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So Far Gone

by Paul Cody

One

Now

They only look at me sometimes. To push the tray of food in or for medicine every three or four hours.

Then each day, I think, maybe every second or third day, Father Curran comes along and they take me to the room where I talk to him. Plastic chairs, and no windows, and the table that looks like wood but is really just something made to look that way.

They have the belt around my middle and the cuffs chained to the belt, and more chains on my ankles, so my arms and legs won't move too much. And maybe that's how I will be when they come for me not long after midnight, when they say, Okay, you. It's time now. And all of us—Father Curran and two or three or four of them—will walk down the concrete halls. Moving slowly and for the last time.

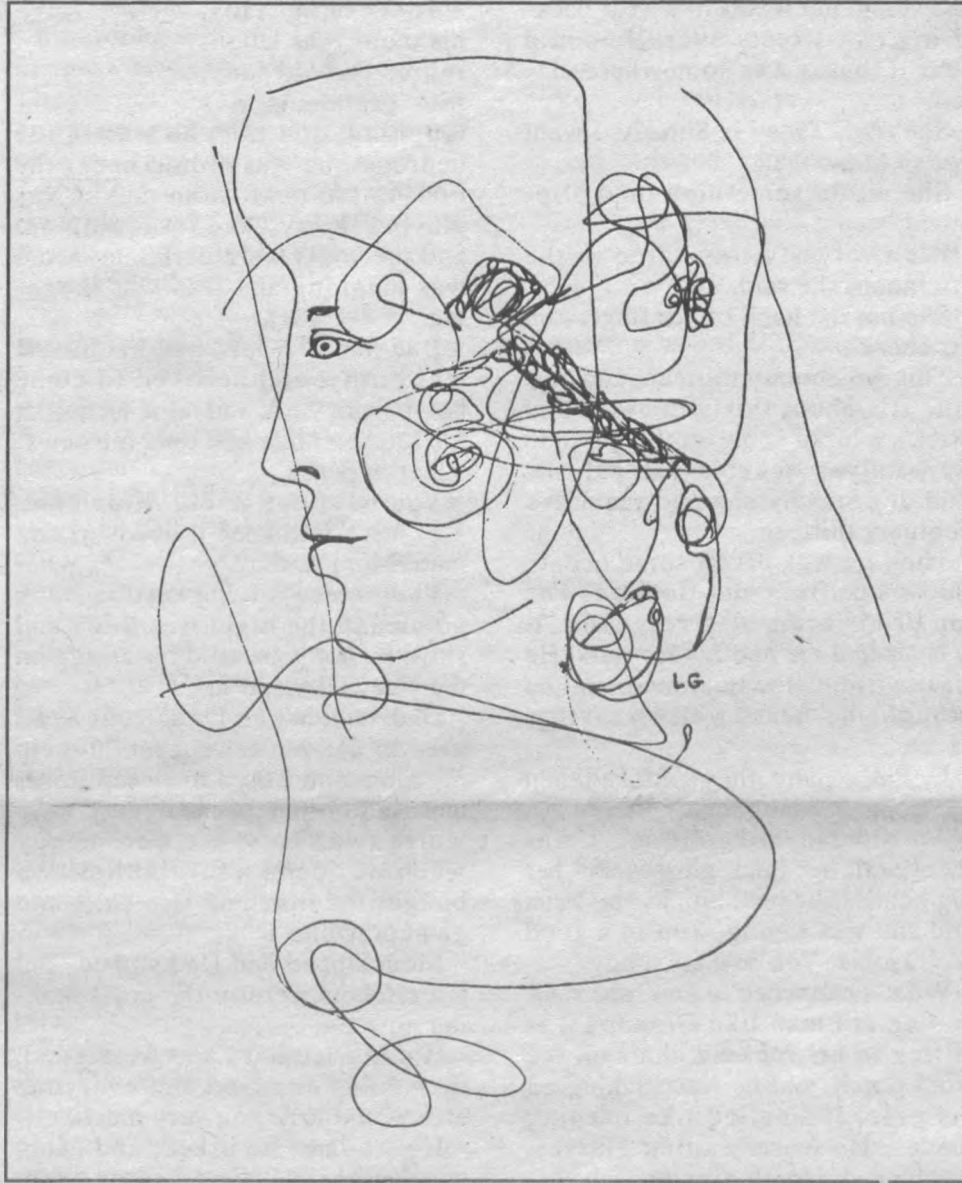
Father Curran has watery blue eyes that are yellow around the edges like nicotine stains, and skin that is tired and wrinkled. He puts his hand on my shoulder and calls me Son. Let us pray, he says, and he looks in my eyes and then down at his lap.

He wears a gray sweater over his black shirt, and has the white collar in front. There is a small brown stain on the arm of the sweater, like rust or dried blood or something.

Perpetual light shine upon them, he says, his lips moving almost silently, and the words hiss and whisper, soft like that.

There are long tubes of light overhead, and the sounds don't echo so much in here the way they do everywhere else.

Our father who art in heaven, he whispers, and his tired eyes are closed and resting, and on the eyelids there are faint red and blue veins like a road map. Father Curran has traveled a long way to be here, over hills, past rivers and farms.



As it was in the beginning, he whispers, is now and ever shall be, and his voice is like water lapping in a bath, the room full of steam and the tiles sweating, and everything calm like sleep and quiet and a soft pillow.

Time, a man says, and we stand up, and walk slowly out and down the hall.

I'm light as air by now and very very tired, and I would not be here if it was not meant to be. These places are not full of Boy Scouts and altar boys and innocent men, so I shouldn't begin to think that way.

The concrete is gray like a battleship, and somewhere, a long time

ago, something bad happened. Something very terrible and bad.

If I say what it was and ask forgiveness and accept into my heart the kingdom, the day and time, then all things can be as one once again.

And back in here I lie down still again—for more hours and days and nights. They will bring a second white pill and a green pill and a tan capsule. The lights are out for a while—and once, a long time ago, there was someone who said, Jack, so soft in my ear, and I could feel her breath, and then we were laughing, then everything was quiet.

Maybe there were pine trees sway-

ing over us in the breeze. Maybe wind in the branches, and the stars far away beyond the very top of the trees and the sky. More stars than we had ever seen.

This is how we will be, she said. Her name was Ellen. It was Jessica and Alison and Jodie.

Then a dog was barking, and for a long time something was terribly wrong. Someone was very angry. Someone had an urge. A strong strong urge to do something. And the air would get quiet and the urge wouldn't go away.

So I was out at night. Sipping from a pint bottle of gin or rum. So much heat in the chest, in the belly, going down, then spreading all over. And seeing the streets in Newton, Massachusetts, in the neighborhoods with big houses.

Put down everything, Father Curran said. From as far back and no matter how unimportant and every scrap and shred and shard. And from that, piece by piece by piece—maybe something, some pattern or picture or thing will begin to emerge.

Like something you heard whispered way back, or some smell of bread as you walked past the bakery on a winter morning on your way to church.

Because what happens in May, what they will do after we walk slowly down the halls, and through metal doors, past people who look on with a kind of awe, and into a room with blinds on the windows and seats on the other side for people to sit and watch—what they will do is erase all of that and there will be nothing here for us anymore. Only a long silence. A great loneliness.

But first the man hands in the small white cup with a tan capsule, and I swallow that, and he does not look at me at all. Just down at my hands. Then he goes away.

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Inside:

Excerpt from "The Saskiad," a new novel by Brian Hall

Poems by:

Archie Ammons, Kathleen Gemmell, & Phyllis Janowitz

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This is what I have. Two boxes of books. Eight notebooks, three pencils, slippers, a metal toilet and mirror, the cot that is attached to the wall. It has a blanket, a pillow, a thin mattress covered with rubber.

There are my hands and they tremble and move when I try to keep them steady, then nothing.

Write a prayer down, if nothing else, he said. Write, Our father who art in heaven. Or something like that.

Hallowed be, and so forth.

Sometimes there are veils in front of my face, and bits of smoke and fog. There are curtains I can't quite see through. I see a shadow sometimes, and I lie down and hold my head in my hands, and I can feel all the heat in there, like wheels and belts and pistons, going so fast, and no oil left, and all of it getting hotter and hotter until smoke seems to rise from my head.

Once upon a time, I start, in a place a long way from here, in a time that few remember, there was a little boy. A boy in a dreamy place. That is how so many stories begin.

Two

Long Time Ago

They hovered over him like whisperers and dreams. They moved without walking. They had blond hair and black hair and hair that was almost red. They spoke so softly he often wondered if he had really heard them.

Little boy, they said. Sweet little boy.

They called him, Peanut. Pumpkin. Possum.

They wore white uniforms, and some of them wore blue or green or red cardigan sweaters over their uniforms. They had watches and stethoscopes, and they touched his wrist, his forehead, the side of his face.

You'll be fine, they said. A little while longer.

Hold on, they told him.

Their voices were a warm breeze, a song, a blanket at night.

He never moved except to open and close his eyes, and to lick his lips, and every once in a while to move his fingers or his toes.

First it was night and then day. It was early in the morning and then mid-afternoon, and he thought there was sun outside, or clouds, or the moon and stars.

There were blips and pings and faint dripping sounds. Maybe it was raining out, and he imagined the millions of drops of rain falling everywhere, drumming on roofs and in gutters, and slapping the leaves on bushes and trees, and then rain falling in the streets of the city very late at night.

The whole world shines, he thought. Everything glistens like stores at Christmas.

Then he blinked his eyes and the one with brown hair was standing there. She wore glasses that made her face look like the headlights of a car, and her hair was falling forward and swaying, and there were hints of red in her hair.

She lifted his arm in her hands and

said, This will be cold. You'll feel something like ice on the inside of your elbow.

She touched him there with cotton, and it was cold. It was snow, only it was just a feeling.

Now you'll feel a pinch, she said, and it did pinch, and then it was something sharp and hot. Something almost pulling at his vein.

Okay, she said. There you go, buddy, she said.

The needle was out of his arm, and she put a cap on the point of the needle, and she felt at the inside of his wrist.

She looked at her watch, and he could tell she was counting.

His arm still hurt, still pinched and stung, but it was like a car back-firing two streets over. He could hear it, but it was somewhere else too.

She said, Today is Sunday. I want you to know that.

She wrote something on a clipboard.

It's twelve-twenty-three in the afternoon, she said.

She put the back of her fingers on his cheek.

This is February thirteen, and outside it's about thirty degrees and there's a lot of snow on the ground.

I want you to know that, pal, she said. It's Sunday, she said again. It's February thirteen.

Then he was off in some ocean. He was drifting and floating. The top of his brain was very cold. It was air and ice and far far stars. He was twirling slowly around, and he thought he heard voices saying, Jackie.

Jackie, c'mere, they said, and then someone was laughing.

An old lady like Gramma was there with her thick glasses and her big hands. She held him by the wrist and she was saying, You're a good boy, Jackie. You're a good boy.

What's happened to you? she said, and an old man like Grandpa was sitting in his rocking chair on the front porch, and he was sucking on his pipe. It smelled like burning leaves. He wore reading glasses, and he had a tooth missing.

A voice on an intercom said, Dr. Bruce, line two-nine-nine, please.

Dr. Bruce, line two-nine-nine.

A man wearing a tie was standing over him, and the man tapped his chest and pressed at his belly, and felt at the sides of his neck and then along the top and back of his head.

They put a pillow under his head. The pillow was cool at first, but later it was warm, and they put another blanket over him.

Then a woman with blond hair was sitting on the side of the bed, and she was holding a cup with a straw to his mouth, and it was orange juice and was very sweet.

It took a long time to drink the juice. There was ice in the cup, and the juice kept dribbling down the side of his mouth, and the lady with blond hair said, That's okay, possum.

He could stay quiet a long time. He didn't have to move ever again.

Nobody could come in and tell him to move or do anything for a long while.

He could be as still as a dead person on television. As still as a cat he saw on the side of the road, blood dripping from its mouth.

Hail Mary, full of grace, he whispered to himself. Blessed art Thou.

Now and at the hour of our death, he thought.

Just quiet and careful all the time, he thought.

He was in a car, and someone was driving. Maybe it was a young beautiful lady or maybe it was an old lady. Maybe it was someone he didn't know or see at all. They were driving fast, and the car was shaking, and he watched the dial go from thirty to forty to fifty to sixty to seventy, and he said, Please, please, please, and she was laughing.

The young lady, his mom, was laughing or the old lady, his grandma, was laughing, and then he was in the bedroom, he was hiding under the bed. In the next room music was playing. Perry Como was singing, and the walls were dark, and Mom was laughing and Dad was laughing.

Dad had red hair, and his breath was minty, and he liked to come home from work and sit in a chair at the kitchen table and read the newspaper in peace.

You be quiet, Jack, Mom said. You just try to keep it down, young man, Mom said.

They were sitting on the back porch and the night was thick and slow. So hot you could fry an egg on the sidewalk, Dad said.

Dad said, When I was your age I used to deliver newspapers to help my mom out. I used to sweep floors and find bottles because they were worth two cents. We were happy when we found a few bottles. We bought red hots and fire balls and giant pretzels.

Mom sipped and Dad sipped, and the crickets were in the grass making noise.

If you tried hard and were good, then Jesus and God and everyone else would love you very much.

How come? he asked, and Mom said, Because God wants only what's good for you.

Dad said, This, that, whatever.

So many things happened so fast he didn't know what was what, or where anything began or ended, and they were coming up to him when he was asleep. They pulled the covers up to his neck, and he could feel them looking at him, and he pressed his eyelids even more tightly closed.

The woman in white said she was very very sorry.

Her eyes were wet, and she said she was so terribly sorry.

Gramma had big glasses, and she was Dad's mother, and she had hands like the roots of a tree. She was standing in the doorway, and she said, Where did you come from? And Grandpa, the old man, was smiling, sitting at the kitchen table.

He was blowing a smoke ring at the light in the ceiling.

Gramma put her hand on his shoulder, and she said, Sometimes I look up and there you are, like an Indian. Quiet as an Indian.

Pumpkin, the woman in the blue cardigan said, and she leaned close to the side of his face and said, Hush.

Shhh, she whispered. Nobody will hurt you. Nobody will touch you.

So now he was quiet as night, and he wouldn't say anything, and no matter what they said or did he'd lie

there, and nobody could come near him anymore. Not with lights or needles or anything.

He opened his eyes and saw white tubes of light on the ceiling, and tiles that had tiny holes in them. He counted seven rows of tile, and then he began to count the holes, and he wondered if there were as many holes in the tiles as stars in the sky and grains of sand in the sandbox at the park.

The park was surrounded by tall trees, and the sunlight couldn't fall down through the leaves. He always tried to look up, and the highest branches were nearly in heaven, up close to the sun and the white puffs of clouds. It made him dizzy to lean so far

back and look for so long. He felt he would spin around and around, and he would become sick.

Something went by in the hall, and when he turned to look, it was already gone, and he needed to scratch his side, and his leg, right above the knee.

Then they were wheeling him down a hallway, and all the people they passed were tall as trees. They smiled at him, and a woman with gray hair patted his arm.

Nice little boy, she said, and then Mom was saying, Jackie. Sweetheart. Honey.

They would fix what was wrong inside him.

There was a rupture and there was infection.

That meant there were germs running all around in his belly, like an army, and that was why he didn't feel so good.

Dr. Heath would fix him. Dr. Kaplan would help too.

Farly tomorrow morning, Mom said. Before the birds are even awake. They would take him to the special room. They would put him to sleep, and he wouldn't feel a thing.

Don't be afraid, the woman with black hair said. Don't worry about a thing.

There was another cold spot and a pinch, this time on his upper arm, near the shoulder, and everything was very cold.

He could lie there and be more quiet than an Indian. Gramma wouldn't even know he was there.

Floating on water was like floating across the sky. Like clouds moving so slowly that he couldn't even tell they were moving. Like lying in bed at night, and all of the darkness surrounding him, and the snow falling outside and making a blanket to cover the earth.

Or when he went for a walk with Grandpa, in the streets of the neighborhood. Everybody they saw smiled at them. People sitting on porches, and people walking by. One man was cutting his grass, and that smelled nice. That smelled like summer.

But when it got cold outside he couldn't walk so far with Grandpa. There was too much ice and snow, and one time Grandpa slipped on the ice and broke his ankle, and that was no fun. That was no fun at all.

So he would have to be patient. He would have to learn to sit still and wait.

He tried to turn over, but he couldn't, and then a woman with a



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red face and glasses was wiping his forehead with a damp cloth. Then the cloth was on his cheeks and eyes, and it went over his mouth too.

His mouth was dry as dust. He couldn't drink anything or eat anything because they would have to put him to sleep soon, and having even a little something to eat or drink could cause problems. So he would need patience.

And then it would be over and he would feel better.

So how come? he wanted to ask. So what was that for? Why did he get sick? And why did everything feel like pins and needles?

He could see clear as a bell. A bell rang loud and clear, and the sound hung in the air.

Like the frost in the morning, when the leaves were falling from the trees. And he went out to the backyard and he ran around and around the tree, and the garage spun past, and the house next door raced by, and the house behind their house—it seemed to float up.

Little boy, they said. Sick little boy.

A fever made you hot all over. A fever was like a fire inside of you. A fever made things kind of funny, so he wasn't too sure what was what.

He thought maybe it was very late at night, like when he woke up at home, and heard a single clock ticking and tocking and ticking and tocking. He didn't know what would happen if he had to get out of bed and go to the bathroom.

The light from the moon made milky squares on the floor, and later, on the wall. A car passed by out on the street and he could hear the car for a long time, as it got farther and farther away.

But then it was very early, and he was in the hospital, where you went when you got very sick. And maybe it was three or four in the morning, and a woman in white came, and a thin man with pale blue pajamas on, and a cap over his hair, and they had masks like bank robbers on television.

They lifted him to a thin bed that had wheels, and, oh, oh, that hurt so bad in his belly.

That was knives and fire all at once.

They put a sheet over him, and he watched the ceiling. He saw tiles and tubes of light and speakers and the tops of door frames.

Then they stood in front of doors and pushed a button and waited.

I'm Dr. Perkins, a man behind a mask said, and he had a very quiet voice. He had a voice that was like a dream. He said, I'll help you go to sleep, and then in a little while, after you're all fixed up, I'll help you wake up.

At first you won't feel so good, Dr. Perkins said, but then you'll feel a little better and a little better still.

Your mom and your dad will be here when you wake up, and you can have something to drink before too long.

First there was a needle in his behind to relax, and he could almost go to sleep already. They were in a white room, with the biggest lights in the world all over the ceiling. They were silver and white, and everyone wore green and blue pajamas, and they were nice to him.

They put his arm on a board, and Dr. Perkins said, You'll feel a pinch, and they put a tube just under his nose for extra air.

He would see God and the angels and they would all have gold circles over their heads. There would be sunshine and fields and flowers. And music all the time. Wavering angel music.

Listen to me count backwards, someone said. A lady with a quiet voice. Count with me if you can. But listen as I count backwards, she said again.

Everyone would be there in heaven. The priest and all the people from church. The people wearing hats and long dark coats and shiny shoes.

One hundred, she said.

Ninety-nine, ninety-eight.

Blip and beep, and something hissed somewhere far away.

When you're gone, someone said. Far far away.

Ninety-three, ninety-two, she said.

Where the air is clear and birds fly. Where they soar among fleecy clouds.

Fleece as white as snow, and he would be still and quiet, and nobody would do anything anymore to him, and it would not hurt.

Everyone was nice, and Mom and Dad, Gramma and Grandpa, the nice lady with red hair—they were there too. He didn't mind. He was quiet. He was still as stone.

Paul Cody's third novel, So Far Gone, will be published by Picador USA next year.

Rite

She has been pursuing that accelerating demon,
that overgrown T-shirt stencilled "ILLUSION",
that toothpick whirling on a lost horizon.

He's endowed—brutality,
slim heels—if he entered he'd win,
but they won't let him in.

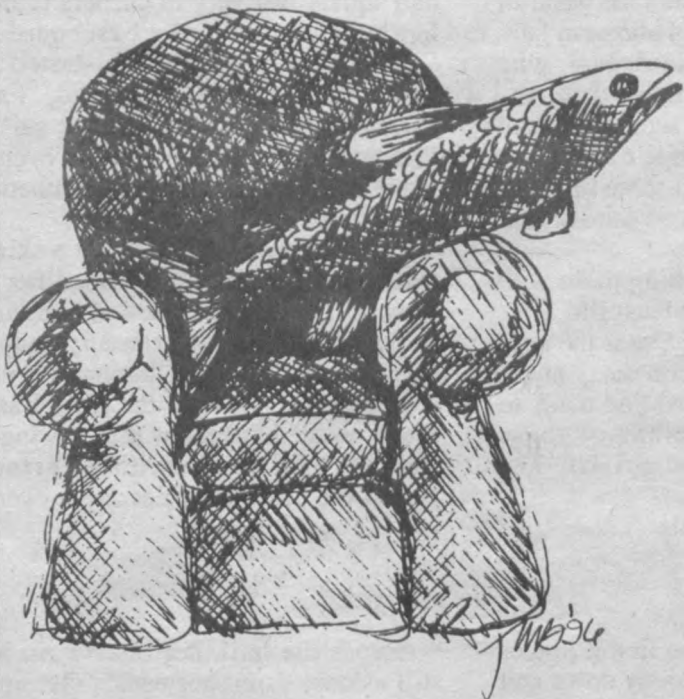
Even on board he sprints around deck
so swiftly the captain
can't take hold and quits,

sobbing, stalled. Oh we're all after him—
men, women, any age—all
we want is a coupling, to feel
something inalienable—an eyelash, not much.

Anyhow it's her turn to drop out
and she hasn't caught up. "Hurry," he says, then
with glottal stop: "it's dime, it's dime." "Oh shut up"
she'd reply, if she could, to that bee-thrum
drilled into her ears and brain, her crumbling
constitution: "It's dime, it's dime."

Oh dear tour-group it's time to say
goodbye to the isle of weeping
beech and dangling moon, firefly with zoom
lens, shingled cottage, the frail, illuminated
room we have visited for so brief a lovely time.

—Phyllis Janowitz



Illustrations by:

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The Saskiad

by Brian Hall

1

This is where she is now: a Greek island, low and away, last of all on the water toward the dark. Ithaca lies between two ridges at the head of a long crooked bay. No automobiles desecrate the silent streets. The modern world has been rubbed out like a mistake. The great stone clock tower on the eastern slope chimes the hour, its triad of gongs shimmering in the gelatinous air.

The sun is motionless, huge. How deliciously she can feel the heat on her arms! She peels off her clothes, and her skin is golden like the sun. Her arms and legs glide, buttery at the joints. She can feel quite distinctly the dirt under her bare feet. She glides between the clapboard houses with their wrap-around porches, their nested gables and towers. Beautiful homes like carved chests containing fine things: all the people she does not know.

But here is an incongruity amid classical Ithacan order and repose. Her own house: the sway-backed porch, the three floors of mismatched windows, the white paint so indecently peeled that only splotches remain like lichen on the rotting shingles. Rising from the shallow roof is a belvedere, a small room with windows all around. A Captain's room.

There is nothing she wants so much as to get up into that room. She would be able to judge the weather up there. She would pace undisturbed, lost in thought, unaware how much her men admired and loved her.

She bounds excitedly onto the porch and tries the door. Locked. She grips the knob and pulls, confident of the swelling strength in her hands. But the door holds firm, indifferent to it.

2

As always, she wakes early, thinking, thinking. The new girl will be in school today. She saw her sitting in the Vice Principal's office. The new girl!

She listens. Quiet.

The sky is empty of stars. She turns on the light by her bed. Blind blackness presses against her window. How frightening! But when she turns out the light, her faithful stars have come out to cheer her: Orion in the northwest, and directly overhead the Big Dipper, which travelers call the Wagon because it wheels, never stopping, never sinking into the wash of the ocean. A supernova blazes in late-setting Boötes, the Herdsman, who herded Odysseus home. And the Moon, her planet, is a wind-filled sail racing along the ecliptic, waxing, always waxing, toward some fullness, some completion she can hardly wait for, but cannot foresee.

Could it have something to do with the new girl? She is so beautiful.

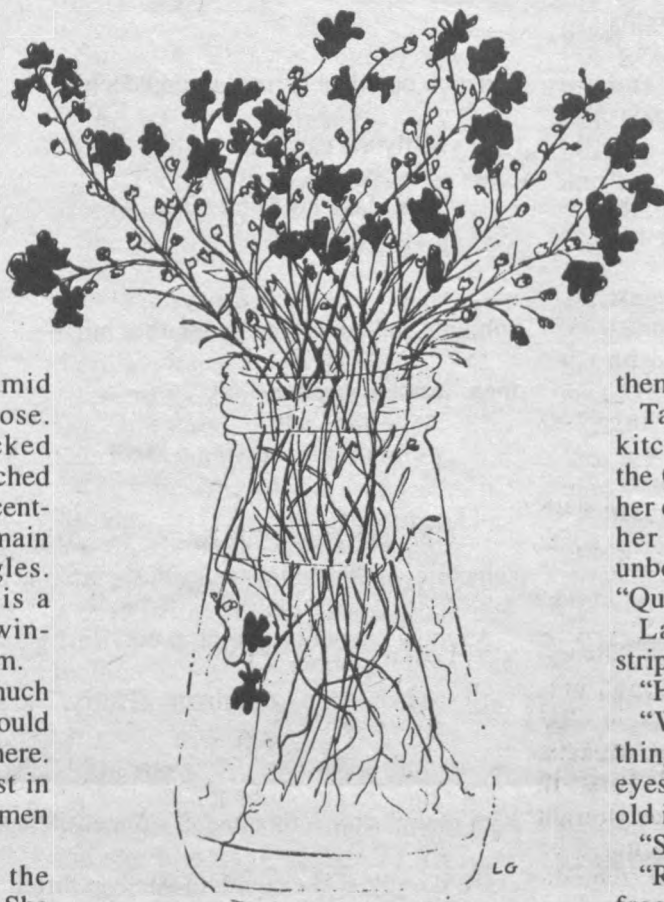
The stars are fading. She is the only one to keep a safe eye on the cunning dark, to help bleed this blind black to gray. No one else thinks of these things. Perhaps the new girl will. The beautiful new girl.

3

When she catches the first glimmer of the lake, she slips quietly down and

pulls on rubber boots in the back hall. Outside is the sodden snow of a Tylerian January.

In the barn Marilyn lumbers, steaming, to her feet, the back up first on splayed legs, the udder swaying hugely. Saskia dumps a scoop of pellets in the trough and shovels muck into the bin, then squats to rub the furry udder, coaxing the coo into letting down. Marilyn never lies in her own muck. She is a good coo with a clean udder, a pleasure to rub. Saskia works white ointment into the rear teats, and the udder-veins bulge, the teats swell. She fires into the bucket a long sequence of pump-action double-bar-



reled blasting. She has the strongest hands of anyone in her grade. At the Ithacan Carnival last summer she pushed the dial on the grip machine up to "Bonecrusher." Afterward, Marilyn is rewarded with a pile of hay and a hug as wide as two arms can reach. Saskia delights in the hot bristle against her cheek. When Saskia was little, an earlier coo pushed her against the wall, making her cry. Thomas ran to rescue her, his brown robe flapping. He lifted her a mile high and kissed her.

In the coop, the chickens mince around her feet like bathers crossing hot sand. She leaves three eggs on the sideboard in the kitchen and pours a saucer of milk for Gorgon, who sidles her fat black body up to the dish with a grunt-like purr. It is a Discipline to love Gorgon, who bites and claws, and squats furtively in corners to do her business along the baseboards. Saskia once wrote and illustrated a reader for the crew that started, "Fat cat, black cat! What cat? That cat!" Pirates threatened, but Gorgon eventually saved the day. A rather pathetic fallacy.

Back upstairs, Saskia picks a skirt and shawl for school. No need for a shower. The caramel smell of Marilyn in her hair is better than any soap. There's a flush of aqua along the eastern ridge. Time to raise the crew. Barring a rescue by the new girl—swinging down on a rope with a Tarzan yell?—the best part of her day is over.

4

Across the hall, her boatswain is still asleep, damn her eyes! "Get up,

you scoundrel! The wind freshening, and a falling glass — no telling what the day will bring!" A lazy dog, yes. But she's damn comely. A hoogily thing. "Come on, Mim, it's almost seven." Saskia rummages through the pile of stuffed animals.

"I'm up!" Mim bubbles up, animals tumbling. "Where's horsey?"

Saskia picks it off the floor. Good God, what the Admiralty sends her. On the lower deck she rouses the rest of the crew—Austin, Shannon, Quinny—to the usual accompaniment of grumbling. Poor devils, it must be hell to be pressed into this service. Weevily food, never enough sleep.

And where does it end? Beheaded by a cannon ball, or sent shrieking under the surgeon's knife. "Don't blame me," she always tells them, when they cry. "Blame Boney." They straggle off to the latrine. (Or is that the loo? Perhaps the ship has no such thing. Simply off the side? Not on this ship.) Quinny takes his sheet with him. "Your hygiene!" she bellows after them. "I'll be checking!"

Tall, capable Lauren is in the kitchen brewing coffee which, like the Captain, she thinks of as soon as her eyes open. She is columnesque in her nightgown, her ton of hair unbound. Saskia reports to her back: "Quinny wet his bed again."

Lauren's shoulders sigh. "You stripped it?"

"He does it himself now."

"Well at least he's doing something." She turns to face Saskia, her eyes still cushioned with sleep. "How old is he, anyway?"

"Seven."

"Ridiculous!" She bangs closed the freezer door on her fancy Ithacan coffee. "Get him to make the bed up himself, too. If he's going to do that like a baby—"

"I'm working on that."

"How did he get to be seven years old?"

Saskia assumes that's a rhetorical question. "It's not a big deal."

"Teach him to do the laundry. Then he can wet his bed all he wants."

"It's no big deal," Saskia insists. You really shouldn't bother Lauren before she has had her coffee.

"Don't be a martyr, Saskia. Nobody likes a martyr." The coffee machine lets out a Bronx cheer. Lauren fills a mug. Hurry up and drink it, you crabby old thing! She sips, smacking at the heat. "If you want to be Quinny's servant go right ahead. I'm getting dressed." As if getting dressed is the way not to be Quinny's servant. Lauren sips again and closes her eyes appreciatively. What is it about coffee? The Captain fights a battle in a gale off a lee shore and never changes expression. But give him a cup of the real thing after a month of burnt bread swill at sea and the sparkle in his eyes is a lovely sight.

"You're a good girl, Saskia," Lauren says, seeming to reconsider.

"Woof!" she says testily.

Lauren shrugs. "All right, you're not a good girl." She goes up to dress.

Saskia scrambles eggs for the crew and sets out Marilyn's milk along with tots of fresh-squeezed rum. Shannon and Austin are sent back to wash their hands. Austin bops Quinny and Quinny blubbers. In the Judg-

Daphne Unbound

She stumbles upon a blacksmith—

frog courtship area

the rain forest around her,

the moon

nearly full.

She can hear only

cling gling cling gling.

A message making clear

such revelries

are not for her.

She rises over treetops.

She would be a voyeur.

She suffers from a pathetic

fallacy

thinking she can think

without gravity.

Stars fall on

her shoulders.

She brushes them off.

She thinks:

This

is the universe.

This

is eternity.

and there is

so much

unoccupied space

so much

room for expansion,

plenty of airy clearances

where a person could

stand on a few bare

toes and spin free from

weather conditions,

no snow or other terrestrial

disturbances,

subject only to

the elements of travel

facilitating

disconnections

—Phyllis Janowitz

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ment Book, Austin has eight demerits, Mim three, Shannon two, and Quinny twenty-six. When you reach ten demerits you clean out the latrines, or swab the deck, or when it's hot you fan Saskia and Marco with wicker platters and feed them peeled grapes. But Quinny is under a different system. Discipline, in Quinny's case, has proven counter-productive, no matter what Lauren says.

Saskia fills lunch boxes, checks bookbags and clothing, tucks a wad of tissue paper in Quinny's back pocket. She wipes his slobbery chin. Lauren reappears in her greenhouse clothes to dispense regal kisses.

The bus jolts down the last treacherous slope and nearly takes out the fence by Lauren's field as the driver, a real toby, backs and fills in the turn-around.

"Morning, Chief." (His daily witticism is to call her Chief.)

"Morning, Toby."

They rattle through the bedraggled Tylerian landscape, under dirt-soup skies, picking up dregs and pigs. Saskia sits in the front to keep a safe eye on the Toby, and Quinny huddles next to her for protection. Austin and Shannon sit in the back and holler for the short cut, an especially mogully "seasonal" road—basically a streambed—the Toby will take now and then when he fancies himself a nice guy. The back of the bus whips on that road, sending barns flying. Mim always sits over the rear wheel casing. The seat is saved for her, because everybody likes her and not even the dregs hide it. Two pigs who get on near town sit with her, and they are as quiet and good and neat as she is, although not so furry. The three of them hold their books on their laps and gaze at each other with long-lashed eyes. Saskia wonders what they talk about. When they laugh, they sound like forest mammals, laughing knowingly about mammally things.

The oldest barns get off at the high school. Tyler Junior is next. "You can't come with me, Quinny." He may start blubbing. "I'll be on the bus this afternoon."

"Have a nice day, Chief!"

Her last seconds of freedom are the time it takes her to walk up the concrete path, through the fortified quadruple doors, each with its one baleful eye of netted glass, into the tiled gloom, the bang of lockers, the shouting and pushing and sneering and blubbing. Count off! Baa-aa-aa!

5

The new girl's name is Jane Sing. Ms. Plebetsky calls it out in English and directs the class to welcome her.

Sing! The new girl nods, acknowledging the praise. She is tall and slender, with skin as brown as Saskia's brown eyes and yards of black hair as straight and glossy as an ironed horse's tail. She turns back toward the Plebe, so that her face is away from Saskia, the hair a satin veil between them. Can Saskia make her pull the veil aside? She bores with her eyes into the back of the new girl's head. Calling Jane Sing. The hum of her heart, the glowing ring of a glass as she rubs her finger on the rim. Sinnnggg . . . Sinnnggg . . . Turn Jane Sing. Turn Jane Sing.

Jane Sing turns. Her eyes run quickly over the faces, glittering as they search for Saskia, and when they

find her they pause, they light like blackbirds on their rightful perch, home.

In gym her locker is far away among the afterthoughts, beyond the next grade's Y's and Z's. Hurriedly putting on her uniform, Saskia tries to see Jane Sing through the crush of pigs, but by the time she pushes down to the end, Jane is already dressed, her hair pulled behind her in a pony tail, showing her chocolate wafer ears, which Saskia stares at. Jane looks up. Saskia panics and hurries past.

Her arms and legs glow in the bright gym lights. Her round brown knees are a blur between the shorts and the socks, she handles the ball well. She runs at Saskia bouncing the ball, Saskia watches her beautiful legs, her willowy arms feinting right and left, she watches her flit past and jump for a basket.

"Sheez louise, Saskia! What are you doing? Quit day-dreaming!"

Back in the locker room Saskia pretends to read notices on the bulletin board while Jane undresses a few feet away. Walking to the shower in her underclothes, Jane passes Saskia with another sidelong glance, as if to say, "When will you have the courage? Only ask me."

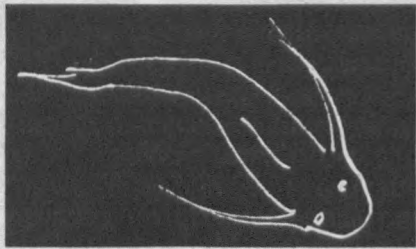
Saskia wraps a towel tightly over her underwear. Her skin is not dark or beautiful. Yellowish, it looks terrible when sweaty, pale and buttery, like something grown in the cellar. Jane's bra and undies hang over a hook outside a stall. The undies are edged with a pretty scalloped pattern. The bra is a yoke of patches. Of course willows don't have breasts. Saskia can imagine Jane's torso in the shower, the lines of it as straight and pure as her limbs. In her own stall, she bares herself, and immediately covers herself again with steam clouds. When Saskia is bare, she is really bare. After two years of mooniness she still has practically no body hair. Even on the triangle there's only a few scraggly hairs like a revolting bunch of insect antennae. The hair on her head is cobwebby. With their inimitable charm, dregs run up and blow on it, as though she were a dandelion gone to seed. Mim is furry and mammally. Jane Sing is a gazelle. Lauren has silky hairs all down her floor-length legs. But there is something reptilian about Saskia, something lizardy. Hairless skin, watchful eyes that don't blink.

And she has breasts. No willow, but a stumpy lumpy apple tree. "Cross-your-heart bra!" the

dregs yell. "Over the shoulder boulder holder!" Saskia has read books in which heroines long for breasts, in which they bare their fronts to the moonlight to make them grow. But that cannot be right. No real person would be happy to see the first mushy stirrings of the pink blobs, the swelling in the flesh around them like some dreadful allergic reaction. And yet here they come. Udders! Soon they will be swaying hugely and getting in the way. And there is nothing you can do about it, not a thing.

6

Ms. Rosenblatt spells it on the board, and there is an "h" hanging on the end: Singh. But you still pro-



Coming Round

The oar squeaks

a dash sound like

moon-hustle on the river:

reeds

trap and ease the

boat slow

to ripple-tilting sanddown:

the night, a

bubble,

hangs two hundred

thousand miles by

a moon-filament:

I tie up, head for the single

windowlight:

I cut the moon free.

nounce it Sing. The "h" is hanging breathless, Saskia thinks. That's a pun. In her notebook she writes, "Saskia Sing."

"Jane's family comes originally from India," Ms. Rosenblatt is saying with a phony wide-eyed expression. "That's a very long way away!"

Jane Sing keeps her gaze straight ahead. Saskia would be embarrassed, too. The Blatt always talks as if this were the first grade: "Ooh, a vewwy wong way away!" She hovers next to the world map with her pool cue. "Does anyone know where India is?"

"Beautiful place, India," Marco grunts.

"So you've said."

"They're all idolaters. They worship cows." He snorts.

"I worship cows, too."

"No you don't." He gives her a noogie. "You milk cows, Aiyaruk. That's not the same." How nice it is to have friends who know everything about you from the first moment! There are no disappointments, no embarrassing discoveries.

"No one has a guess?" The Blatt is wilting. Saskia raises her hand. "Yes, Saskia?"

"India is that thing hanging down below Cathay."

"Cathay?"

"China, stupido," Marco whispers.

"China. It's that thing hanging below, there." Like an udder, with only one teat. Perhaps that's why they worship cows.

"Yes, very good, Saskia."

"Yes, very good, Saskia," sim-pers Marco. "The old cow doesn't even know what Cathay is."

Weathering Here

Rain has worn my umbrella clear,

so dis-waxed and de-fibered

it's even a poor para sol:

I can think of no use for it

atmosphere justifies: on the way

out of town, I might believe it a sieve,

if there's a river or pond around:

closed, its steel point (rain-shined sharp)

could suggest, rain or shine,

intentions undisclosable: stripped

it could be a kind of sculpture mocking

itself: it still sheds some rain:

two such umbrellas might be as good

as one new one: but how can I

collapse two's rags and ribs into one stalk?

—A R. Ammons

"Are all the women in India as beautiful as Jane?"

"All the maidens are. Their flesh is hard. For a penny, they'll allow a man to pinch them as hard as he can. But there is nothing to pinch."

"I guess not." If anyone pinched Saskia, they would get something, all right.

"They all go around naked. Because it's amazingly hot."

"And they're hard and brown?"

"Like mahogany. Even their breasts."

"Jane doesn't have those."

"She will."

Not swaying hugely, but as much a part of the clean lines as the curve of the hips, the curve of the grain in the wood. "It sounds beautiful, that way."

"Oh it is, my lass." Marco gazes at Jane for a long moment. "A man could lose his mind altogether over a maiden like that."

Marco is kind of a sex fiend.

But here comes the Blatt down the row with hand-outs. "We have to hurry through this unit if we're going to get to Rome by March," she says querulously. The hand-out is a list of dates and headings. Heroic age . . . Periclean Athens . . . greatest artistic flowering . . . cradle of Western civilization, blah blah. Only the Blatt could make Greek history dull. Saskia writes in her notebook: "Rome by March! We March on Rome! Beware the Ides of March!" She wishes she had a lean and hungry look. That is partly what makes Jane so beautiful: a lurking hunger. For what? For a friend, of course.

She tunes out the Blatt. Counting

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syllables on her fingers, she writes a haiku:

Lovely limber limbs
Skip past to make a basket —
The coach yells at me

7

In the tiled gloom, on the way to her bus, Saskia has a last chance. Jane Sing is at her locker. Saskia has thought of so many things to say—advice, something friendly, something special between the two of them, something Jane alone would understand and know was meant for her alone. But Saskia suddenly realizes how impossible they all are. Dumb, barnish ideas.

Jane is arranging things in her locker, intent. She does not see Saskia. She will not glance coolly and say, "Are you ready now, at last?" and turn with Saskia, to walk out into the sunshine with her. She is too tall, too beautiful, too mature. She comes from India. Saskia is going to walk past her without a word, hating herself.

"Hey scuz, look out!" Someone shoves her. Her books skitter off the ends of her chasing fingers and fall. Laughter. A pair of dregs splits and passes to either side, happily surveying the scatter. "Pretty clumsy, scuz!" And they are gone in the crowd before she can do anything except stare dumbfounded, think of anything except running and hiding. In front of Jane Sing! She gathers her stuff in the gloom, down among the scissoring legs. Her poor rumpled books! Two stupid dregs, their heads torn off, stuffed into garbage bags, their brainless laughter drained into horror and fear and begging for forgiveness as the bags are thrown into the back of the truck and cackling she pulls the lever that brings down the hydraulic crusher, so lonngg . . .! Her eyes bulge. She can't believe it, she is going to cry right here.

"Fucking idiots," Jane Sing says, from high above.

F— Even that word is all right, cradled in her lovely voice. What is it, that voice? Smooth-sided, spoken out of a cedar box. The page with the haiku is in Saskia's hand, ripped at the bottom. It is coming, she has no time . . . "This is for you," she says with her awful squeak, like something getting stepped on. She thrusts the page. "My name is Saskia." Jane Sing's mouth begins to open and Saskia glimpses a pink tongue pointed like a felt-tip marker. But she runs away. She hides in the opium den, barely making it into a stall before the lightning cracks across her forehead, her eyes tumble out, and the rain pours.

8

In the dark time, propped up in bed beneath her lamp, she labors over her autobiography, which begins:

Like all real people, I go under several names. To the laconic Captain, I am simply "Lieutenant," and proud to bear that humble title under his wise command. Marcocalls me

Aiyaruk, which means "Bright Moon" in the Tartar tongue. By Odysseus's side I am Saskion Monogeneia. Lastly, the Novamundians, with their typical lack of imagination, call me Saskia White.

My personal color is white, for the obvious reason. Thus, my planet is the Moon and my metal is silver. My armorial bearing is sable, a baston sinister, argent, between a crescent, argent, and sol, or.

The sable background is the night, held at bay by the silver light her eyes shine on it. The baston sinister signifies bastardy. The crescent on the left is herself, while the sol on the right is the one whom she would follow, if only she found one worthy: the Captain to her faithful Lieutenantancy, the perfection of gold to which near-perfect silver aspires.

Lauren and I have a farm in Novamundus. Ours is a goodly land, fertile and yielding to the plow. It lies on the western shore of mighty Cayuga Lake, along both sides of fast-flowing White Creek. The farm is now known by the name "White-on-the-Water," although it was not always thus.



Actually, Saskia is the only one who calls it "White-on-the-Water." She loves geographical names, and English ones seem especially delicious, like sandwiches: Stratford-upon-Avon; Stourport-on-Severn. Lauren calls White-on-the-Water simply "The Place," or if she is feeling eloquent, "The Old Place."

Lauren is Plant-master at White-on-the-Water and her store of wisdom in this matter is great. With the help of silent spells and incantations she causes wondrous things to grow. I am the Animal Keeper. I tend to Marilyn and I encourage the chickens in their laying of eggs. In summer I cut Marilyn's timothy with my personal scimitar. Lowly jobs, some would say, sneering. But I do them willingly and well.

Marilyn and the chickens are at White-on-the-Water only for milk and eggs. Saskia knows the Novamundian practice: chasing the chicken, swinging it like a noise-maker to stop its noise. Or hoisting the coo by the hind leg at the end of the fifth milking year, the wave of blood splashing from the throat into the trough. Lauren and Saskia don't allow any of that barbarity at White-on-the-Water. The chickens mince and dither until they keel over from tiny heart attacks. Marilyn will experience a sudden massive stroke in her meadow on a sunny spring day and collapse in a patch of clover so lush and loving it will lower her gently to the ground. Such care is ordained. If you do not treat the things around you with the proper respect, they will not be good to you. You will not have earned their goodness.

9

Down, she floats down, deeper, pulling down with her the precious

Making the Film

Three fingers of sun on the far shore:

shallow beach, steep green to the ridge, trees

black against the last light;

It is the shaft moving slowly on the shore that you watch.

A spotlight, leading a camera,

it tends southeast, holding briefly each cottage

and cluster of boats,

letting you savor the film's beginning,

where it will unfold, what land it has to do with,

what you will remember when the tale ends, poorly,

or with hope.

Soon the man with the trumpet will begin to play,

will open the song that leads not to forgetting,

but remembering what is gone.

Each night he sits alone on the dock, hears the water

slapping the pilings beneath his chair,

sucking the stiff wood.

He lifts a golden arm into the dark.

Perhaps it is about this man.

On the opposite shore the houses dim, then glitter:

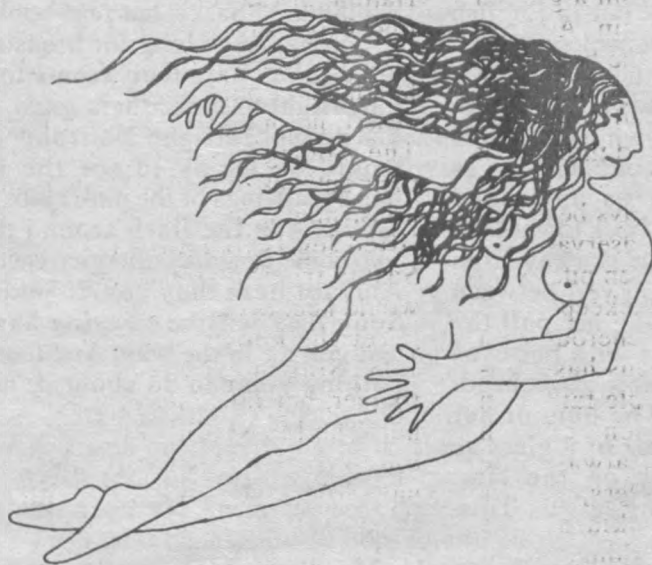
channel lights marking the shallows and points of safety.

They are so few.

Already, you can see what there is,

what there will be in the last frame.

—Kathleen Gemmell



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consciousness, a trapped bubble, that she is going down. She monitors her breathing and the slow dissolution of blankets, the confusion of place. Koan: I am in two places at once. This is what it is like. Remember.

A Greek island. No people, no cars. The clock tower chimes the gelatinous hour. She peels off her clothes, feeling the delicious heat. She walks between the beautiful houses, and her own house is there, itself and not itself, the Captain's room rising from the roof. She bounds onto the porch. The door is locked.

But she is getting better. She remembers the crucial fact: she brought a key. It lies solidly on her palm. She turns the key in the lock, and the door opens. How laughably easy! The inside of the house is exactly as she knows it. She climbs the stairs, passing Lauren's room and the crew's quarters and continuing up until she emerges in the top hall, her cabin to one side, Mim's berth to the other. There are no more stairs. The attic is nothing but a crawl space, reachable by means of a folding ladder bolted to a panel in the ceiling. But that is no way to get to a Captain's room.

Looking down, she realizes she is still naked. Strange that she could have forgotten that. The thought of her loose in the house naked, her bare flank rubbing against the bristly wallpaper, makes her feel buttery all over, as if she could shrug off her arms and legs as painlessly as kicking off shoes. She opens the door to her cabin. She is standing on the threshold of an enormous room. Thrones backed against the walls are upholstered in rich cloths and furs: brocade, damask, vair. Saskia runs her fingers over the cloths and along the polished curves of the mahogany. She sits in the thrones one by one, luxuriating in the touch of rough and smooth.

A bard is strumming a lyre and singing of heroic deeds. Men sit at long tables, feasting noisily. Saskia joins them. Nothing could be more right or proper. She has bathed and been anointed with olive oil, she wears a tunic as sheer and soft as the skin of an onion, shining as the sun shines. One of the men spies her and calls out in greeting, "Help yourself to the food and welcome, and after you have tasted dinner, we will ask you who among women you are." A maidservant brings water for her to wash her hands in, pouring it from a golden pitcher into a silver basin. A grave housekeeper brings in the bread and serves it to her, adding good things, generous with her provisions. She puts her hand to the good things that lie ready before her.

This is how it has always been and always will be. The maidservant will always pour from a golden pitcher to a silver basin. The housekeeper will always be grave, and generous with her provisions. Odysseus has complained that young people fail often to act properly when custom demands a thing. "For always, the younger people are careless," he has said. But not all. Saskia strives always to do the proper thing, as you could never have hoped for in a young person. So she puts her hand

to the good things that lie ready before her as she has done countless times before in exactly this way, so exactly this way that each instance is not a repetition of an occurrence but the same occurrence returned to, like a dream. She can no more do something different than she can change what she has already done. In this unbreakable web of the done, there is a small, still space into which Saskia fits perfectly.

When she has put away her desire for eating and drinking, the man who spoke to her before says, "Come now, recite us the tale of your sorrows, and tell us this too, tell us truly, so that we may know it: What woman are you and whence? Where is your city? Your parents?"

The men are turned to her, waiting. They would wait forever if necessary, with their goblets empty at their elbows. They would wait, deathless, their grave warrior's eyes turned toward the space into which she fits perfectly. She stands, hooking her thumbs in her copper belt and tossing back a thick mane of hair. "See, I will accurately answer all that you ask me." The warriors catch each other's eyes, nodding approval. As you could never have hoped for in a young person. She begins: "Like all real people, I go under several names . . ."

10

Today is the day on which Saskia and Jane will become best friends. In the tiled gloom, Saskia proposes to herself a test: she gave Jane the haiku at her locker, so that is their special place now. If Jane is at her locker now, that means she is waiting for Saskia.

She pushes through the fire door and scans the crowd. Of course if Jane is not there, it doesn't necessarily mean anything. Her math class might have run over. She might be hurrying there at this very moment, glancing anxiously at her watch, praying that Saskia has waited for her. Of course Saskia would wait!

But Jane is already there. She is peering into a notebook and twiddling the lock. One leg is lifted, the foot flat against the inner thigh of the other leg, which is locked back, curved like a bow. Saskia catches her breath. She has never seen anything so graceful. Storks stand that way, resting for a moment on their long migrations. So do nomads, like the mysterious Masai who go on safaris with Denys Finch-Hatton, or the Australian aborigines that Bligh saw from his open boat, after the mutiny. The Masai run for hundreds of miles across the African desert, no one knows why or where. The Aborigines cross and recross their outback, recognizing no boundaries, singing their magic songs. The lifted leg is like a folded wing. If Saskia tried to stand that way, she would keel over.

Yet she knows she can speak to Jane. Jane is a veldt-roamer, but Jane is also waiting for her. The Masai allowed Finch-Hatton to travel with them. Jane must have loved the haiku. "Hi!" It feels so easy, all of a sudden.

"Hello." She takes the leg down

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Meditation

Two geese skid into the water

on the raised webs of their feet,

the water coming into them,

wings coming down.

I knew a barefoot skier once.

He had but this one trick in life. He loved the water

and the way it held his feet,

how it filled the arch and pressed against the sole.

Day after day he dug in, skiing far back on the rope

so it seemed as if there were no boat at all,

as if there were only the slim body angled above water

and only muscle and will held him aloft.

I think how tender the muscle, the tendon

beneath the soles of feet. Of how in parts of the world

it is an early zone of torture

by fire, or with a simple club,

of how the foot curls in around the pain

and is crippled long after the ordeal ends.

Limitless, the body's landscape of pain

and of pleasure, nearly the same,

bounded most by imagination and will.

I think of how a lover who means to love

for hours, for years, will begin here,

farthest from the heart, will give first

the humblest of gifts,

lay the Achilles tendon in the bowl of his lap

and begin with the heel, its rough edge

and the mound in the middle,

learn the first arch of a body with his hands,

let his thumbs uncurl each toe,

hold the foot like a bird he would not lose.

And of how the wealthy Chinese lord

would have his mistress prepared,

how the women-in-waiting would tap her soles

with soft rubber bells on sticks,

how stress would melt from the chosen body,

and a deep tremor of pleasure

spread upward through the groin.

All this from feet.

—Kathleen Gemmell



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and opens the locker.

"My name is Saskia."

"I remember."

Of course she remembers, stupido. "What were you looking at in your notebook?"

"My locker combination."

Jane is so tall she can see right onto the top shelf of her locker. "You shouldn't write it there. The dregs look for them in notebooks and steal your stuff."

"Who?"

"The dregs. The boys."

"It hasn't happened to me before," Jane says doubtfully.

"Dregs in India probably aren't like the stupid dregs here."

"I've never been to school in India," Jane says coolly. Saskia can feel her face heating up. Did she offend Jane Sing? "I mustn't be late for class," Jane says, turning.

Saskia turns with her. "We're in the same one."

"That's true."

Jane Sing sounds marvelously mature, doesn't she? "I remember." "That's true." It suits her smooth-sided voice, flowing out of its cedar box. She is from Vastamundus, even if not from India. (Saskia doesn't understand that, the Blatt said she was.) Saskia doesn't say judicious things like "That's true," and it shows what a small-town barn she is. "Have you gotten to know anyone yet?"

"Not yet."

They pass under the big clock. "The V.P. designed the schedule," Saskia says, "and it's the most cunning thing you ever saw. Some classes are forty-eight minutes, some are fifty-one. Lunch is twenty-nine! It's all carefully planned to confuse you so they can pile on the demerits and get slave labor in the afternoons. English starts at 9:13! How can any self-respecting class start at 9:13?"

You're babbling. Stop babbling.

"The V.P. is the Vice Principal?"

"Yeah. The Very Putrid. The Vicious Pupil-hater. The Virtually Pandemic." Saskia once spent an enjoyable afternoon with a dictionary, making a list. "The Vitally Polluted. The Vitriolic Pusball." Jane glances side-long at Saskia, who shrugs, adding, "There's a rumor going around that he's the Anti-Christ." How big are his shoes? Saskia never thought to look.

"And what about the Principal?"

She asks questions so reasonably! She merely wants information, like a mature person: Ah yes, and what about . . . ? Do tell me about . . .

"That's the P. The Pusillanimous. Did you see him your first day here? I saw you in the V.P.'s office." The folksen she was sitting with must have been her moor.

"Just for a second."

"Yeah, you hardly ever see him. It's pretty sad, actually. He's got leprosy."

"He—what?"

"We see him once a year, when he gives a speech at the opening assembly. They prop him up behind this podium that's mainly there to hide his hideous deformities. You can't understand a word he says. They say that's not uncommon with lepers. They keep his office dark and they incense it to hide the smell."

Jane Sing turns her gazelle eyes full and wide on Saskia. She bites her lip. "You're joking." The bell rings.

"Oh, shit," Saskia tosses off as



calmly as she can. "Come on!" They run the last straightaway to English and slide in just as the Plebe is swinging the door shut.

On the way to French Saskia says, "Actually I think he's just shy, or something."

"The Principal, you mean."

Note how they are already on the same wavelength. "He's pretty old. I was sent to his office once when the V.P. was out on a rampage rifling lockers and mugging students and so on, and he sat the whole time behind his desk leaning way back and holding his hands out in front of him like he was trying to ward me off." Mumble mumble shouldn't mumble try to mumble and those two old white palms up and out saying noo please go away noo don't come nearer! Saskia felt like a leper.

"So where should I write my locker combination?" Jane is asking.

Advice! Jane Sing wants advice! "Don't write it anywhere. Just remember it."

"Numbers don't stay in my head."

"You need a trick, that's all. What's your combination?" Jane hesitates. No this cannot be right, they cannot have secrets from each other. "Mine is 20-9-1. The trick is, if you switch the nine and the one you get nineteen, and nineteen is one less than twenty."

Jane Sing looks in her notebook. She hesitated because she couldn't remember it, not because she doesn't trust Saskia. She was waiting for her at the locker, it is their locker now, she trusts her. "21-3-12."

"That's easy! They're all multiples of three."

"I'm not good at math."

"That's not math, that's just numbers." Jane shakes her head impatiently. "OK, twenty-one minus three squared is twelve. Even better, the whole thing's a palindrome."

"I said I'm not good at math!"

Will you just stop showing off? I'm not showing off, I'm trying to be helpful. Jane doesn't think so, she'll decide you're a drip and you'll only deserve it.

But at lunch magnanimous Jane sits with show-off Saskia, anyway. A long silence drags by. Don't babble. Don't be a drip.

Three dregs at the next table have stolen a smaller dreg's cap and are keeping it away from him, braying as he pleads with them tearfully to give it back. Yah! Yah! A shout in your ear. A rubber band aimed at your eye. A thumb tack on your seat. Saskia shrinks, hoping they won't notice her. She wishes dregs would all disappear. Nothing bloody, nothing mean. Just a quiet, gender-wide ceasing-to-exist. "What rawholes," she finally says, cowardly quiet.

"What?"

Saskia takes a roll of shredded wheat stuffed with vermillion sliced almonds and chartreuse cottage cheese out of her lunch bag. "I said, 'What rawholes.' Those dregs."

"What's that?"

"What?"

"That!"

"This? It's a millet roll with tamarind seeds and camel's milk. I make them myself." Saskia takes a

Clear Creek

Here the water bends at the hip, and again.

It fills a curve in the earth and makes one want

to bend like that, like ground and water.

Again I have taken you to bed

and you slip through me,

The ground has felt the water move like a fish in its belly,

like a flood.

It has felt the whole body of water freeze

and splinter with loss.

And water knows how to enter land

and make a living thing of it, soft and slick;

signing my body

with your bright calligraphy:

The water will take all the ground will give,

and move it again, and lift itself

into the air and come again to ground.

Ankle, wrist. Shoulder, knee

and all the soft ground between.

—Kathleen Gemmell

dainty bite. "They eat this all over the Mongolian Empire. Camel's milk keeps better in the desert than coo's milk. Higher fat content. You want to try some?" Jane just stares at it. Saskia holds it out. "Go ahead. I've got plenty."

After looking it over slowly, Jane nibbles one end. "It's cottage cheese."

"Yeah, it's similar. You like it?" Jane doesn't answer. "Well, it's not for everybody."

The next class is Technology. "Mr. Brandt is a big dumb lug," Saskia explains to Jane. Actually, he's the only teacher she sort of likes. He spot-welds metal bands around his biceps and pops them off as he points the way to Muscle Beach. His coffee floats a rainbow sheen, which proves it's really high grade machine oil. "We're in the middle of a unit, so he probably wants you to double up with someone. You can do my project with me, everybody else is just making candlesticks."

"What are you making?"

"A sextant." The Captain lost his overboard in the horse latitudes and he has a birthday coming up.

Sure enough, after attendance Mr. Brandt comes over and raises the question of Jane's project. "She can work with me," Saskia says instantly.

"OK by me," he says, boring meditatively into an ear with a parsnip-sized pinkie. He doesn't give a hoot about projects, as long as you watch

him pop armbands. "OK by you?" he asks Jane.

Of course she wants to work with Saskia. She loved the haiku, she was at her locker, she asked for information on principals and locker combinations. Saskia bores a hole in her cheek. Yes. Yes.

"Sure. Sounds like fun."

Saskia's heartwarmth erupts and spreads. Suddenly, Jane Sing giggles. "Big dumb lug," she says, after Mr. Brandt has lumbered off. The tall dark willow from Vastamundus giggles with the stumpy apple tree from hicksville. Not believable, after all. Yet Jane's coffee eyes sparkle unmistakably. She has found a friend, Saskia whispers to herself. Me! She shivers and hugs herself, she is so very big blooming warm from her stomach lungs heart out to the tips of her fingers and toes HAPPY.

Brian Hall lives in Ithaca with his wife and two daughters. The Saskiad is his second novel.

