing up of riverbed as struts and foundations got laid into caliche; then as the river got let loose, the lock seized up and jammed; no one noticed until the St. Louis railway line buckled down through South Texas into Mexico, unrattled the earth, then released the lock just as the Piedras Prietas – Matamoros Bridge swung open. The rush of water was a mere consequence of pressure, a letting in of Atlantic Ocean into Rio Grande River, a valve-release, an equilibration.

*El Nuevo Tiempo de Matamoros* in Tamaulipas, Mexico transcribed a different articling of events. Page A3: “Niño Bendito: Madre de la Asunción [12 diciembre 1910]” got buried beneath articles about the coming Mexican Revolution. Pancho Villa, the Texan incursion, los gringos setting up camp all over Matamoros, the border all diluted and that was nothing for what was coming from the south and west and guerra.

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José Guadalupe Mar de Calletano never understood the fuss about his birth, his body, the tall pale lankiness of his flesh feathered in dark hair. Mi Lobito, his father often called him, My Little Wolf. Birthed from the Virgin’s holy waters: aguadelupe, agualupina, agualobo, Agua del Lobo, water-wolf. Eva-la-Curandera, the medicine woman who lived kitty-corner from them, simply told him he was blessed, “Tocado con agua bendita.”

Still, he never understood why water beckoned him, what drew him to work on the Piedras Prietas – Matamoros ferry as a teenager, what kept him manning that ferry back and forth across the monotonous murky green riverwater until the ferry shut down in 1929. An unsupportable business: What with the uptick in automóviles y coches crossing the bridge, who needed a boat? ¿Quién quiere un barco? So he roamed along the docks at Boca Chica where the little mouth of the river met the Gulf and Guadalupe learned the fishing trade, meandered out to Port Queen Isabel and South Padre Island—worked as a deck hand on a fishing boat—then wended his way up to Corpus Christi where he landed a job on a shrimping boat. “Qué Dios te bendiga, mijo,” were the last words he heard his father speak. “God be with you, Papá.”

Wally (as the gringo shrimpers rechristened him) never understood what it was about the rollicking waves and briny air that seemed to quell his penchant for wandering (“Born with sealegs, that Wally,” the shrimpers often said after the boat had a bout with a tropical storm).

And Wally would never understand what made him start dreaming of giant dust clouds encroaching the horizon, like a hurricane of dry clouding the coast in blackened ash. He couldn’t put a thumb on what drove him away again, just felt it—a reflex as natural as breathing—the pull to follow the contours of coasts, travel upwater, head north.

1938, just before the Dust Bowl’s third wave, Wally followed the black blizzard to the East Coast, figured dirt that had kicked itself all up into a frenzy couldn’t hurt him once it settled, drove his Chevy truck past Washington, DC, trekked over the Potomac into Maryland until he meandered onto the Chesapeake Bay, skidded roadside along the

Wye River and felt his stirrings settle. He took a spell scraping the barnacled skins of flat-bottom boats and crabber vessels. Soon enough, he landed jobs working the aquatic fields. Skiffs, nets, crab-pots, buoys, the sharp green scent of marshland. Not the raucous salty ocean he was used to, but a happy melding of water and work.

“I need a steady hand.”

Wally heard the low, gruff voice—more a grumble than speech. He lifted his head from the engine of the boat he was working on, the sun blinding his view of the dock, a bright red corona of hair framing high cheekbones, a square jaw. “I hear you’re reliable. Hear you got steady sealegs and skin that won’t quit.” Funny thing about Wally’s skin, the way it didn’t pink, burn, or blister; just sort of shifted from white to a caramel glow. Made some watermen talk while others gawked in awe: a body built for the Bay.

“What all you have in mind?” Wally asked. The promise of a schedule of steady work coupled with the company: it all smelled like greener pastures. Though in truth Wally was sold once the sunglare got out of his eyes and he focused on Jonah Jr.’s pale blue irises. “I’m all yours.”

All went swimmingly. A few months out, meeting Jonah’s wife, Norah, for the first time—a stout firecracker of a woman heavy with child—and Jonah’s son Artemio, the bright flare of his freckles so much like his father’s. Weeks later, Norah’s miscarriage, the doctor saying it’s the end of the line. Norah’s silence, Jonah’s frustration. Grief looming like a tropical depression getting ready to swirl and get all flung out into a hurricane.

“I just want Norah to be happy,” Jonah telling Wally, “instead it’s like she’s empty inside.”

“What about you—are you happy?” Wally clasping Jonah’s shoulder, muscle firm as an unripe peach.

“I wanna punch a hole in the world.” Jonah clenching his fists, his body stiffening as Wally embraces him, the two men breathing in tandem, their lungs pumping in a steady rhythm as easily as their hands working the water in time to the visible pulse of tide.

Wally driving Jonah back home in his blue Chevy. Wally flicking the station away from Billie Holiday singing “Strange Fruit.”

“Dammit!” Jonah dialing the station back.

“What the hell?” Wally saying as his fingers spring back to the radio dial.

Jonah’s grip on his hand now, clasping tight. “I’m listening.”

“Damn mournful if you ask me.” Wally holding his gaze steady on the road but out of the corner of his eye glinting the redfaced ire on Jonah’s face. “Besides, it’s my truck.”

Jonah slamming his fist into the dashboard.

Wally swinging the wheel and wrenching the truck off road onto the gravel.

“Let’s have this out!”

The two of them, forms swaying among the cattails, the roadside ditch sloping their bodies down. Jonah swings a punch to Wally’s ribs but Wally yanks away in time—a dance he learned many a time proving his manhood on the deck of a swaying

ship. Wally pulls his punches, teases Jonah down into the marshy wet, then an embrace, a kiss, lips stunned by the prickle of sandpaper stubble.

“What the hell was that?” Jonah says, too winded to yell.

“Anything you want it to be,” Wally says. For a moment neither flinches, forearm muscles taut beneath the rolled-up cuffs of their workshirts, the setting sun glinting copper and black off the thick hair on their wrists. Wally pulls Jonah back in close. Glenn Miller’s “Moonlight Serenade” playing on the drive back to Jonah’s place, both men quiet, their hands occasionally knotting together on the truck’s stick shift.

The rest is as easy as the diurnal undulations of tide: a back and forth, the steady increase of water levels followed by a letting go. Clench, release.

Months turned to years, Jonah Jr. and Wally composing a steady rhythm of work and touch, labor and affection. Artemio sprouting like a pole bean, learning a waterman’s ways, the deft means of ropes, knots, and nets. Wally getting ready to purchase his own boat and expand their business into a partnership. But what neither Wally Calletano nor Jonah Bywater Jr. cared to notice was Norah hovering about the edges of their entanglement. Norah as she scrubbed and beat Wally’s scent off Jonah’s shirts—cotton smashed and grated against lava rocks. Norah neglected.

Wally driving back from Annapolis after seeing the perfect boat: he’d been ready to strike a deal but something at the back of his brain kept bugging him. Better have Jonah take a look. But what he met as pulled into the Bywater driveway was Norah sobbing into the deputy’s arms, Artemio steadying himself against the police car’s trunk,

Jonah's absence palpable as a cold front heavying the air, Artemio's blue eyes hard as steel catching Wally's gaze and saying, "The water's took him. Dad's gone."

Search parties, trawlers, nets: no body.

Launching the skiff out into the Chesapeake, circling the waters where Norah claimed she'd last seen Jonah, Wally came to know the truth of his existence: that everything he could have every truly loved was taken up all too soon by water.

~ ~ ~

Repelled by water or propelled? Wally could never quite tell. He'd avoided water since moving back to Texas. 1950, a year after Jonah's submergence, Wally met an oilman from Matamoros who promised him a steady, land-locked job so long as he managed his string of gas stations. He needed someone who could speak la lengua de los gringos, could move in their circles like a fish takes to water, a son-in-law to take good care of his hija preciosa, his lovely Lupita. Friendship, Wally figured at the first sight of María Guadalupe—her short curved frame, the strong gaze in her eyes that reminded him of Norah in her kinder days—made a pact and wed thinking ahead to a legacy all his own.

Wally remembered how it was between him and Jonah: as easy as touching his own body, the flat hard expanse of his chest, the tuft of fur at the small of his back a slight echo of the fur swirling around his navel, the heft of Jonah springing up in his hand in mutual arousal. Jonah had told him once how it was with Norah, how he'd learned to please his wife, found joy in her pleasure. "It's different with you," Jonah had said once

as he laid his head on Wally's shoulder, "I don't have to think, it all just comes natural." Calm and fierce all at once, Wally thought, like waves.

No more water, Wally promised himself. He was tired of all that welling up and drowning. He would learn to love María Guadalupe, build friendship, companionship, find joy in pleasing her. He would learn to work Lupita's body the way he'd learned to cast and tease a fishing line, would learn the murmur of her skin and know just when to reel her in. A love quieter than Jonah's, like the Chesapeake Bay on a windless day.

"Nunca me llevas al mar," his darling wife Lupita said every summer. The sea, she wanted to see the sea.

"No tengo tiempo, mi amor," he always replied. Never enough time. Truth was, Wally avoided bodies of water the way a man avoids a good dream turned nightmare by bursting up from sleep (or the way a sane driver averts a low-slung road after a downpour because the fear of flash-flooding is too real). He'd heeded water's call once before and what had it got him? Just loss and wandering back.

His wife made her way to South Padre anyway, strolled along the seashore with her hermanas y comadres, but it wasn't the same without Wally.

Then one late spring in 1953, the curve of Lupita's waist swelling slightly, Wally got home from a day of breaking ground on a new gas station only to find his senses assaulted by a pound of Gulf shrimp his wife had brought home. At the whiff of that shrimp, as Lupita rinsed their curved little cold, pale bodies—the kitchen air heavy with the scent of brine and wet—Wally's pulse raced, his ears felt hot as the noonday Texas

sun, his mouth watered as for a moment the salt-clean tang of Jonah's skin came flooding back to his lips, his tongue. He loped across the room, looped around the kitchen table, wrapped his arms about Lupita's belly, kissed her cheek and said, "Oh darling, mi amor." And if asked at that moment whether he murmured his love to Jonah, Lupita, or the fledgling kicking in Lupita's womb, he would've said there was no telling, no difference at all between the three.

The shrimp, breaded and fried, rich with butter and a light squeeze of lemon, was only the beginning. Shrimp dainty as earlobes cluttered their sink, kitchen counter, dinner table. Still, Lupita wasn't sated. Jumbo shrimp, big as Wally's thumb; crawdads, lobster, scallops, mussels, calamari: they sampled them all. Scampi, Fra Diavolo, Alfredo, Lemon-Garlic.

Lupita craved the sea. But more than that, it was as if she could hear the Gulf sloshing inside her, wave after wave ebbing. "Tiene que ser el bebé," she said.

Wally even borrowed one of the station attendant's fishing rods, made a few fishing trips to Laguna Madre and brought home cleaned fillets of flounder, speckled trout, redfish, king mackerel for his wife. (Though he kept away from casting nets. Some actions were best left undone.)

Still Lupita craved more. Then, mid-September, at El Origen restaurant in Matamoros, Lupita tried a soft shell crab and her hunger hit its mark.

The smell of the crab drenched in garlic and oil; the smile on his wife's face: Wally loved her in that moment the way a man cherishes a memory just before he wakes—the way he felt some mornings after seeing Jonah's bright blue eyes or hearing



the rumble of his voice in a dream. Joy, pure joy. So he bought-up crabs from along the Gulf as his wife reveled in the taste: crab bisque; crab beer soup; crab miso; crab salad with mango y pepino; crab dip with pretzel; jumbo lump with Tabasco, cilantro, and lime. It tasted like home to Wally, like those blue crab dawns out on the Chesapeake. He even stockpiled cans of crab for winter, though something began to needle at him.

Wally worried his wife would turn into the Gulf stream, her body become ocean.

Eva-la-Curandera's advice: Keep her grounded. Feed her rose petals folded into apple jam, a grating of thorns blended into corn and pine nuts, yerba buena chamomile tea with a hint of miel, mud thickened with mesquite ash mixed into oatmeal and lightened by hibiscus pollen, earth powdered into cake batter: feed her dirt.

When his wife entered labor, the contractions cresting like wave after wave crashing against the beach, he drove her as far upland as he could, up to la lomito a couple of miles away from their house, the little hill that overlooked the Texas – Mexico border.

“Hike her up as far from sea level as you can,” Eva had directed.

And when the baby came, the waters didn't rise, Lupita lay spent on the cool winter earth, laughing at the brightness she'd brought into the world as the sun rose across the bare Texas brush and warmth scraped up against mesquite branches to greet her, welcoming the beauty of their daughter, their perfect little dawn: Madrugada.

## II. Earth : Terremoto

(1972)

“In that field on the earth at dawn.” ~ Brian Henry, *Quarantine : Contagion*

Madrugada strolled la lomita overlooking the banks of the Rio Grande River, the January night air prickling the taut brown flesh of her distended belly as she scanned la frontera and waited. Would Dionisio come to her tonight? The question split her open, pounded like a nail in her chest. As the river sloshed below her, she caught the ripple of whirlpool glinting like ivory silk in the moonlight. The waters crested, parted open, Dionisio coming up for air from the swell of riverwater, lugging his pale reedy body up the muddy landing into Brownstones, Texas.

These evening visits, Madra didn't care how wet Dio's body was, the clammy pucker of gooseflesh that enveloped her. She marveled at how his skin glowed under the stars, his eyelashes wisps of gold, the cool glint of his long thin fingers feathered around her neck. The rush of under river flow pulsed beneath her heels whenever Dio drew close, as if the water knew their baby neared.

“Caña,” she said as she pressed Dio's palm against the kick inside her body.  
“We'll name her after cane, after the fields where you first had me, mi amor.”

She remembered sugarcane, cutting leaves swirled about her ankles, the firm knotted ribs of stalks bracing her arms as he entered—

He remembered it differently: rows of corn just past the ditch that slips into the river, stalks and earthmounds sheltering their bodies, the taste of cornsilk between his

teeth—bitter yet sweet as the promise of rain—leaves of ears cutting at his ankles as he entered—

“Cualquier cosa que deseas, mi azucar,” Dio whispered into Madra’s ear, “I’ll name her anything you want,” though he secretly wished for a boy: hair gold as cornsilk, eyes green as husks; he’d name him Cobb— un hijo Americano, a boy who would propagate.

Hand in hand they trailed down the little hill, routed away from the river out into the open field, a wide flat expanse where a resaca once lay, the dry inlet bed rich with loam. The soil pulled them in. In that field, on the earth, Madrugada lay split. Dirt, earth, bodies: Dionisio rained down on her fierce brown flesh, her body parched as the arid resaca. His glans to her lips, his seed to her throat. She thought of a terremolino wafting away, leaving dust and destruction on the ground. She pulled him back into her, pressed the pulse of his veins into her-self.

The beautiful storm is leaving us, she swallowed. “La lluvia nos lleva,” she whispered. “Ahí viene,” she gasped. She felt asphyxiated, all the air in the world abandoning her. Her water broke but instead of clear warm fluid trickling down her thighs, out slipped a slurry of sludge. The gush of murk pulsed from her womb, then darkness.

Dionisio beneath her then, cradling her back, his lips to her lips, resuscitating Madrugada, “Madra Madre Ma—” On the earth, in that field, Madrugada splayed at dawn. Her body shuddering and crumbling apart like a dried mudcake. Her fingernails

tilled the soil, one push then another claw / rake / striate, the dirt wedged into her nailbeds. Earth quaked beneath her, split.

“Cane,” she begged, aching for something to clench between her teeth as her body quavered one last push then dissolved into a furrow: from earth returned to earth. Arms-deep in sediment, Dio rutted and rooted through the muck until he dug out the newborn, brown as dirt, then sucked the mud out of the suffocating baby’s nostrils, wondered at the dark pucker of foreskin between the creature’s legs: Caine—as he entered the world.

## CHAPTER 17: WITNESS TREES

Norah wore a white dress to the wedding that day. Nothing too fancy—no lace or pearly frills. Just a simple white dress, the sort of thing she might wear on a picnic. The sort of dress she'd have worn to church on any other day. But today—today was different. Norah walked her son down the aisle, stepped in as she'd had to step in these past 15 years, guiding her fatherless boy along his way.

Joan wondered at the luminosity—no, the lunacy of the scene. Her soon-to-be-mother-in-law walking her soon-to-be-husband down the rose-petal-cluttered aisle. How Joan hated roses. So blasted ostentatious. Overwrought. She preferred baby's breath, carnations, plain old bright dandelions. And Norah looking so proud yet stoic, not the hint of a smile, her hand gripped tight around Artemio's elbow—as if the mother were proving she'd always be wedded to her son. Joan felt the cool prickle of gooseflesh despite the summer heat, and for once was grateful for the rayon backing of her white silk dress layering her arms. She wavered between pity and irritation: wearing white to her son's wedding—the gall.

Earlier, while waiting to get her dress zippered up, Joan had ranted about each last detail of the day—the photographer's lazy assistant, the pianist's arthritis, the bouquet

stems being too long. Just then, Norah had walked into the bedroom to check on the bride-to-be. Joan was certain she felt the temperature in the room drop a few degrees.

“The bouquet’s no worry,” Norah said to no one in particular. “Unlike people, stems are readily fixed. All you need’s a knife.” Silence cluttered about the room. “But a decent pair of scissors will do.” The bridesmaids scrambled for a pair of sharp things, anything to ward Norah away. In the flurry, they left Joan stranded, unzipped, her pale back exposed.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Joan felt the paper-thin skin of Norah’s hands brushing along her spine as she zippered up her wedding dress. It felt almost like being scraped by onion-skin vellum.

“You know, I never got to wear white when I married Artemio’s father.”

Stained?, Joan wanted to ask. But she kept silent. She thought how easily Norah bruised, despite her grit.

“Now, it’s not what you might think,” Norah said as if reading Joan’s thoughts. “Heck, it took me forever to get Jonah to touch me. But that’s another story,” she muttered.

“What color dress *did* you wear?” Joan asked.

“Red. Strange, I know, but my mother insisted. Years later, after Mama passed, I figured it out. That red wedding dress wasn’t about *me* at all. Mama’d just wanted her daughter to celebrate her new life wearing something exotic. Something Chinese. A good-luck glint of red.”

All zipped up, Joan was slow to turn around, constricted as she was. The rustle and scratch of her train nearly drowned out the gasp that escaped as she saw Norah's hand outstretched, a garnet necklace resting in her palm. "I thought this might be more appropriate."

"Mother Bywater," Joan said, "you shouldn't have."

"Now dear child—" Norah paused, drew her hand away from Joan's fingers, then placed her fingers on her future daughter-in-law's shoulder. "No, you're no child. Joan, there's no need to go around calling me 'Mother Bywater'. That'll be your name soon enough, Lord hoping."

"It's lovely," Joan said as she fingered the necklace. "Will you help me put this on?"

"Just something to remind you to hold onto yourself."

"But I've got Temo to hold me now," Joan said, soft as a sigh.

"That's just it," Norah said, fastening the necklace around Joan's pale nape. "If there's anything I learned after my husband's passing it's that every wife needs to learn to love herself. Be herself. Never know when you might get stranded."

Joan tilted her head, weighing Norah's words, but couldn't quite make sense of it all.

"Besides," Norah continued, "I'm worried there's too much of his father in him. It's hard to bridge a conversation with these Bywater men. They're silent. Slow to connect."

“Temo’s not like that at all. Can’t say what it is, but Temo’s so gentle with me...”

“Men don’t need to be gentle,” Norah said. “They just need to be true.”

Joan scrunched up her face as if a skunk had just sauntered by. She wondered what Norah might mean. Hadn’t Artemio been loyal to his mother all these years, despite Norah’s abrasiveness? And Temo was anything but quiet. He could talk up a storm quick as the lightning struck him. It was all a matter of interests. Mention plows and fields and his blue eyes lit up like a sky at daybreak. Bring up leases, contracts, and ledgers—the things Joan had learned from her own mother—and Temo glazed over a bit as if a cloud had just blotted the noonday sun. Joan stood up, looked over the veranda, watched the crepe-paper ribbons fluttering white and silvery in the sunlight like the Bay glistening in a foggy dawn. Then she laughed. Couldn’t help it—it struck her as ridiculous how little this woman knew of her own son. Oh, your son is true to me, Joan wanted to protest. But it’d serve no use. Temo had warned her often enough: Norah can be set in her own ways of thinking. The woman needed a taste of grace.

“I think our first will be a girl,” Joan said. “I’ve decided we’ll name her after you. Norah the Second.” The idea had drifted in, easy as a sailboat, caught Joan herself by surprise.

“And if your first is a he? What’ll you name him then?”

“Why, Noah I suppose.” An echo of Norah’s name.



“That’s a bit busy, don’t you think?” Norah nudged Joan’s shoulder. “Noah Bywater: sounds like a boy sure to get all caught up in a flood. Might be better off sticking with Junior.”

“Artemio Jr.?” Joan wondered aloud. “He says he wouldn’t much care for that, to weigh a child down with all his history.”

“What’s history got to do with it?” Norah asked.

“No offense Mother By—, I mean, Norah. But whatever happened to your husband still weighs on your son.” It still haunted Temo, the vision of his mother anchoring, alone; his father lost in the Bay. Joan imagined this slightly stooped woman boating away from Keel Island, the tiller under her fingers as the skiff’s jarring bounce propelled her back towards her son, Artemio.

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Myrtle Blankenship wore a black taffeta dress to her daughter’s wedding. Corseted tight at the waist, puffed up with ruffles and lace from ribcage to neck: all bodiced in black. Her dress brought out the solid black of her hair, still gleaming just like raven feathers as she neared mid-fifty. Myrtle even wore the black pearls her own mother had worn to her father’s funeral, the pearls she in turn wore as a widow nearly seven years ago at her husband’s memorial. Walter Blankenship: now there was a man. Tall and broad as an oak, eyes the color of honeycomb. Left her and her daughter, Joan, with waterfront properties and grocery stores dotting the Chesapeake from Colonial

Beach to Annapolis. A steady man, firm even in his dying. So unlike this Artemio her daughter was set to marry.

“Strikes me as a drifter,” she’d told Joan when Artemio first started courting. “A man without a father is a man without foundation.”

“For heaven’s sake, Ma, I’ve told you. His father drowned up near Keel Island.”

“Seems careless to lose a parent. Least they could’ve done was recover the poor man’s body.” She might could forgive the son—after all, he’d only been 10, a sapling. But the story of Jonah’s drowning made Myrtle suspicious of this Norah character, a woman who would now be braided into their lives. “What sort of person leaves things undone like that?”

“Temo was just a kid. Besides, *we* lost Daddy. You don’t go around accusing me of foolishness.”

“Don’t bring your father into this business, God rest his soul. He did good by us. What does this boy have to offer you but himself? And what sort of foreign name is Artemio anyway?”

“I’ve told you Ma, it’s an old family name. I saw it myself, scrawled into their family Bible, right before Genesis.”

Artemio Dandale: Temo’s great-grandfather, the man who skulked out of Virginia with Norton grape vine cuttings nearly a century before Prohibition. The story went that around 1820 a Dr. Norton in Richmond crossed grape varieties to create a hybrid whose grapes fermented into wine as rich and dark as Virginia soil. A couple of decades later,

Artemio learned the craft from old Dr. Norton himself. Artemio in his vineyards, his father in his still: a rift had formed between them.

It wasn't long before rumors of war started buzzing busy as bees in spring. "I've got no dog in this fight," Artemio the First told his father. "I'm not pointing a rifle at my cousins, let alone my brothers."

"I didn't raise a coward," Artemio's father, Francis, slurred under a scowl fueled by moonshine.

"And you didn't raise a fool." In Temo's version—the tale he spun for Joan on many an afternoon walk through vineyards out near Haymarket—those were Artemio the First's last words to his father.

Artemio the First had meandered his way up and over to Missouri in the late 1850s, tended vineyards, began producing wine. By 1865, the remaining Virginia Dandales had been wiped out, old Francis Dandale the last lain to rest, taken down by grief. The only remaining family line stayed rooted in the Midwest, prospered and propagated in Missouri, right up until Prohibition. It was 1920 and the Dandale clan's world changed from right under their feet yet again. Back in Virginia, all the original Norton grape vines were uprooted, chopped, and burned, only to be replaced by Concord grapes: safe grapes, suitable for making jelly and jam.

"Imagine the fierce light of it," Temo whispered into Joan's ear one night as they sat on her mother's porch and traced constellations. "Acres and acres of vines blistering orange, far as they eye could see."

"A horizon aflame," Joan had mused, "you make it sound holy."

“No, darling. Just zealots. Nothing holy about that sort of destruction. But truly awesome nonetheless. The harm men can do.”

Joan loved to hear the stories of Temo’s past, of all his family had lost. In Missouri, old Artemio Dandale’s sons managed to continue turning Norton grapes into wine, for sacrament this time, but it wasn’t nearly as profitable as the old days when barrel after smoky barrel of wine won awards around the world. Even the French had taken notice back in the day. Suddenly, the family had nothing. All it took was one bad law and the barrels spilt onto the fields. Soon the Dandale clan shriveled up and husked away, leaving only a maiden named Aegina to marry into the Bywater name. Aegina, whose son Jonah had roamed his way back towards the Chesapeake. Maybe there was a bit of drifter in Temo’s blood, after all. No, couldn’t be. Temo’s roots were happy here, Joan was certain. That was just her mother creeping into her skull. Hadn’t Temo proven otherwise when he’d proposed?

“You keep me grounded,” he’d said, “and I want to keep it that way. Forever. I want you to be my wife.”

~ ~ ~

Joan was led down the aisle by her mother’s beau, Joseph Wellstone. A tall, wooden ladder of a man, handsome in his middle age. Joan was glad for her mother’s happiness, despite Myrtle’s insistence that she had to wait a proper grieving period before remarrying.

“Ma, must you wear black? Today of all days. Might as well bring a stormcloud indoors.”

“Joan, out of respect for your father’s memory, I can do this one thing,” Myrtle said.

“Fine. For Daddy. But I swear, Mother, if you mean to worry Temo away or jinx my joy—”

“I’ve said my peace about Artemio,” Myrtle replied. Over her shoulder, from the branches of a grand white oak that stood there since before the Civil War, a hawk perched on its nest, flapped its wings, and spit out into the sky. “If there’s any trouble for you in your new life, that’s on you.”

Joan turned away, unable to shake the worry her mother instilled in her.

“Just remember, you’re still my baby girl. I’ll always be there for you.”

Nearly a year later, in the spring of 1964, Joan wore a peacock blue dress to her mother’s wedding. The color brought out a deep, bright spark to Artemio’s eyes, like lapis lazuli. Plus it was dark enough to distract from the bump that had begun to show. Not that Joan wasn’t proud of her ensuing motherhood, just that she didn’t want the word “grandmother” bandied about during her mother’s wedding.

Myrtle opted for a soft cream wedding dress. It was the first time in eight years anyone besides Joan had seen Myrtle in anything but black. Oddly enough, the off-white dress made the black of Myrtle’s hair glimmer even darker.

And in the second row, on the far left aisle, distanced from her son sat Norah in a peach dress. Her auburn hair had grown greyer the past year, as if winter had struck her particularly hard. A few months later, she'd die in her sleep, never having witnessed the birth of her grandson, Noah.

Joan and Temo shared a good year of marriage before the Vietnam War caught up to them.

“We can move to Canada, avoid the draft,” Joan pleaded, their baby suckling at her breast.

“I won't dodge my duties. Besides, it's better I enlist now, before they call my number.” Temo had heard from field hands that you had more say if you volunteered. And the Gulf of Tonkin incident last fall just before Noah was born had sent a chill down his spine. This storm couldn't be avoided.

Temo enlists in the Marines, fights in Vietnam, writes letters home to Joan. Joan who lives with her mother, Myrtle. Joan forever underthumb of the needling “shouldn't've”s of her mother. And after the war, Temo broken. He doesn't feel whole, he writes to Joan, but he wants to reconnect. Can't return to her 'til he's whole. Over the years, the letters, the ripped flaps of envelopes that kissed Temo's lips but leave Joan parched because Myrtle sorted through all of her son-in-laws correspondences and didn't let Joan hear her husband's side of the story. Disparity. Disavowal. Joan abandoned. Joan and Temo never reconcile. By the time Noah's five, his parents divorce, and Noah

only gets to know the shadow of his father. An image, a glyph. I'll never be that to my child, Noah decides. Better yet, never have a child, never commit. But commitment settles into his bones like marrow, plasma, oxygen in the blood.

~ ~ ~

Years later, at Noah's own first wedding, Joan would tell her son: "Your Grandma Norah wore a white dress to my wedding. It wasn't malicious—just who she was. I think she was making up for lost things, for the wedding she didn't quite have. But she warned me then: 'Men are fleeting, always drifting away like boats lost to a current'. I guess I thought you'd be different, but you're roaming off on your own route. I get it now. All men ever do is leave."

**CHAPTER 18: A POLYPHONY**  
**(SEEDS FROM THE JOURNALS OF CAINE L. CALLETANO)**

**I. The Stone Age Heart (A Voyage)**

In the beginning—

No, scratch that. Some stories don't have a beginning. Or rather, stories are sometimes all beginnings, all starts and repeats, events circling back, like the dorsal fin of a wave spiking and swirling and curling back into itself: blue to brown to green to murk.

If there is a beginning to this story, it would have to start aboard a small flatbottom boat: a skiff chugging its way from Keel Island back to the Chesapeake Bay, two men (my great-grandfather Jonah and his lover, Wally) wending their way among crab pots and fishing nets. That they will rope into one another they way streams braid into the Potomac is clear; but that isn't the heart of this particular story. Granted, their touch will reverberate through generations: both men dead, their grandsons will meet, coalesce, stroke, find comfort in each other's arms. But the meeting of paths doesn't interest us much: it's the cresting of waters that catches our eye, a surge in the offing.

So perhaps we hop onto this journey two generations after that initial meeting of gene-strands, aboard my father's boat, the Joan of Ark: four friends on a Fourth of July jaunt navigating that same near-Atlantic Bay. Sally and Abel asleep in separate



compartments below deck while their spouses spoon and caress one another: Noah and Caine entangle.

But for now, let's focus our attentions on a ship transporting people and cars from Cape Hatteras, NC to Ocrocoke Island, a ferry spitting out from the Eastern seaboard into the deep blue Atlantic, then swerving back: from inlets to island, avoiding sandbars.

It's May, just before Memorial Day, and the Flood hasn't yet hit. Here we get to the heart of this particular story, this unique flood-tale. Imagine a frieze, a scene carved from stone: my father, Noah, and his friend, Caine, leaning against the rails of a ferry. Their spouses, Sally and Abel, are sitting in the cafeteria cabin on the deck above them, avoiding the bright summer sun.

"The color of water keeps shifting," Caine says to Noah. "Those lines—what are they?" The waves rise from murky green to a bright blue then fall to a deep, bruised shade.

"Shoals. Sandbars. Peninsulas and channels. Imagine trenches underwater," Noah says as his hands rise and dip in the air, as if molding contours beneath the Atlantic.

Places where the sea plummets deep: sounds like my heart, Caine thinks but doesn't say.

"Hey, Noah? Used to be we could talk about anything."

"Uh-huh." Their shoulders rub up against one another, their hands nearly touching on the rusted railing.

"Can we still? Talk about anything, I mean?" Caine's heart beats a quickstep faster, gulping in-time with the muscled thrust of the ferry's engine.

Noah turns, his blue eyes flare in the sunlight as he leans around and squeezes Caine's shoulder. "Of course we can talk," he says. "Always." A bright gap-toothed smile.

"Yet when I told you I loved you, you seemed genuinely..." (Wait for it, watch for the teasing out of just the right nuanced word:) "exasperated."

Noah sighs. That's what Caine remembers, from their walk just a couple of months ago, a March dusk. The sun had been pummeling the ground all day, until a coldfront swept in, piled clouds against the horizon, heaped the sky in grey. "Snow's a-coming," Noah presaged.

"You know I fell in love with you, right?" Caine said. Noah scraped his boots on the steps and unclasped the Labrador's leash before heading back into the house.

Noah sighed. "Yeah, I guess I'd gathered as much."

Noah was famous for his sighs, though they were usually in response to something his wife, Sally, had said. A sigh that said, "I know, I can't do anything right." Or, "Well this is a losing fight." And more often as of late, a sigh that said: "I just don't want to talk about it."

Now, back aboard the ferry, Noah doesn't sigh. Instead he says, "I've had to ask myself: 'Noah, what is this? I like Caine—' "

"Of course you like me. We're friends."

"No, I mean, I *like* like you." His calloused palm clasps Caine's shoulder. "I don't know what it is about me. I ignore things. Compartmentalize."

Caine has always known this about Noah, his ability to not deal with weighty issues. How often has Sally asked Caine, “You’re a guy: so maybe you can explain to me why Noah won’t try to reach out to his father. Why he doesn’t talk to him, for Jonah’s sake.”

Caine will later write in his journal:

Men are malleable as marble, as readily chiseled  
as Da Vinci’s *David*. Don’t let stone’s softness  
fool you. You can shape, beat, ply,  
pursue the grain. But once set,  
men are hard as concrete:  
unworkable.

“There’s a solid, unshakeable quality about you,” Caine tells Noah now back on the ferry. “That’s part of what I love about you. And I don’t want you to think that what I feel for you diminishes my love for Abel. I guess my heart is polyamorous.”

“Yeah, I get that. I feel that way too,” Noah says as he thinks back to his first wife and then Sally, the way his heart straddled two people. “Besides,” Noah continues, “I’m too old. That’s a door I can’t open.” He embraces Caine, out in the open, on the ferry’s middle deck.

I don’t want a door or a threshold, Caine thinks but doesn’t say: I just want you. Caine presses his lips to Noah’s neck, revels in the sea-salt taste for a moment. They stand together on the deck, a tangle of shades, Noah’s ruddy fingers clasped along Caine’s brown skin, the way seashells and seaweed snarl up into one another beneath the waves, submerged past the depths of human glares.

We expect an end to all things. That's what keeps us alive, keeps us grasping and clutching for that final touch, breath, kiss. The plot of existence: to feel and never forget. And if this story has an end, it is in the retelling that we make meaning of the past. Incidents loop and circle about; transgression slingshots its way around the sun, flings the future ahead towards a new horizon, a new constellation, a new telling.

Tomorrow, the two will paddle onto the Sound together, the bows of their kayaks jostling and rubbing against one another. Just over a year from now, as they hike Great Falls, Caine will slip on a rock, nearly fall into the Potomac's bristling whitewater, and Noah will reach out, rescue Caine, embrace him: "I can't lose you just yet," he'll say and their bodies will tangle together once more. Three years later, a hurricane will expose their affair. The Flood will swell, surge, and slam into their lives, dredge up slurried secrets. And a year after that, on the day of Caine's death—September 15, 2025—my father will brush his fingers across Caine's comatose brow, press his lips onto Caine's unmoving knuckles. Noah will sigh and say, "I love you."

A door will open, another will close, a medical monitor will hold a high sustained beep.

By then, Caine will have written:

Don't grieve the brittle body beneath you: tenderness  
calcified. Even stone withers into dust.

The words will ring about Abel's head as he stands to the right of Caine's body, while Noah stands to Caine's left. The two will take turns caressing Caine's dark, immobile brow. Just as Noah kisses Caine's hand once more, a door opens. Sally walks in. "Am I too late?" she asks. A door closes.

And if those futures are known somehow, if this particular ferry bears the weight of imminence as much as it bears the burden of unfulfilled desires, well, we cannot know the truth of what water holds buoyant.

So let's jettison the future for now. Let's stick to the present, or whatever midlevel moment we name as "now". Let's consider the two on a boat, a prior-coupled-pair staring out onto the sea: Caine and Noah, their same glance mottled by possible horizons:

—In the beginning.

## II. from the Journals of Caine Lance Calletano:

### Dinghying into Dusk

He spoke to me of an engine's spark  
how two-stroke and four-stroke  
ignite  
the means by which each mechanism  
breathes  
reed inlet valve exhaust choke  
flood  
I remember his grip  
on the tiller  
his forearm glistening beneath  
the sunset skimming the waves  
wakes curling behind us  
the sunglinted hirsute  
coarse glimmer that he was:  
jaw neck pecs wrists: the wonder.

### III. A Telling

I'm no more than a jab and poke at memory. No more than that 10-year-old idiot  
thumping drums, not hearing the true tune of things. Dum—da-da—Dum—da-da—  
Dum-Dum. Pounding away as if I were pulling and yanking and pummeling my prick.  
Have always been plucking and pounding through life,

I suppose.

All the while the world thrummed and beat around me. Got all swallowed up.  
Tsunami-like.

“Jonah! Quit beating those drums!” Mom on the Ark, wanting from me only silence.

“Hon, let him have his fun.” Dad coming to my defense. “He’s gotta practice if he’s gonna get any good.” Besides, he muttered, we’ll drop him off at Camp Potomac soon enough—embrace silence for ourselves.

Though the only silence I ever knew between them was more like the grunt and groan of waves—the (now-former) Bay reaching out into the Atlantic. Not the ocean itself, but the motion of storm-surge that I incessantly heard thrashing then murmuring between them.

I look back at myself, as if leaning over the dock and catching my reflection in the diesel-slicked murk of water.

I am Jonah Artemio Bywater at thirty-three. Then,  
a glint of the past flickers  
flame-like on the curl and fin of the wave. Memory flutters.

I’m Jonah at thirteen.

Just old enough then to appreciate anything that resembled something else, and when we anchored behind a cluster of sailboats I watched as the mastheads went from looking like abandoned flagpoles in the daylight to something new by night.

Masthead lights dazzled across the horizon.

A constellation hung at arm’s length: that’s what the masthead lights made me think of, even though the real stars swam miles above us, and all we had around us was the Chesapeake Bay before the Flood.

We. That's the clinger. The cinch of it all.

(And by "we" or "all" I mean to say here: all that matters to me. The past. My family. The many split and threaded / unthreaded, beaten up and tenderized muscle-strands of my heart: Dad [Noah, 51 years old when I turned 13], Mom [Salome, 55], and my Might-as-Well-be-Uncles [Abel, 61; and Caine, 43].)

The past is like that: all wrought and tethered up. A rope. A connection. A bond. A muscle that pulses and struggles for oxygen. A drowning mammal that needs to breathe. Wants to suck it all up. Because the past needs air.

And if there's anything that must breathe, anything that needs to take a gulp before diving into the Atlantic Bay, it's this particular creature: my familial past.

I'm diving for the truth now. Dunking underwater and feeling up the murk. Well, that's what I'm dredging up, isn't it? Crap and barnacles and history.

In the moonlight, the shadow of Dad's arm swirled around my Uncle Caine's waist. Caine's lips to Noah's ear. What secret whispered?

A wind kicks up its tail, breezes rocket-like, shocks the atmosphere, announces itself: I'm wind beyond wind, air that flutters air, echo that reverberates enough to disturb the local temperament, triggering a microburst.

That's the thing with memory: all flurried up and windsailed, swirled into an unstable barometric pressure: it blusters the past: that last breath you took might well be the breath someone else swallowed and exhaled. Which is to say *your* breath isn't quite



*my* breath, and the air I sucked up as a teen isn't exactly the air I swallow now. It's all gone: expired yet recycled, relived, revived, rewritten. The past redrafted and suspired onto synapses.

I'd woken up from a nap, slinked off the bench by the helm, stood up and saw:

Dad on the deck, cradling Mom.

Except it wasn't Mom. Couldn't have been. She was napping down below deck. What I witnessed was my dad wrapping his burly suntanned arms about something darker—a ghost, no—the penumbra of a ghost, an island of desire: my Uncle Caine.

What I wonder now, what I can't quite reconcile is whether I saw them at low-tide, high-tide, or simply a stable mid-wave. Were they weaving about the ending of things or simply stirring up some beginning?

I'm uncertain of this past. Don't know how to read this particular swell and bob of tide.

I do remember feeling a tug in my gut, a tingle along my thigh, an odd tautness to my body—between my navel and, well, *that*—as if a stretch of fishing line had been thread through me and yanked.

I felt lured in. Took a step on the gunwale, unsettled the boat just enough to announce my presence, watched Dad unclasp himself from Caine.

We said nothing at the time.

Three years later, at sixteen I told my dad: “I miss Uncle Caine.”

“I miss him too, buddy.” My father, Noah, shifted his weight away from me, stared off towards a heron on the Bay.

“Dad?”

“Uh-hmm. What’s up, son?”

I hemmed and hawed. He turned to me, gave me that gaze that meant, *There’s only one way to navigate: watch out for shallows. Hold steady.*

“Spit it out. It’s OK—you can say anything, buddy.”

“Dad. You loved Caine, didn’t you?”

A sigh. “Oh Jonah.”

Dad wrapped his arm about my shoulder. We both stared out towards what was then still the Bay and is now merely the Chesapeake Gulf of the Post-Atlantic.

“Oh son, I can’t. Can’t go into all that.” Dad paused. He yanked himself away from me, clasped into himself, gripped his hands together, calloused fingers kneading rough palms, as if touch could massage hurt away, as if knuckles could pummel back the past.

“Of course I miss him. And as for the rest—love’s complicated. Love doesn’t always carry a boat afloat.”

~ \* ~ \* ~

Grief / comfort / solace: which word to use? I've come to define longing and grief and want as nothing more than a lazy caress. Pain as simple as touch. Hurt no more complicated than the heat of skin grazing skin. Warmth.

Sixteen. About the time Dad turned to me and said, "Here, take the helm for a minute."

I panicked. Swung the wheel towards port then thrashed against starboard, tried swishing and maneuvering wave against wave, kept Bloody Point Lighthouse as my horizon-point, but couldn't seem to steer straight, worried myself to near drowning, jostled the Ark on the water:

Don't snarl a crab-pot.

Don't hit the shallows.

Don't veer too far away from the horizon-point.

Don't, don't, don't.

"Good job, Son." He'd been watching me the whole time. That was Dad: always silently assessing, but never criticizing, just buoying us along.

Later that afternoon, after we'd anchored and Mom decided to take a nap, as Dad and I stared at the jellyfish, I finally got the courage to tell him: "Dad, I'm gay."

"Aw, son," he pulled me into a bear-hug, patted me on the back, "I love you no matter what. You're my son. Besides, your mom and I kinda figured, since the only friend you ever bring around the house is Tony. And by your age, I was sleeping with every girl in the neighborhood."

I could feel my freckles turning beet-red. “I wanted to tell you sooner, but—after Abel and Caine left us...”

“They didn’t leave because they were gay,” Dad said, even though I’d finally figured out as much. “I hope you never discover this, but sometimes people just need different things. Sometimes even the closest friendships come unraveled.”

I’d overheard Mom and Dad fighting over the past year, and I could still hear the echo of her voice from nearly a year ago, just after the hurricane: “It’s either him or me. You decide.” Her voice was low and laser-sharp, tough enough to cut steel.

As my dad and I sat looking out onto the Bay, I said, “I think I get it now. You had to make a choice.”

Dad nodded, sighed, said “Yeah,” and lit up a cigarette. “These things’ll kill you, but since you’re a man now, you can have one if you want.”

I took a puff, about coughed out a lung. “Nah, I think I’m good,” I managed to spit out.

“You are being careful—using protection?”

“Yeah, Dad. I remember what you told me when I turned thirteen. ‘No glove, no love.’ And Uncle Caine reminded me when I told him.”

“You came out to Caine? He never mentioned.”

“He promised not to tell anyone, not ‘til I was ready.”

“Huh. Funny thing. I thought he and I had no secrets between us.” He took another drag from his cigarette. “Well, I’m glad you were able to talk with someone.

Who better than Caine? Anyways, son. You can always trust me and your mom; you can tell us anything. You know that, right?”

“I do, Dad. It’s just— I know how Mom wants grandkids. I didn’t want to disappoint either of you.”

“You’d never disappoint us. As for kids: being a father has been the greatest gift.”

“I *would* like to have kids, you know. Someday. That’s not out of the question.”

“Well, I’ve gotta admit, I’m happy to hear that. Keep the Bywater line going.”

“If I can be half the father that you and Abel and Caine were—”

“Ha!” Dad chuckled and slapped me on the back. “That’s three halves. You’ll be a hell of a father! So, do you want to tell your mom or would you rather I do?”

~ \* ~ \* ~

A month later, after I came out to my parents, the house-phone rang and announced “Abel and Caine: Home”. They hadn’t called in nearly a year. Mom knocked a martini glass off the bar; Dad stared at the phone, his hand outstretched, stuck in mid-air, unsure what to do.

*Abel and Caine: Home*

“Goddammit!” Mom yelled. “Somebody get that.”

“Uncle Abel!” I said as his voice filled my ear. “It’s so great to hear from you.”

Abel asked to speak to my parents; I passed the phone to Dad.

“It’s Caine,” Dad told us. “He’s at Georgetown Hospital. Stage 4 cancer. It’s spread from his spinal cord to his brain. Went lightning quick. We need to go see him.”

Mom gave Dad that steely-eyed look of hers, a look that could’ve frozen the Potomac. “I meant it when I told him,” Mom said as she clasped her arms around her waist as if to steady herself: “ ‘When I’m done, I’m done.’ ”

“Hon, I’m sorry about everything. You’ve gotta believe me. But he’s not gonna make it.”

Mom flung her fingers out into the air, as if she could pause time. “I don’t know if I have it in me to go. To see him just now. I’m not ready.” Her fingers trembled, the diamonds on her wedding band glinting under the halogen lights. “I think I need another drink.” She stepped over to the mini-freezer by the bar, took out her Kettle One, poured, and slugged back a shot.

“I’m going,” I said. “I need to see him, one last time. Say goodbye. And I want to be there for Uncle Abel. I can drive myself if I have to, but... Mom, Dad: he *loved* us. Can’t we just hold onto that for a little, while we still can?”

Dad stared into the distance, his reddish-blond mustache drooping, the creases around his eyes making him seem more hollowed-out than usual. He raised his copper-tinted eyebrows, his pupils dilated, and then he walked over to Mom, took her hand. “I’m going. With or without you, I need to be there.” Mom let go of his hand. Dad turned, headed for the door.

“Mom, you should—” She cut me off, turned the other way, muffled a sob.

“Just go,” she said. “Go. All men ever do is leave.”

#### **IV. from the Journals of Caine Lance Calletano:**

##### **Gacela of Riverflood (for Noah)**

I want the water unchanneled not bedded  
not forced to wind into a creek or fed

into riverbed. The stream gleams blue as your eyes  
—no: the water’s murkier cloudier and mottled by

the leaves that fell last fall still  
linger like an echo a shadow on the Potomac a skiff.

Why won’t the past wring itself outside my skull ring free?  
Can’t I wash you from my brain flood the future

clean of you? See how it is between us  
even when we don’t coil about one another

we endure even as we’ve become tributaries  
rivertrails broken apart and flash flooded

into other banks. Me, I’m still stranded here a rivulet  
hoping the floodplain will open and swallow you

once more: my skin longs to filter you, percolate your body for  
one moment then another. Show me the way to dam this flood.

## V. The Vigil (The Sea)

I remember the beeping, the constant pulse in the hospital room, steady as a heartbeat. I suppose it *was* a heartbeat, a monitor meant to keep track of my Uncle Caine's life, meting out each beat like a metronome. Beep, beep, beep. I remember the steady IV drip, my father's and Abel's tears, a stoicism in me as I tried to comfort them. The stainless steel ring drilled into Caine's skull reminded me of a crucifix he'd shown me in South Texas—a dusky Christ with a crown of thorns crafted from silver, only the tips of each thorn where the crown pierced skin were plated in copper points.

The medical technicians had pinned a steel halo brace to Caine's skull. "Did it hurt?" I asked Uncle Abel. I imagined his forehead sedated, but the rest of him conscious. A sharp pain drilling into his skull as they screwed bolts. Caine was made immobile while the cancer worked its way through him, until some part of his brain just shut down and he went comatose. To shelter him from pain, I suppose.

"The Doctors said they'd do their best, could salvage him," Abel said. "I didn't imagine this was what they meant. Still, I'm glad you're here." He and Noah stood on either side of Caine's body—so still I imagined he might just be sleeping. Except for the crown on his head. There was nothing I could do to stem their combined grief; they each took turns touching Caine's still-warm skin, offering tenderness. Who knew whether Caine was the slightest bit aware? Dad kissed Caine one last time, then his heart flat-lined.

The door opened, and Mom strode into the hospital room. "Am I too late? Goddamnit," Sally hollered as she reached towards Caine's chalky-brown cheek. "You



couldn't have waited, another damned minute? I don't know whether to slap you or kiss you or say I want our friendship back—but it's too late. None of it matters." Sally stroked the few exposed bits of Caine: his cheek, his nose, his earlobe. "It's all too damned late."

Abel reached out, embraced Sally while Noah just hunched over Caine's body and whispered, "God how I've missed you. I love you. I'll never forget you." A nurse came in, tried to pull Noah away.

"Let him be," Abel said. "Just give us a moment." He turned back to Sally, noticed a shock of silver in her wine-dark hair, a white streak on her forehead: "What happened?"

"This happened," Sally said as she pointed to Noah then clasped Caine's hand. "My god," she cradled Caine's dead hand against her cheek, "he's still warm. Oh shit, you couldn't have held out for me?"

## **The Stone Age Heart (A Jacob's Ladder)**

### *I.*

Stone dust settles into firm compaction, lays  
a solid foundation for pavers, walkways,  
the underpinnings of paths.

### *II.*

Neruda never warned me: a rock hung about  
the heart can glisten hard and cool as marble

(or granite, stone streaked yet sturdy)  
but still chip.

### III.

A keystone seems a simple thing: a pinnacle  
binding an arch. But really it's the scaffolding  
that holds an arch together, lets keystone rest.  
Once the form pulls away, pray  
the bricks bind.

### IV.

Men are malleable as marble, as readily chiseled  
as Da Vinci's *David*. Don't let stone's softness  
fool you. You can shape, beat, ply,  
pursue the grain. But once set,  
men are hard as concrete:  
unworkable.

### V.

A Jacob's Ladder can't be built by stepping-  
stones. Mere ribbon won't bind tumbling  
blocks of granite and marble. And love  
is only so robust—not braided strong  
enough to sustain the hefty weight  
of rocks flipping, cascading, and dangling  
back into a click-clack chain of circled memory.

### VI.

Don't grieve the brittle body beneath you: tenderness  
calcified. Even stone withers into dust.

I remember a voyage when I was ten, getting dropped off at Camp Potomac, beating the drums after the last bottle rocket was shot, thumping the drums well past midnight. But I had no clue then as to that trip's repercussions, the waters that were stirred that night between Caine and my father, Noah.

I remember Whitman and Thoreau—will always remember Whitman, will always be grateful to my Uncle Caine for that. And even if he wasn't really my uncle, both he and Abel remain as true and solid as second and third fathers to me. I'm fortunate to have been raised around them, am glad to have known them. I know my dad felt that way too, at the end.

As for Mom— Love and anger get all tongue-tied and twisted in people sometimes, and I don't know that she ever let go of her grief. *Betrayal* she'd mutter in her sleep. Don't know that she ever allowed herself to accept that love is love and sometimes it just wends its way into people, the way rivers swell and meander and reshape terrain.

After all, we're nothing but terrain. People. Hearts. Earth. Dust to dust, bone to bone, shaped from clay and into clay we must return.

Except this world isn't so much a land of earth and clay anymore. It's more a wide evercresting horizon, foam caps frothing up along a boundless field of aqua waves of kelp, our Floating Farms a faint reflection of what our vast coastal cities once were. And if we are then of water and to water must return, well, all the easier to filter out the truth of our souls: we are at heart as malleable and fluid as the sea.

## CHAPTER 19: HOW THEY MET

### I. Caine and Noah

As he and Abel made their way across the Watergate living room, Caine saw Sally standing near a window. The midnight blue of her taffeta cocktail dress caught glints from the chandelier and mirrored the dark sway of the river behind her, the Potomac all lit up with stars. It was a perfect spring evening for a retirement party, and with Vincent leaving, Sally was poised to get the promotion she'd worked decades for. But Caine noticed that what should have been a night of best fortunes wasn't reflected in Sally's face. Her red hair was a shade darker tonight, which was probably why she looked a bit pale. But there was something else – an almost stoic, statuesque quality to her posture. The gleam in her eyes looked more like tears than joy. Her husband stood next to her, holding her hand and resting his arm around her waist. Such tenderness, Caine thought. Public displays of affection had been an ongoing battle between Abel and himself—he was just happy Abel had agreed to join him tonight.

“Look, there's Sally,” Caine said as he prodded Abel's elbow, “you'll finally get to meet her.” As they wended their way through the crowds of Housing and Urban Development staff, Caine admired the couple. In heels, Sally stood just a couple of

inches taller than her husband—she was probably nearly as tall as Abel. But her husband—what was his name again? something to do with the sea—he stood with a sturdy, masculine confidence. Broad chested, broad shouldered, he looked like he could carry the weight of a mountain and still grin. And his hair, the dark copper of his hair cascaded like curls of flame down to his neck – nearly as long as Sally’s hair. Caine had always preferred men to wear their hair short; he’d even persuaded Abel to cut his shaggy blond Beatles hairdo when they first moved in together. But somehow, this man in front of him wore long hair well. Perhaps it was the golden red mustache that balanced his look and added a masculine depth to his handsomeness.

Just a few steps away now, Caine noticed that while her husband seemed to be cradling her, Sally seemed unmoved, as if unable to return the affection. If anything, her shoulder seemed to lean on him for support while her waist seemed to pull away as if eager for space.

“Caine,” Sally said as she unclasped herself from her husband and stepped forward to hug him. “I’m so glad you made it!”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. I’m just an admin type, but I know how much Vince has meant to you. Besides, since I’ll be leaving soon too –”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me. Everyone’s abandoning me. Ah,” she said as she turned to her husband, “we’re being rude. This is my husband, Noah.” Caine expected a fierce, rugged handshake, the kind that could bring you to your knees. He was surprised by how gentle yet firm Noah’s calloused fingers felt. And the cobalt blue of his eyes

shocked him. Holy shit, Caine thought, he's beautiful. Then a millisecond later, as he introduced them to Abel, Caine wondered what had just jolted within him.

"Sweetie, are you alright?" Sally asked him?

"Sorry, I was just about to ask you the same thing. You look a little ... stressed."

"Oh, these crowds. I love Vince, but as soon as he makes his speech..."

"Why don't we go out on the balcony, get some fresh air. Hon," he said to Abel, "mind getting me a martini?"

"I'll join you," Noah added, "we could probably all use a drink." He pecked Sally on the cheek, then strode towards the bar alongside Abel. Caine was mesmerized by their movement, the quick sudden laughter the two engaged upon, probably commiserating about how much they hate being dates on these affairs. Whatever that was just then, Caine told himself, whatever spark you just felt: put it away, ignore Noah, don't look at him again.

He and Sally sat outside and watched a cruise boat churn its way leisurely down the Potomac towards Georgetown.

"Sally, I've known you a long time. What is it, four, five years now? You've been more than a mentor to me. When I started as an intern, you were the only person at HUD that didn't treat me like crap."

"That's because I remember what it was like, starting at the bottom, trying to keep your head above water."

“But you’ve been a friend too. We’ve had enough happy hour hear to hearts to know when something’s wrong. So please, spit it out. What is it? Are they blocking you from the promotion?”

“No, nothing work related.” A sigh escaped her lips then quickly shifted into a sob. “I just – it’s been a tough day.”

Caine held her hand, wanted to comfort her but didn’t know what words to say. “Sweetie, I’m here for you.”

“Another miscarriage. We’ve tried and tried for years. I really thought this was the one – it felt right. And now, it’s like my body is betraying me all over again. The one thing I want more than anything for Noah and me, and I can’t seem to hold on.”

## II. Jonah Meets His Whale

It wasn't that he expected to be anonymous, unknown, unseen—especially in a place like Provincetown. Hell, his brown skin stuck out like a thumb most places along the East Coast. But moving from job to job, fixing roofs, working on shingles, toting ladders around in his beat-up blue pickup as he drove from beach house to beach house, he did feel a sort of anonymity. Just another laborer. So when someone at the Norman Mailer Center offered to help him board up the windows in advance of Hurricane Roberta's arrival, Moby didn't give it a second thought.

“If you can handle a hammer, jump right in,” he said. The guy was lanky, pale, a shock of red hair. A director had once told Moby he had catholic tastes. “I'm definitely *not* Catholic,” Moby had protested, “left that holier-than-thou crap behind a long time ago”—soon as my old man left, he thought but didn't add. “No, catholic, little-c,” the director had explained. “As in all-encompassing.” “Oh,” Moby had responded, “that.” “That's why you make such a good star to work with,” the director had added, “any flavor of porn will do—I can always count on you to jump right in.” True that, thought Moby. If there was one thing he knew how to work with, it was his body.

Moby yanked his second hammer from the right hammer-loop of his shorts. “You can never have too many hammers,” the lead at his first contracting job had told him, so he always carried two. Besides, it helped balance his hips as he strutted around a worksite: left hammer, right hammer. Made him feel like a gunslinger.

“I'm Jonah, by the way,” the guy said as he reached his hand out for a shake. His palm was paler than pale, the creases of his lifeline and loveline looking like



angry red whipmarks. The rest of his hand looked smooth—too smooth. Not a day of hard work under his fingernails.

He didn't bother shaking Jonah's hand, would probably just crush his knuckles. Like a bird in the hand, he thought. As he handed over his second hammer, his fingertips brushed against the guy's fingers. Surprisingly tough. Calloused. Reminded him of a freshly cut two-by-four: warm and splintered. "I'm Moby."

"As in Moby Dick?" Jonah grabbed a nail, centered it on the right edge of the plywood sheet that Moby was using to board up the picture-window. "Ha! What, is that your porn name?"

"Dude." Moby scrunched up his brow, wrinkled his nose as if a whiff of roof-tile tar had hit his nostrils. So that's why he was helping him—freckle guy just wanted to get in his pants. "That was a long time ago. Chill."

Jonah stammered. His hand faltered, got stuck in mid-air as he swung the hammer back. "Uh, that was a joke," he said. He looked Moby straight-on. God this guy's eyes were blue. A pale blue, bright as the sky just after the sun has risen. And his ears, suddenly almost as red as his hair, the freckles on Jonah's cheeks and nose getting blotted out by a blush.

"Sorry." Moby cleared his throat. He could feel his own dark-brown ears get warm, blood rushing through the outside edge of his ears down to his lobes. People said he was lucky because he didn't blush. Truth was, he got hot under the collar all the time, it's just that his dark brown complexion covered it up. Just like he didn't bruise easily. "Sangre de indio salvaje," his grandmother Dora used to say: blood of a native

savage. She meant it as a compliment, of course, since he was as dark as she was, so much darker than his white-looking mom and dad who could pass for gringos—if not for him. “It’s OK, mijo,” Amá Dora had said as she patted him on the shoulder once, when he was five. “Tu sangre es fuerte. Y abezes esa fuerza hace falta para una generacion. Pero vuelve come un hurican.” Your blood is strong, and sometimes that fierceness skips a generation, comes back stronger than a hurricane.

Be proud of your blood.

## CHAPTER 20: THE NEW WORLD

As the waters continued to rise, as the temperatures shifted and storms transformed into seasons, we learned to splice and graft and regenerate cultures until we deconstructed and reconstructed ova, spermatozoa, xx, xy, until xx+xx could propagate, and from there a minor leap, a major chord, a seismic shift in platelets and a revolution in cell-division → mitosis, meiosis, binary fission, chymerosis → so that xy+xy = progeny.

“Let’s have kids,” I told Moby. “But let’s make them better.”

Sperm culled from cold storage, the microscopic genetic flagellations labeled Caine Lance Calletano and Abel August Blackfield, spliced and rejoined to bits of Moby and me, and through us all a whole history of need and want and desire and comfort brought home.

Union.

When our surrogate glowed with the pride of two heartbeats—a double-heart we called it—twins. I knew.

“We’ll do better this time. Do right by them, make the world do right by them.”

I understood that finally—past time and rivers and blood, past the edges of shorelines, the ends of coastlines, past rivers rushing forth into lakes and seas and oceans

of their own unbounded making, past the end of the world diving into a world made new—my father and his beloved friend would finally commune.

“We’ll name them Caine and Abel,” I told Moby. “And we’ll teach them to support one another as brothers. To shore up and tend to what’s left of this earth. To plot and till the stars, spread us out into the heavens, to Kepler-438b and Kepler-442b. We’ll get it right this time. We’ll set them free. Joy. We’ll teach them joy. In every flicker and glance and glimmer of earth greeting sky.”

“You mean love?” Moby asked. He spread his bronze fingers open and wide as if trying to scour back into the now that was left of the then of his childhood, of our post-adolescent matinghood, of the time when he and I could still stroll along Provincetown boardwalks past docks under piers. Before all the floods. Before the oceans asserted.

“We’ll teach them to appreciate and love what’s left of land, tend to what’s out there, make something of some feebly possible ground underfoot.”

Love. Yes, love.

To love each step as we embark the StarArk, race two by two onto the vessel, my husband Moby and I, our sons Caine and Abel, all four prancing and leaping and boarding not knowing what the future holds—past the fluctuation of magnetic fields and coronal space borealis dawning and fluttering and shimmering and penetrating deep into the underglow of darkmatter—not knowing when or where we might emerge, only knowing we’re guiding our futures towards heavenslight, propelling genes and cells and

progeny past lightspeed past dreamspeed past the darkwatered abyss of night, we spurt  
towards the stars.

We embark.

## WORKS REFERENCED

Portions of Chapter 14 are reimaginings of bits from James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and Andrew Marvell's "Musick's Empire."

Chapter 16, II "Earth : Terremoto" was published in the 2014 Lambda Literary Emerging Writers Anthology.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

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