

How Do Pigeons Find Their Way Home?

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Introduction

How Do Pigeons Find Their Way Home? extends and reimagines Chaucer's exploration of non-normative identities in *The Canterbury Tales*. When I encountered *The Tales* in my Junior year of college, I was struck by the depth of Chaucer's inquiry into medieval constructions of text and what we might now call gender. Specifically, I thought that the excessively gendered, animalistic Pardoner and the simultaneously textual and authorial Wife of Bath held immense literary power as representations of identity outside of normative structures, which I relate to queerness.

The two main characters in *How Do Pigeons Find Their Way Home (Pigeons)* are based directly on characters from *The Canterbury Tales (The Tales)*. Alison is an older Wife of Bath, settled, at last, with a much younger husband, John. John is the mythical sixth husband of the Wife and the first to convince Alison that, finally, she has someone to grow old with. Twenty-something Culver is a reimagining of the Pardoner. Like his predecessor, Culver defies gender norms in body, dress, and speech. Culver's partner, Miles, serves as a modern foil. A nonbinary, sensitive lover of psychedelics, Miles draws attention to Culver's flighty and self-serving disposition.

Throughout the story, both Alison and Culver grapple with disconnection from the people around them. Alison has been entrenched in a heteronormative mode of thinking and being her whole life. From marriage to marriage, she claims to long for trust, but instead repeatedly encounters emotional and physical violence. Having experienced intense homophobia at a young age, Alison is, at her core, repressed and afraid. She longs for the safety that normative structures claim to provide but has yet to find it.

For Culver, total repression was never an option. His mannerisms and appearance revealed his queerness before he could control how he was perceived. He has found that an amplification of his otherness gives him more control. As a result, he has failed to develop a deep self-understanding. His suffering as a child has blossomed into narcissism and fear of connection. He occupies spaces that are home to those who have liberated themselves from hegemonic constructions of identity through self-exploration. However, his trauma has left him ill-equipped for introspection, as it would require him to resurface a pain that he has “successfully” dealt with through deflection and compartmentalization.

Both characters are informed by readings of *The Canterbury Tales*. In Alison’s case, her struggle to find a mutually trusting relationship reflects the Wife’s prologue and tale. The Wife repeatedly asserts a relationship structure built on mutual trust, but her stories make it clear that this “trust” is predicated on violence. For example, in *The Tales*, she and Jankyn live peacefully only after they have a physical altercation. Her tale provides another example when a rapist knight successfully completes the quest assigned as punishment by the women of the realm: to discover what it is that women truly desire. He is then confronted with having to marry the terribly ugly woman who gave him the answer, much to his dissatisfaction. In the end, he must give up his power entirely, under threat, to find a desirable partner who will serve him as he said he would serve her. I further draw on my reading of the Wife when Alison explores a nonbinary identity. I argue that she actively deconstructs heteronormative structures. Other scholars have noted her critique of male authority, but conclude that she ultimately reifies heteronormative structures (Dinshaw, *Glose*130). In my reading, I find that Chaucer’s placement of the Wife outside of male authorial power complicates heteronormative binaries more than scholars have acknowledged so far.

Culver is constructed with the Pardoner's confessed vicious, self-serving nature, animalistic appearance, and opaque use of language in mind. I explore the potentially homophobic aspects of the Pardoner's construction through the lens of narcissism. Culver does not have the internal strength to fully understand himself, so he resorts to mirroring, deflection, and performativity, and thus is disconnected from reality. Though Culver exhibits similar tendencies to the Pardoner, the evolution of these tendencies clearly results from harmful external forces. While he carries forward some of the negative attributes that Chaucer gave him, he also asks the reader to consider *why* these sorts of stereotypes might have existed and still exist.

While our current understanding of gender and sexuality is vastly different from the medieval, these disparate conversations inform each other. In Chaucer's time, the female body was the "Figure for the text," reading and interpretation being likened to the dressing and undressing of that body (Kruger, 126). What we might now call homosexuality was expressed in the terms of a text without a fruitful meaning of "gloss," an act of undressing and intimacy with a text that can bear no fruit. In other words, homosexuality was likened to language that has no innately true meaning.

I argue that this construction of gender interested Chaucer greatly as it pertains to authorship. As producers and decoders of text, there is something inherently gender-bending about the role of authors within the medieval construction of gender. This is evident in the Wife's prologue and tale, where she illustrates how certain types of authorship require a balance between genders. I will elaborate on this particular point later but first will connect the more general medieval reading practices to current queer modes of writing.

The medieval conception of a concrete text or total authorial control is less stable than we might assume. In his book *Medieval Interpretation: Models of Reading in Literary Narrative*, Robert Sturges points out that *Lancelot* was a fiction built through widespread collaboration, while Chaucer himself wrote *Troilus and Criseyde* largely by translating *Filostrato* (Sturges, 3). The same poem by the same author could be found in many versions, and even the bible was subject to the interpretive whims of a priest (Sturges, 3).

The medieval reader would also be familiar with the idea that the text itself is not merely a collection of letters, but an active process of decoding authorial intent and “Adding to it that which is not yet there” (Sturges, 5). They saw text as an active project, a dynamic entity that grows and changes with time and readership. While the distinction between personhood, language, and authorial charge is distinct within the modern framework, it is evident that the boundaries between those categories may not have been so distinct at the time

Current modern queer fiction writers are also interested in destabilizing the hegemonic ideas surrounding author and text. Three of my inspirations, Kai Cheng Thom’s *Fierce Femmes and Notorious Liars*, Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red* and Robert Gluck’s *Margery Kempe* play with ideas of narrative structure and the reliability of the narrator.

In Thom’s piece, narrative chunks are abruptly retold in a fantastical and heightened tone. She states, “What really happened was...” and then transforms a “realist” scene into something extraordinary. The reader must fill in the spaces left by the fantastical language to create logic, or be swept into this strange, new world. Carson and Gluck both tell their stories from the point of view of characters who are often dismissed as untrustworthy or unrealistic. In Carson’s case, it is a young boy with a learning disability and an abusive upbringing. For Gluck, it is a gay man in love and a religious fanatic woman in love.

Carson and Gluck both take stories from centuries past and use them to frame an exploration of queerness and the universality of experience across time. All three authors blend the sublime with the absurd, situating the fantastic within the mundane. In *Autobiography of Red*, the central character is red and has wings. In *Margery Kempe*, Jesus plays hard-to-get as Margery starves during a pilgrimage.

I consider this mode of writing inherently queer, as it confuses categories taken for granted by destabilizing narrative norms. Who is to say what is real? Who is to say what is interesting? Distorting expectations for a written world enables readers to better view their understanding of categories, such as gender, as arbitrary. If a woman is sometimes a bird, maybe it is easier to imagine that she might sometimes be a man. I also would argue that this space beyond the real/unreal binary calls readers to construct their own logic, filling in the blanks.

While medieval literature has its own binaries, it gives us a perspective that allows us to critique our own with greater clarity. Similarly, queer theory is a useful tool in historicist analysis because it allows us a distance from our own paradigms of thought that unconsciously color our assumptions of the past (Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Queer Touches*, 79) In terms of Chaucer and his authorial prowess, Burger states that queer theory allows us to see “A far less hierarchical, far more fluid, relationship of power and agency” between the “Chaucerian narrative ‘persona’ and ‘Chaucer the man’” (Burger, 163).

While these two perspectives can build on each other, reclaiming historical work also presents a number of issues. When looking back on Chaucer with a queer lens, we must ask: how do we hold difference and similarity together without leaning toward an exaggerated essentialism or a hard division between our era and his (Burger, 154)? How do we understand “queerness”

across time without accidentally reifying the binaries and categories we are attempting to deconstruct, such as an innate conflation between queerness and homosexuality?

In my work, I wanted to hold the flexibility of each lineage, allowing them to blend and merge. I wanted to speak from my experience without reifying a divide or projecting backwards. Thus, *Pigeons* is its own story. It does not reflect the plot of *The Tales* unless I felt that plot point was necessary to Chaucer's exploration of theory through the character. For example, Alison's five ex-husbands mirror the Wife's experience in many ways, because I felt this was important to her particular construction of queerness. Specifically, the violent and coercive aspect of those marriages illustrates the failings of hegemonic heterosexual ideals. Some marriages are physically violent, like Jankyn's. In contrast, the others are a more quiet violence in which a young woman can only find a permissive and non-aggressive partner by marrying an old man. I also confuse the voice of the narrator, shifting perspective and structure to leave ambiguity.

I draw on a queer intersectionality that is not present in Chaucer's time, specifically from Thom's *Fierce Femmes*. Western readers tend to divide authors contending with race from authors contending with gender identity and sexuality. It is not possible to extrapolate these identities as we are whole beings whose many facets commingle. I do not want to write a story that explores queerness as divorced from race, and also acknowledge that both of my main characters are white. As a queer white person writing fiction for the first time, I felt that writing closely to this perspective would allow me to write the most truthful, rich narrative I could.

That being said, being white does not divorce one from questions of race, as it is not a default of being that one gets to build other marginalized identities on top of. I intend my narrative to point to the ways in which whiteness is a construction that has been wrongfully asserted as fact and default.

Chaucer was also writing at a time when harmful racial constructions were present. While his racism is more typically explored in the Prioress and Man of Law's tales (Blurton, 397; Shibanoff, 60), I would argue that racism is equally present in the Wife and Pardoner, if instead in the (relatively) indirect reproduction of whiteness, which, again, is something that is still alive and well in popular narratives today. The question that Chaucer and I share is this: How does one construct self outside of a hegemonic paradigm without simply being "not." This question is one that has been considered by all peoples that have defined the edges of heteronormative whiteness for centuries. There is a vast scholarship on this subject coming from the perspective of people of color, queer people of color, indigenous people, and more. This is a lineage of thought that I intend to explore within the context of this project past graduation.

Before the 1990s, Chaucerian scholarship was decidedly heteronormative: "A dominant culture's representations of itself to itself," that "has thus often reproduced rather than critiqued hegemonic attempts — both medieval and modern — to construct and maintain the purity of its foundational epistemological categories." (Burger, 153). However, it was not solely the makeup of Chaucer's body of critics that supported this heteronormative mode of reading. There has long been an assumption that "What little evidence there exists about the historical Chaucer's own sexual desire — most notably and controversially the "rape" of Cecily Chaumpaigne—is clearly directed toward women" (Burger, 158).

As we have recently become aware, Chaucer is most likely to have hired Chaumpaigne away from another employer, not to have committed rape in the modern sense of the word. However, we should still keep in mind that this does not absolve him from participation in a culture that perpetuated the harm of women in many modes, including the physical (Roger and

Sobecki, 436). While this discovery may have prevented Burger from having to address what some held as proof of Chaucer's sexuality, I agree with him when he later states that the sexuality of Chaucer himself is beside the point. How could our speculations about Chaucer's orientation tell us about his text more than the text itself?

Nonetheless, I do acknowledge the historical lineage that demands Burger, among other queer medievalists, address Chaucer's alleged "straightness." It is due to their work that I do not have to prove that, if it is ridiculous to speculate that Chaucer might be "gay" by modern standards, then it is equally ridiculous to call him "straight" (Burger, 155). An argument in support of this claim is that a society that understood sex along a one-sex model could not possibly have the same construction of heterosexuality as we do.

In constructing a queer reading of Chaucer, I am not trying to find some inherent mode of being that is "queer" and that transcends time. Queer theory is not interested in parsing out precise overlaps or boundaries between categories. Instead, I am interested in the ways in which queerness still remains an othered, disruptive force, and where we might find similarities to this in Chaucer's work. While we do have words for various gender identities and understand them within the context of subjecthood and self-actualization, they are not necessarily accurate or sufficient (Butler, xvi). As a society, the West still finds itself contending with questions concerning how language and category create false binaries and divisions where they may be unnecessary (Butler, page).

The history of Chaucer's scholarship is particularly frustrating to me as Chaucer himself invites a queer reading of his texts. Current scholars have elaborated on how Chaucer consciously played with misinterpretation in a mode that we might now call queer (Magnani and Watt, 271) He is certainly no stranger to the ill-defined nature of the "other" and its destructive

and transformative capabilities. Chaucer has been shown to contend with the othered and the accepted modes of the erotic (Pugh, 9). Using a retrospective queer lens allows us to then “illuminate the disjunction between licit and illicit portrayals of desire within his fictions.” (Pugh, 9) This intentional play with categories of belonging/otherness demonstrates that Chaucer was aware of a “queer” force that acts upon and within language. Chaucer himself would not have considered this blurring effect to be “queer” in the modern sense. However, he is effectively grappling with constructions of identity and desire that cannot be fully defined by the language he is given.

I add to this scholarship by claiming that Chaucer uses the Wife of Bath to articulate a space beyond gender that can be found through a balance of opposing binaries: male and female forces. Then, he uses the presence of the Pardoner to destabilize the use of category at all. Two years ago, I may not have believed that Chaucer was exploring non-binary identities in the fourteenth century. However, as I have continued to sit with his work, I have found many areas of overlap in the questions queer theorists pose today. It is easy to dismiss the medieval period as dark and lesser, assuming that our current, flawed ideas of gender have evolved from some “worse” predecessor. Ironically, assuming that the past was the sole impetus for our current hegemonic ideals only serves to normalize these ways of thinking now. I aim for my novella to breathe new life into the questions Chaucer was considering in a mode that is interesting and accessible to the modern reader. I want to be clear that I am not “fixing” or finding issue with the past. Instead, I am attempting to blur the lines between past and present, allowing questions of gender and identity to flow across time. Thus, my novella is interactive and incomplete, filled with illustration, white space, and ambiguity. Queerness is never defined, and Alison and Culver

share a sense of needing growth and change more than any sort of particular trait of “universal queerness”

When it comes to queer readings of Chaucer, the Pardoner has received the vast majority of the attention (Kruger, 1990; Dinshaw, *Chaucer's Queer Touches*, 1995; Burger, 1994; Pugh, 2018). It is not surprising, as he is the most obvious candidate for a queer reading. However, I think that with the evolution of queer study of Chaucer, there is now a platform on which we can build towards new readings. I have no intention of reinventing any of the plethora of close readings of the Pardoner's tale and prologue. Where I interject is in the Wife of Bath's tale.

The Wife has long been relegated to a decidedly heteronormative space. Feminist, and sometimes even queer readings, typically consider the Wife within a binary construction of gender. Carolyn Dinshaw, a noted queer medievalist, states that the Wife is a reification of many “female” constructions (Dinshaw, 128-129), and that the Pardoner's interruption of her monologue “Exposes her femininity as itself a pose, something theatrical, an act.” (Dinshaw, 77). I argue that Chaucer uses the textual understanding of Alisoun's body to complicate her gender through astrology. He uses astrological theory to mark the Wife's body physically, creating an intersection of text, authorship, and predestination. Through this intersection, Chaucer demonstrates that the human construct of gender limits a person's ability to develop balanced relationships, both within themselves and with others. He then uses this analysis of gender to question human will, implying that a gender binary functions to strip humans of their ability to exercise autonomy in the face of Providence.

The Wife, very much in control of her narrative, describes her own astrological chart. She focuses primarily on the profound role that Venus and Aries play in her life: “For certes, I am al

Venerien/ In feelynge, and myn herte is Marcien” At that time, it was widely known that women with these two signs would be lecherous (Chaucer, 49), and the Wife herself acknowledges that she does not have much choice when it comes to sexual promiscuity: “I folwed ay myn inclinacioun/ By vertu of my constellacioun” (Chaucer, lines 615-616). Here, Chaucer likens her astrological chart to the providential power of predestination, a force that clearly dictates underlying elements of her character.

While the effects of her horoscope do give Alisoun a variety of specific personality traits, such as her lecherousness, Chaucer repeatedly emphasizes the physical marks that these signs leave. Mars, which gives her “sturdy hardynesse” (Chaucer, line 612) of mind also has effects on her body: “Yet have I Martes mark upon my face/ And also in another privee place (Chaucer, lines 619-620). Additionally, after mentioning that she is “Gat-tothed” (Chaucer, line 603), a trait also associated with sexually promiscuous women, she states that she: “hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel / As help me God, I was a lusty oon, / And faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon” (Chaucer, lines 604-606).

Here, we see that the physical mark of Venus’s seal is mentioned first, which then causes both her “lustiness” and attractiveness. Alisoun effectively forges a link between her astrological chart, the state of her physical body, and her internal sexual motivation. Astrology is therefore something that acts on the physical body, which in turn is indicative of some internal trait. By establishing astrology as something that acts on the body, Chaucer brings the cosmic scale down to the basest level of humanity. He also suggests an alternative mode of self-reading that is separate from predestination and male authority. The body is malleable, changeable, and subject to animalistic whims. Most importantly, the body is subjected to human constructions that are unrelated to the intentions of divinity.

One such construction is, of course, gender. It is important to note that the Wife, having a “female” body, is going to experience the social implications of these marks in a decidedly gendered way. The gap tooth and the marks of both Mars and Venus render her a visibly subversive figure as a result of her gender. However, the very delineation of this gendered role comes into question when Chaucer relates the physical body to astrology. There is no intrinsically negative or positive quality to gap teeth, but the method through which we interpret these signs imbues the mark with meaning. If we return to the understanding of Alisoun’s body as a text, the construction of gender becomes a certain method of glossing her body. It might be tempting to leave it at that: yes, the Wife is a text, and gender is a proper gloss through which we can glean meaning from her body. However, I argue that Chaucer does not leave it there, and, in fact, shows that the “gloss of gender” is an inadequate reading of the body.

In order to elaborate on this claim, I will draw on a second passage from the text. In this passage, Alisoun is describing the relationship between clerks and lovers, also within the context of astrology and predestination. Alisoun claims that the sign that rules clerks is Mercury, another traditionally male sign. Lovers, on the other hand, are ruled by Venus. These two signs are in opposition:

*“And thus, Got woot, Mercurie is desolat
In Pisces, wher Venus is exaltat,
And Venus falleth ther Mercurie is reysed
Therefore no womman of no clerk is preysed”* (Chaucer, lines 703-706).

Alisoun is telling us that when one gender is at the height of its power, the other must fall. By that logic, any man or woman seeking power in the absolute would be demanding the subjection of the other sex. Inversely, any person that is bent on stripping an entire gender of agency must be motivated by a desire for power. This logical progression foreshadows the eventual demise of

her argument, as we ultimately learn that categories have to be done away with entirely to truly escape power dynamics.

The passage cited above comes after a discussion of the many stories men have written in an attempt to paint women as irredeemable and evil creatures. Alisoun's statement on the matter "Who peyntede the leon, tel me who" (Chaucer, line 692) illustrates that the negative caricatures of women are written by men. It is men's projection of an ideology rather than an objective truth that perpetuates this "wicked women" narrative. Taking into my account this previous point of power and balance, we see that male authorship is being used as a tool through which men can retain power at the expense of women. Here, we have Alisoun, a woman, being written by a man, Chaucer. Yet, we must remember that he is not claiming authorship over her but instead, astrology is responsible for the physical aspect of her body. He is attempting to place her outside of male authorship, or at least bring the authority of male authorship into question.

When she continues the metaphor: "As clerkes han withinne hire oratories,/ They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse/ Than al the mark of Adam may redresse" (Chaucer, lines 694-696), Alisoun illustrates a key difference between women and clerks. She says if women made stories like the clerks, then it is men who would be beyond saving. However, As we see in her prologue and later in her tale, the men she writes are not evil or irredeemable. Her reality is quite the opposite. In the prologue, she is able to reach an understanding with a physically abusive husband and the knight in her tale is able to be happily married after committing rape. Therefore, she must not be writing stories like the clerks. She is different from them, she does not need to reduce them for her own gain. Thus, Alison performs authorship differently, telling stories with greater compassion and space for reform.

To further elaborate on this claim, I will return to my original discussion of body and gender. When addressing *why* it is men who write such harmful stories, the Wife states that it is old men who no longer can partake “Of Venus werkes worth his olde sho/ Thanne sit he doun, and writ in his dotage / That wommen kan nat kepe hir mariage!” (Chaucer, lines 708-710). In other words, it is only when a man loses his connection to Venus’s works that Mercury fully wins him over and he resorts to writing cruel fables. These men are unable to retain a balance between the masculine and feminine aspects of themselves. Therefore, a binary understanding of gender in which one is either a man or a woman renders us incapable of writing accurate narratives or seeing the world in a true way.

I would also like to point out that, like Alisoun, these clerks are connected to Venus through the physical ability to have sex, a parallel to the marks Alisoun has on her body. Since we know Alisoun’s marks to be the result of an astrological force, we can assume that their physical capabilities are a result of astrology as well. Drawing again upon the concept of the female body as a text marked by astrology, we can now see that it is not only women who have textual bodies. Further, if Alisoun’s ability to be both text and gloss (respectively feminine and masculine roles) makes her able to see the world in a more realistic light, then anyone with a physical understanding of their body can achieve this ability.

However, the very presence of the Pardoner deconstructs Alison’s self-glossing mode of being. The Pardoner is the confusion of meaning, a creature beyond words that disturbs the normative constructions that he touches. He is an excessively gendered body: an effeminate man, a masculine woman, a man who commits sodomy, simultaneously. There is no definite truth, no exact physical body that can ground the mode of understanding that the Wife builds. We see this aspect of the Pardoner in the general prologue:

*A voys he hadde as smal as hath a goot.
 No berd hadde he, ne nevere sholde have;
 As smothe it was as it were late shave.
 I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare.
 But of his craft, fro Berwyk into Ware
 Ne was ther swich another pardonere.” (Chaucer, 688-693)*

He is animal, deviant, a being beyond description and comprehension. The narrator himself cannot answer the question: who, or perhaps *what* is this creature? And so, how could the Pardoner find balance if his body cannot be defined? Thus, his presence begs the question: if there are bodies that do not abide by the logic of balanced binaries, then is this logic inherently flawed? Without the Pardoner, there would be no complete definition of what the “norm” is.

The Pardoner thus functions in Chaucer’s work as queer theory functions now. As Carolyn Dinshaw so succinctly puts it, “It [queerness] is arresting: it makes people stop and look at what they have been taking as natural, and it provokes an inquiry into the ways that ‘natural’ has been produced by particular discursive matrices of heteronormativity.” (Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Queer Touches*, 77). The Pardoner and queer hermeneutics are powerful in relationship to hegemonic structure, not in their ability to create category, “Queerness articulates not a determinate thing but a relation to existent structures of power” (Dinshaw, 77). Thus, I use the term “queer” to mean the spaces, identities, practices, and desires that cannot be defined by the logic or language of the hegemonic discourse. The queer is the boundary, the outlier. It defines what belongs, yet simultaneously spells the deconstruction of belonging (Butler, cite). There is no time in which the queer did not exist, as there have always been those who defined the edges of acceptance.

Dinshaw also discusses how the Pardoner illustrates the queer touch, using disruptive capabilities within the physical realm as he interrupts the Wife of Bath. She notes that the Pardoner does not simply speak, but “First ‘starts up’ ... disturbing the air around him, sending

shock waves into the body of pilgrims with whom he travels.” (Dinshaw, 76). This physical nature of queer disruption serves two purposes. First, it calls attention to the embodied nature of identity, even in the inscrutable bodies of characters such as the Pardoner. Second, it morphs the deconstruction of normative modes of thinking into a physical pathology, “Queer touch disorienting and rendering strange what has passed until now without comment” (Dinshaw, 79)

The deconstructive presence of the Pardoner ties into a second complication of the Wife’s understanding of gender: the brutal reality of the Wife’s description of relationships that she does not acknowledge. In her prologue, pleasure in and the mutuality of relationships are predicated on the inherently violent act of sex and/or glossing of text (Dinshaw, *Chaucer’s Sexual Poetics*, 125 glose). In her relationship with Jankyn, it is only *after* they both hit each other that they are able to fully reconcile. After she hits him, he smites her on the head, she hits him again, and they make up:

*“But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
We fille acorded by us selven two.
He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond,
To han the governance of hous and lond,
And of his tonge, and of his hond also;
And made hym brenne his book anon right tho.”* (Chaucer, 811-816)

Chaucer is articulating that the very act of glossing or interpreting a text, though it brings it to life, also harms whatever inherent truth it might have held. I would also argue that there is an aspect of mourning, a sadness, in the harm that predicates trust in the world Chaucer occupied.

When the Pardoner interrupts, he calls attention to this violence:

*Up stirte the Pardoner, and that anon;
“Now, dame,” quod he, “by God and by Seint John!
Ye been a noble prechour in this cas.
I was aboute to wedde a wyf; allas!
What sholde I bye it on my flessch so deere?
Yet hadde I levere wedde no wyf to-yeere!”* (Chaucer, 163-168)

Regardless of his what his intent may be, the Pardoner's statement, "What sholde I bye it on my flessh so deere?" (Chaucer, 167) highlights the violent language so often used in the context of heterosexual sex: payment of the flesh, piercing, wounds, etc. In doing so, he forces the listener, and Chaucer forces the reader, to contend with the violent paradigms we might accept implicitly and without thought.

That being said, the Pardoner's ability to construct motivating philosophical and religious arguments despite his malintent makes his every move opaque, as well as his physical form (Dinshaw, 157). Thus, his interruption of the Wife can be read in many different ways. Perhaps it *is* a jab at the normative construction of sex and marriage and a self-aware and subtle outing of some subversive identity. Or perhaps it is Chaucer critiquing the fallible nature of language and text, demonstrating the space between intent and expression.

When I first read this interruption, I saw in the Pardoner an other, an indefinable queer monster attempting to relate to a person who is concretely situated within the heterosexual market. Even in his effort to enter into the Wife's discussion of marriage, I saw him expose his disconnect from this realm. His protest can be seen as a misinterpretation of her statement that her husband bears "Tribulacion withal/ Upon his flessh" (Chaucer, 156-157). He simply might not understand that this "suffering" could be pleasurable for both parties as opposed to a sacrifice, and so reveals himself in his attempt to belong.

Despite my urge to follow this sole line of thinking, I had to consciously consider how I was going about my reclamation of the Pardoner. Self-proclaimed as vicious and self-serving, the Pardoner himself seems to resist any form of empathy that the reader might develop upon observing his position as a reviled outcast. This question of the Pardoner's malintent has complicated queer and gay readings of the Pardoner as scholars struggle to reclaim a figure that

was constructed “At least partly created out of heterosexism and homophobia” (Kruger, 125). While there is no correct way to reclaim a potentially-queer historical figure, there are more careful ways. Kruger argues that reclamation needs to be wary of blind acceptance. Instead of simply celebrating an apparent example of lineage, we must seek out the aspects of the Pardoner that resist normative structures (Kruger, 138-139).

As a result, I was left with a complex task. I did not want to discard the negative elements of the Pardoner’s character, but I also did not want to reify homophobic constructions. And, returning to the Wife, I wanted to explore how an innate, non-binary feeling might be stunted by a reliance on heteronormative binaries. I chose to follow the human aspect of Chaucer’s logic, extending his line of questioning to consider what it might look like for a modern Wife to begin to deconstruct a binary way of thinking. I take the Pardoner’s deconstruction of the Wife’s logic and infuse it into Alison’s experience by highlighting the moments in which binary thinking prevents her from acting in line with her desires. I also used broader tools, shapeshifting and pigeons, to explore the complex and contradictory nature of each character. In a more general sense I used pigeons and shapeshifting to delve into questions of otherness. However, added complexities of the Pardoner’s historical construction led me to add in another bird, the duck. The duck exists in a separate narrative that merges with Culver’s at the end of *Pigeons*.

I use the pigeon as a means of delving into queerness as pathology/infection/pest, as dirty/other, as expansive, as a new mode of being, and as reinvention. In my novella, Culver and Alison are both contending with an affliction that causes them to shapeshift into pigeons, without warning, and with great discomfort.

Shapeshifting occurs when each refuses to acknowledge a point of disconnect in their lives or within themselves. Alison sacrifices self-understanding for the safety of marriage, and starts seeing a pigeon head in the mirror. Culver refuses to truly contend with his inner turmoil, and thus experiences the same. The pigeon signifies the illness that emerges as a result of repression, but also the internal self that one is not expressing. It is like a sickness, but also a drive toward change and growth.

Pigeons in particular are an effective metaphor for exploring this paradoxical construction as people often have heated and oppositional opinions about pigeons. Though they are often referred to as disgusting pests, I grew up watching them flock to a neighbor's window because he would set out pizza on his windowsill and sit with them while they ate. I imagined he desired the ability to care for others more than he could. From then on, I saw the pigeons as the friends of the outcast. They are never alone, though, and they are not concerned with the example they provide for others. It is the simple fact of their existence that gives some people hope, and some people something to be upset about. Much like queer people.

I also use pigeons to contend with the transformative nature of queerness and the ways it allows a clearer vision of repressive structures. Pigeons see colors we can't imagine (Cuthill, et al.). They also dream of flying (Ungurean, et al.). They are great communicators, maintaining coordinated movement among large numbers (Chen, 2017). Nobody knows how they find their way back home, but they always do. Some think they create scent maps, locating each subtle distinction of smell in space. They reproduce through what is called the "cloacal kiss" (Determination Pest Control) When they are born, they look like this:



(Camp, yes?)

and they eat a hard, white substance called holocrine secretion (zero carbs) for the first three days of their life (Davies). They are truly miraculous, beautiful creatures, and the bottom feeders of New York City. Eating garbage by the razed church and then flying away. Wheeling across Columbus Avenue, seeing the city from an angle we can't with freedom we don't have in colors we can't see. They bring pest, other, animal, friend, scavenger, ugly, beautiful, dirty, and transformative together.

To address the pathologized and problematic nature of the Pardoner in the original *Tales*, I chose to introduce a second bird: the duck Kouach-Aurghkm. There is a separate narrative that follows him, though his world collides with Culver's at the end of the novella when they meet in a space between realms. This duck serves to introduce a foreign consciousness that is grappling with inflicting harm as a result of something he does not have control over. Male ducks have corkscrew penises with barbs, making sex a coercive and violent act. In *Pigeons*, I consider: What would it mean for a duck to come to a human level of consciousness? How horrifying would it be to suddenly realize the harm that you have been causing instinctually for your pleasure?

My duck is a tool for considering questions about identity, purpose, and meaning across time and space. As a foreign consciousness, he is as near to our understandings of gender as Chaucer was, and thus becomes an analogue for the medieval perspective. I argue that this duck-construction also points out some of the assumptions that we make when we think back on historical periods. You would never say a duck is straight in the way a human is. Aside from the fact that ducks of both sexes will engage in "homosexual" sex, (von Frank and von Frank, 2021) their consciousness is simply too far removed from ours to make that comparison worth exploring. And yet we do that with medieval figures all of the time.

I do not intend for the duck to belittle or animalize medieval subjects. Instead, I aim to exaggerate and play upon the point that many queer medievalists have been articulating for some time: the “queer” is not the homosexual, and the “other” is not the same over time. Further, while we should consciously enliven older texts with our new perspective, we need to do our best to navigate through historical worlds with as little assumption as possible.

Thus, as historical texts inform each other, so do the Pardoner and the duck. Both have identities that are beyond words, and both feel the harm they have caused and the resulting grief. Having the duck be *physically* harmful was intended to complicate the manner in which we separate out different aspects of our identities. How do the lines between sickness, queerness, evil, harm, narcissism, malintent, and innocence blur when one’s identity is considered to be a pathology? What is the difference between being sick and being considered to be sick? At what point does one suffer enough to be deemed innocent? The duck poses this line of questioning which I then use to ground Chaucer’s exploration of intent versus meaning that he elaborates on in the Pardoner’s Tale. I wanted to root the questions of the Pardoner’s true motivation in a queer, human logic that illustrates the power of naming things. The boundary between belief and reality is fine. Calling someone a monster might well make them one.

Thus, I attempt to reckon with the ways I observe queerness to be pathologized in my experience and in *The Tales*. I consider the animalistic ways in which the Pardoner is described through shapeshifting and also confront the more internal modes of harm that he both bears and perpetuates. I also reference AIDS, a pathology that has been deeply linked to queerness. I do this directly in the Wife’s story arc and through allusion in the piece as a whole as both characters struggle with uncontrollable bodily shifting. Lastly, I consider the ways in which

internalized hegemonic structures are truly the mechanism through which identity turns into sickness and harm, real, imagined, and in between.

How do Pigeons Find Their Way Home?

Beginnings

Here biginneth the Tale of the Wyf of Bathe.

Alison lay awake most nights. The torment of small things was splintering in her mind. It had been three weeks since she first saw the bird in the mirror.

Picture: toothbrush forgotten on the floor. A lady with gray roots that split the brown cascade. A silver line from her forehead straight back. She claps her hands over her mouth. Gray light through a window. The tiles on the floor have grit caked in between. It smells like lavender lotion.

Curious eyes had peered back at her as they sunk into the deep recesses of an alien face. John hadn't noticed anything different when she asked if maybe she seemed changed. He said she looked great. Which was nice of him.

And then again, the next night. She was lounging across that old, red sofa. The fan was blowing hot air in and sucking hot air out. The heat was coming out of the buildings, out of the asphalt, absorbed to be spit out again when the sun was over it. She kept shifting around; she wanted to lie on her back but then her arms got tired from holding her book up. It was like being a kid again. She leaned over and let her head pull her slowly down to the floor. The coffee table was dusty underneath and the lamplight backlit a gray, cratered landscape. John and Marcy discovered her like that. John looked strained, his soft hips slanting down into those same worn, brown shoes. Meanwhile, Marcy radiated weird disappointment from her too tight, too boring suit jacket. She had imagined better for her brother or something. Alison admitted she had forgotten their plans, even though they already knew that, and then later, tossed a bowl of soup into the air when a pigeon looked back at her out of it (its eyes looked red in the tomato bisque, she blinked and it was gone). She didn't tell them what she saw.

Things had been relatively quiet since then, but how can you make yourself forget you're turning into a bird? What counts as a bigger thing to worry about?



Alison goes shopping and encounters strange things

Alison decided to take comfort in the day-to-day. On Friday they were having Gary over for dinner and it was very important. Alison didn't like to cook, normally, but somehow she had gotten it in her head to make something fancy, which felt motivating. Friday morning she meant to go shopping early to get the outside portion of her day over with, but slept in and was now wilting in the midday sun. Well, she did it to herself.

The peak July heat was busy melting asphalt, sweat, and garbage into a sort of paste. Gray-green puddles steamed along the curb of the sidewalk, shimmering in iridescent coats. People lounged in groups on corners and stairways, exposing skin. Gathered loosely around speakers and coolers, sitting stagnant as the pigeons parked for the day on shady window sills.

Alison's shirt stuck to her lower back, the sticky slide of her thighs rubbing together. Every few seconds she reached up to detach her yellow blouse from her stomach, arranging it to appear as though she was just picking off a piece of lint.

"Why," she thought, "Did I choose to live here?" Passing a series of vacant brownstones, she pictured the owners slinking around their pools in the Hamptons.

"Cowards," she scoffed, tilting her chin up slightly, refusing to look in at the undoubtedly pristine interiors.

Two hours and three grocery stores later, beginning the long trek back to the apartment, Alison wondered what John would think about her cooking if he thought about it at all. And fucking Gary, no way a guy named Gary was worth cooking for. Besides, all the best bits would get caught in his mustache.

Lost in thought, Alison rounded the corner and started on the last block of her journey. She walked past the gaggle of young people, parked there since the bar they haunted reopened in May. Abruptly, she became conscious of the sweat stain on her back. She didn't like feeling old because it made her feel outside of attraction, so how was she supposed to know how people viewed her?

"Well, they're missing out," she laughed, but it was a little forced.

Looking down at her feet, feigning concentration, Alison almost ran into one of the loungers. Her shock was soon forgotten as she looked up to take in the sight of one very odd-looking person. He stood in front of her, a look of apology and excitement growing out of his bulging eyes. Lank blonde hair roped down to his collarbone, though some of it was wadded in a bun-like nest. His long, beaky nose hovered over a wide mouth, curled slightly at the tips. Alison thought he looked like he was being eaten from the inside, like if you tapped him he would be hollow. He had a short green skirt tied over ripped sheer leggings, and a striped tank top that displayed the reddish-blond trail of hair that tapered up from his skirt to his navel. There was something simultaneously alluring and off-putting about him. He moved in too many directions, it was like she couldn't quite look at what was really there. When he pointed at her, his hands were strong and nimble. Thin, long fingers with big knuckles. He cocked his head and spoke in a raspy tenor,

"Do I know you?"

"What? No I don't think-" He cut her off, widening his eyes a little too close to her face,

"No, no, I do. You're changing, just like me. I can tell." Alison brushed by him,

"Sorry, no, I-

"Please just one second, I feel like we really might know each other."

She wondered if the aggression was misplaced, but it was too late,

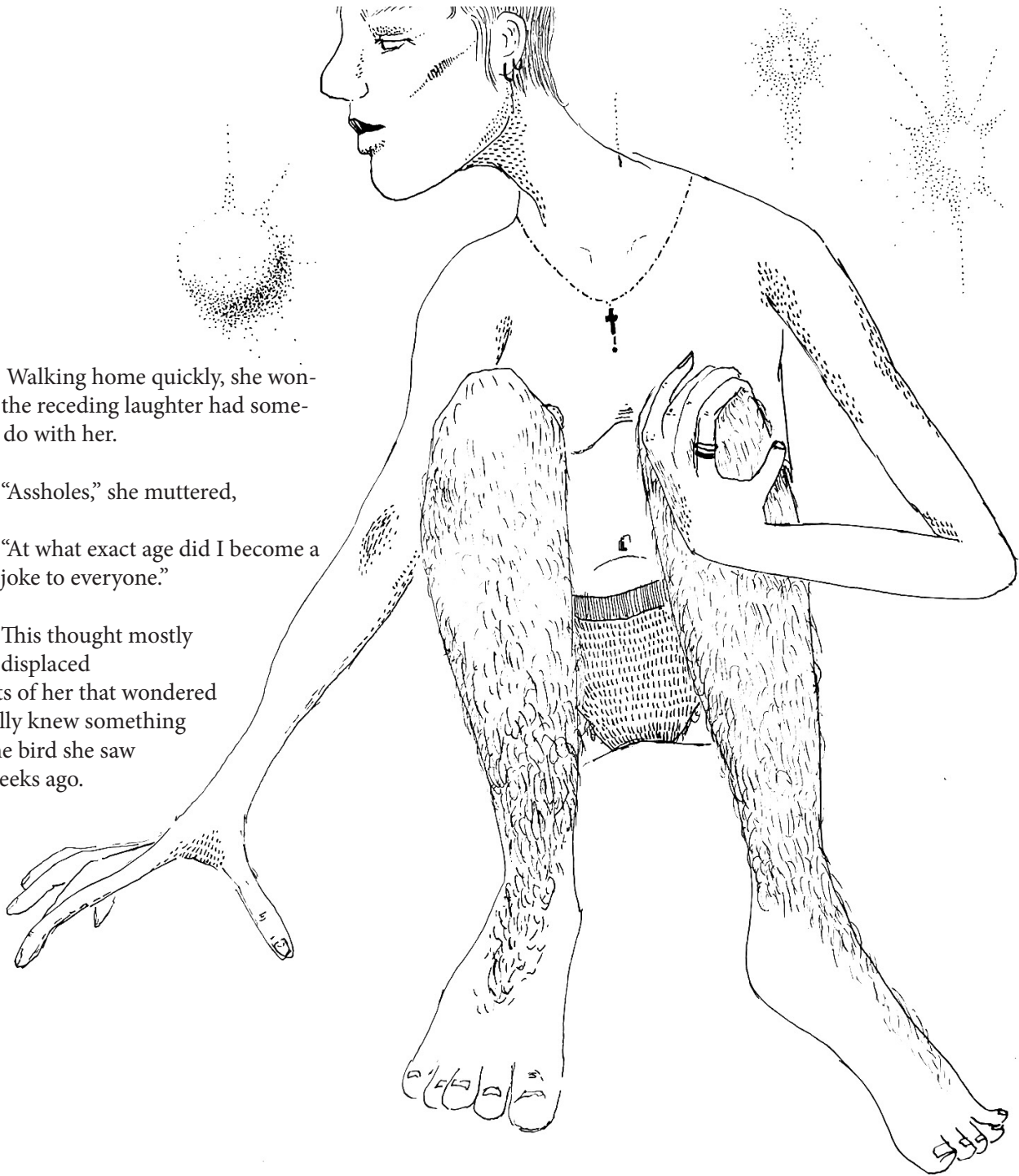
"FUCK. Sorry. I have to go make dinner for Gary!"

Walking home quickly, she wondered if the receding laughter had something to do with her.

“Assholes,” she muttered,

“At what exact age did I become a fucking joke to everyone.”

This thought mostly displaced the parts of her that wondered if he really knew something about the bird she saw a few weeks ago.



Dinner goes awry

Alison made pork chops cooked with fennel, clove and cinnamon, and onions. She was proud of how perfectly crisped everything was. Her strange encounter was long forgotten, and besides, everyone likes to fuck with old ladies. She'd prepared salad to start and honey ice cream for dessert. The smell in the cramped kitchen matched the walls, everything warm and yellow. She set the table with the silverware perfectly aligned, and candles in the center. "It's like a stage." Then got dressed, put her hair back, and watched clips of *The Ultimatum* until they arrived. This particular sect of reality TV was strangely moving for her, it was so blatantly horrible. There was something magical about the way dysfunction, stretched this way and that, shoved into various containers, always seems to be a shock. She wasn't quite sure what was so universally appealing about watching people suffer- publicly- while they are seeking help. An obvious answer might be comparison, an affirmation that life could get worse. Or some strange unconscious conviction that suffering is the most real feeling, the most human. Or is it a distraction from more real suffering, perhaps the kind that one does not volunteer for. She tried not to worry herself too much with the moral particulars, as she was aware that this mode of questioning was something this sort of television was supposed to help you get away from. Mindless consumption of people falling apart. And it's not like televised agony is new, it's been around. Kind of a cool band name, *Televised Agony*.

John and Gary arrived talking and didn't stop. Gary was wearing a brown shirt that was uncomfortably orange. He had seed-like small and shiny shoes peeking out from under his gray slacks. The hair on his knuckles was sparse and light, fading down to thin fingers with tapered ends. He looked like he was always on the verge of remembering something important that he'd forgotten. It made Alison sad. She didn't say anything though, aside from "Hello, welcome" for the first twenty minutes after they arrived. Instead, she kept a list of everything she didn't get to say, and every time she was cut off, for later. John said, "Why don't you cook like this all the time?" and Gary laughed. Alison drank four cups of wine, alternating in color.

"So, Alison, what do you do?" Alison lifted her finger from the rim of her cup and marveled sideways at being spoken to. Gary was leaning over his hand, looking too courteous. She was trying to gather her thoughts, so John said

"She used to be an artist." Gary raised his eyebrows,

"Oh? How interesting. What medium?" Alison took a nice fistful of tablecloth, her eyes swimming around the smear of leftover food on her plate,

"Well not used to, I'd say. I'd like to think I'm still," she twirled her free hand in almost ease, "Doing it." Did John just roll his eyes? She wasn't sure. He did chuckle though,

"Of course, apologies to you both, I misspoke." His hands went up beside his head, mockingly yielding, palms facing her. Looking up, she found him smiling. The crinkles around his eyes were scaly and dark, like a lizard.

"It's a stick-up!" Gary grinned, "Did I say how great these pork chops are? What did you put in here?" Alison was too busy staring at John, who was chewing. Gary contemplated repeating his question, but instead swallowed his sharp intake of breath and gathered a forkful of salad with deep focus. John's phone chimed. He excused himself to take a call.

There is a deep space, a sort of forest of various grays, browns, whites, and blues, where all the dead leaves and brush are arranged quite artfully, like it was put there on purpose. But it wasn't. What makes it special is that it is the only place where all the animals have realized that they can do whatever they want. What makes it scary is they act exactly like animals in most other places. They are still trying to figure out what else there is to do.

When John came back, Gary wanted to know what he was up to. Was it Phil with the number for that guy? Was it his sister, didn't his sister just have a baby? Oh come on man, don't leave us out! He turned toward Alison and raised his eyebrows conspiratorially, showing off a perfect line of gravy glistening from the corner of his mouth to the bottom of his chin.

"Or maybe he's hiding something! John, you got something to tell us? You've been gambling? Or a mistress in a flat downtown?" He wobbled his head back and forth on that last bit, speaking in a nasal British accent. Somewhere inside, John decided to use this setup for a big moment. He probably didn't realize, though. John looked up and laughed, waving his hand,

"Yes of course, Gary, all of the above." They chuckled around melty bites of caramelized onion. Suddenly, John's outstretched hand clenched, pushing into the table with determination. Then, surprising everyone, he started to cry slow drippy tears down a perfectly still face. He was, abruptly, the picture of dejection. Alison only wondered why this was what did it. In front of Gary, too? It felt so mundane. She didn't ever want to cook again.

John had been cheating on her for six months with someone she had ordered spaghetti bolognese from upwards of fifteen times. Alison thinks she may have also complimented that waitress's hair at some point. Considering the rate at which the city was changing, Alison felt the loss of a favorite restaurant deeply.

"At Il Posto Accanto? How the fuck did you think this was going to work out for you?" Unfortunately, it wasn't so much that John wanted to get away with it. He wanted to do something unforgivable enough to be broken up with. All his friends supported him through this devastating loss of partner and home, they knew he never would have ended things so abruptly. He told them how much he wished there had been more conversation, he wished they had both been able to communicate properly. He'd never stop loving Alison.

The door closed. Gary walked home in silence, counting windows. Standing on the corner, he waited for the light to change. On the rim of half-empty milkshake by his foot, three flies rub their black bodies with spiky feet. This is absolute, we have transcended, one says. This is the most perfect feeling.



And all around, pine cones were caught in the branches, covered in snow.



The heat broke two days later, and things moved a little faster again. Alison didn't notice. The dinner plates sat exactly where John and Gary left them. The faucet dripped. Alison ate the leftover ice cream while lying down on the floor until she didn't feel like lifting her head up anymore. Now melted ice cream was slowly evaporating into sludge in the living room. It wasn't just that he cheated, it was that it had happened again. Or maybe that he had beat her to it. It didn't matter, anyway.

Time passed in unknown quantity. Her head hurt all the time, she either wasn't sleeping or was only sleeping. Somehow she made it into a bar, she wasn't sure which one. It was dark, the bartender was glowing red and smiling at whoever was sitting to her left. Looking down at her hands, she got the feeling something was wrong. She was turning blue? Green? "Fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck..." The words came out slow and slumped together, her head clouded and brittle. "Not here, not here," she felt top-heavy, falling suddenly against her elbows. Rocking her hands back and forth she watched the track lighting slide over iridescent feathers.



When a day ends, a new one starts right away

Here beginneth the Tale of the Pardoner.

Culver walked up the street and down to the subterranean door at the base of the old brown-stone. It was something of a reluctant return, he didn't like the idea of having to go back home because he couldn't think of anything to do. His roommate Em was curled up on the couch around some sleeping body with tiny, thick fingers and an orange mullet. He made his way past them to the kitchen and stared at the fridge. It was emptier. He went to his room.

Miles was sitting on the floor there, rolling blue paint up the wall with their hands in smooth arcs.

"Culverrr you're back." Culver started reasonably,

"What are you doing here?" Miles stated the obvious,

"I'm painting your wall."

Culver decided to leave, but he wasn't sure where to leave to. The DJ from the night before twisted around in Culver's mind and shrugged. He had said something about floods, or something about Venus and being wary of appearances. Miles appeared smiling.

Culver did a 180 and waved a hand at Miles as he left. Miles smoothed the paint across their head and felt the glow of blue drip down their neck. It was like when they were little and their mom would make the bed around them. The feeling of the top sheet, billowing, then gently sliding down their face to tuck in at the bottom, the sides. The rush of cool air followed by clean warmth.

Culver was back out in the weird heat of a summer day that is still arriving, but at least now he had a plan. He remembered the DJ was sort of wolfish and wore a brown tank top so he was probably from Bushwick. Also, the DJ had seemed New School, maybe because of the rings. So he probably knew Sara, and Sara was probably shopping. Or would be in a few hours.

The air was misty so he decided to waste time in the cemetery, squinting down Central Avenue into the sun. Gray-orange cement boxed in the sky and tied it with a single cloud. The cemetery was wet, grass licking up his feet and setting them down again. He imagined his headache seeping into the ground through his toes, whispering away with the ghosts. Leaned against a tree, he fell asleep.

Culver's dream: He was slipping down a hill, covered in mud, toward something he was trying to get away from. He clawed at the ground in front of him trying to get a grip, his fingers were bleeding, his palms raw and bruised. Yet looking down at the grass, he saw it was completely undisturbed. And so he kept sliding down, falling and fighting. He did not leave a trace.

Culver woke up as the shadow of the trees shifted and the sun eased over his face. Around two, he slunk into the thrift store and found Sara. She was eyeing white camel-toe boots held out straight-armed like roasting a marshmallow. Pink hair straggled down her head and into her stale eyes. She was a dead sort of clean. He poked the back of her shirt and watched the red knit pucker and kiss his finger. "Do you know a guy who would wear a brown tank top to DJ at Mystic Circus?"

Ten hours later, Culver pulled his hands along the smooth length of the DJ's spine, right up to the top of his head and down his nose and down and down. The room was humid and colorless, brown couch swamping into the cracked white tiles of the living room.

"Is that ok?"

"Yea, yes or- Shit what the fuck?" The DJ suddenly pulled back. Culver started and looked down unbelievably at a scaled talon, and the accompanying blushed puncture marks on the DJ's abruptly limp dick. The DJ jumped past the pain to skirt awkwardness,

"Hmamma what? I'm like, so high."

Culver figured he should leave, the DJ said that was cool, he had to get up early to get to his internship tomorrow anyways. Culver decided to never hook up with anyone who was "doing an internship" ever again.

Culver had already gone all the way into Manhattan so whatever, he was just gonna stay here until he found something else to do. The one good thing about time not pausing is that every moment technically holds the same amount of potential. And every place, sort of.

The sky was marbled with orange clouds, a slight breeze painting a cool line across the sweat of his upper lip. He felt a surge of energy and purpose, like maybe something led him here. It was always satisfying to think that actions had some larger meaning. Miles says that, "If it comes it comes, your job is just to seek. If you don't find it, it wasn't meant for you." Culver appreciated the ways in which Buddhism (or was that Sufism?) diminished responsibility.

So Culver played one of his favorite games: go in the direction the stop lights let you, cross the street wherever the light is green (unless you see someone interesting in which case you follow them). The lights were taking him East, the breeze pulling him South, there was that spot Carl had taken him to a couple days ago. He ducked in, adjusting his hair so that it tucked behind his ears, revealing hot pink earrings. And there! Just as he had hoped, somebody interesting.

The older woman he had run into, the one who seemed familiar, was sitting at the bar looking terrible. She had the look of someone not fully there, like she was melting away. He debated walking up to her, hesitating briefly as he contemplated the best way to approach. How does one start a conversation with someone old? It was supposed to be easy because they have no one to talk to, but she had been pretty skittish before. Maybe he'd just forgotten how to do it, to talk to an old person face-to-face. He couldn't even recall the last time it had happened. Guess he'd spoken to his parents about seven years ago, but late thirties is a whole different thing.

As he sat there wondering, Alison's body began to change. He watched as a transparent shimmer emerged around her. She was falling backwards, slowly. Her arms caught the counter top so they were extended limply in front of her, making it look like she was reaching for something. Her face stretched, her eyes shifted smaller and planted in the sides of her gray head. The feathers on her neck ruffled in fear, an unconscious reaction to falling. With a soft thump she landed, head whiplashed last, pigeon neck limp and elastic on the floor. Her eyes were closed and she was perfectly still, aside from a slightest breeze moving through her feathers.

Culver froze. Who else had seen? This was bad, he'd never shifted in public like this. Why wasn't she more careful? He felt his heart rate rising, his breathing caught in his chest. He'd better do something, people were bound to notice a human-turned-pigeon hit the floor. And sure enough, a couple of people glanced over confused, standing up, talking to their friends. He clenched his eyes shut. Should he just leave? He could go home and pretend this never happened, What information could she even have if she's going full on bird and passing out in bars? Shit, she's an old lady and she passed out on the floor and he's gonna leave? That feels gross, fuck. Miles would never do that. They'd already be right next to her, feeding her snacks they packed for this exact circumstance. Whatever. Culver slowly unclenched his hands from the table, and stood up. He couldn't see her anymore through the meager crowd. Someone was kneeling down, others stood over looking anxious. Deep breath, Culver. He walked up and peeked around someone's sweaty shoulders. And there she was, an old human person, sprawled on the floor. Relief. Culver sailed, thank fucking god. Surprising himself, he announced,

"I know her. Let's get her outside and I'll see if she wakes up and then I'll bring her home."

People were skeptical of this, some murmured, "Should we call an ambulance like now?" but Culver didn't even have to do some, "You think she can afford that?" bit because the crowd was ultimately lazy and sort of drunk and wanted to sit down.

They weren't outside for long when Alison woke up. Her eyes fluttered open like in those old movies, and he couldn't help but notice a red tint in her irises, fading quickly to orange, brown. For a moment, she seemed so peaceful. Then abruptly heavy, her face sagging, her shoulders raised. She looked around

precisely, swiveling her head till she saw him.

“You. you, I don’t fucking know you get away from me!” Her hands scrambled as she tried to push herself up against the wall, she seemed uncharacteristically heavy. Culver jumped up,

“Hey, careful! You might have a head injury, you can’t just stand up right away! You passed out and fell pretty hard. I was just trying to make sure you’re ok, ok? Jesus.”

“Trying to make sure I’m ok?” She tried to turn to face him and cross her arms but quickly lost her balance, leaning hard against the wall,

“Where are the doctors then, huh? If you’re so worried about me. Just leave me alone, I’m not a fucking joke, I’m not a toy for you to fuck around. I swear to god if you don’t walk away right now I’m gonna scream something that’ll get you in a whole lot of trouble.” Culver was considering this threat when she started taking a deep inhale. He scrambled to his feet, backing away palms out.

“Can I just say one thing, please? I swear I’m not trying to-”

“I’m counting down from ten! Nine! Eight! Seve-

“I know you’re turning into a pigeon!” He swiveled his head around and lowered his voice, “I know you’re turning into a pigeon, ok?” He had gotten her, there. Her eyes went wide,

“How did you-” suddenly her demeanor changed, her face clouded and angry. Culver would have been impressed by the sheer intensity of vehemence this woman could possess if he wasn’t so fucking scared. She spoke quietly and slowly, her voice almost shaking,

“Are you the one doing this to me? Is it you? Where the fuck do you get off? If you don’t fix this now I swear I don’t know what I’ll do but I know you won’t like it.

“No, no it’s not me. Look, I- I’m having the same problem, ok? I don’t know what’s happening, I don’t know what will happen- I’ve been dealing with this for two years. Two whole years, dude, do you see what I’m saying here?”

She went quiet. Her anger seemed to be faltering, her eyes casting down instead of staring daggers at him. He tried to bring it home,

“I swear! I swear on- look- you have to believe me. We might be the only people who can help each other. I need- I can’t do this by myself anymore.” That last bit surprised him. A bit sappy for his taste, but it seemed to work. The woman slid back down to the ground, head between her knees. Culver cautiously walked back toward her, dropping his hands when he realized they were still up in defense. She looked over at him and smiled,

“I’m Alison. By the way.” He hadn’t noticed before how beautiful she was. Her eyelashes were dark, her hair warm and buttery streaked with gray. Her face was round and open, she looked strangely untouched by the world for someone who was so bitter. Shaking her head, she smiled slightly,

“The weirdest part is I feel totally fine now. Or at least my head does.” Culver shrugged,

“Well you did go full pigeon when you hit the floor so you weighed a whole lot less.”

“Full pigeon?” Her eyebrows raised. Suddenly she started to laugh. It was a low laugh, it moved her whole body. I wonder if she always laughs like that, Culver wondered.

It felt nice to have someone think it's funny, at least. It felt like she was reading his mind,

"Laugh now, cry later, right?" But before she could finish, he saw the tears collecting dense in her eyes. She sniffed,

"You still have a whole lot of explaining to do, don't think it's all rosy all of a sudden." Culver nodded,

"Ok, yea, let me think and I'll tell you sort of my progression through it. I think it first started in around October two years ago-

"Culver? I thought I might find you here." Culver started, looking up to find the disembodied voice. It was Miles, looking sad. Fuck.

"Culver, can I talk to you for a moment, please? Now?"

Never give up!

Miles regarded Culver's outfit and wondered how he pulled it off. Was it sheer confidence? Or was there just something about the line of it? That shade of orange with that shade of green should be repellant. Or fuck, am I just in love? They were on their third time around the block, walking in circles so they wouldn't have to deal with crossing the street. Miles was marking the conversation in the street lamps, awnings, patterns of gum on the sidewalk. This tree we have seen in new moods every time we pass it, they would think. We always get sad again by the box of shoes and the peeling nightstand.

Miles had first seen Culver in Sara's thrift store in the purple section. They know they must have done something else that day, talked to other people, eaten breakfast. But they don't remember any of it. Just Culver, filtering through shirts in slow motion, turning around and doing that head-tilt he does with the eyebrows like "What the fuck do you want?" Miles had never seen anyone like him. He carried a window with him. Glimpse into some deeper reality, a way out. He had this way of moving with the surety of an animal, but also naive. Like a baby horse that has the insane physical prowess that comes with being a horse, but is just sort of sprinting around tripping over himself. The wiry strength in his arms, the hollowed leaning arc of his stomach, still soft. He gets covered in freckles in the summer and his little mustache gets so light it disappears.

Now, walking along the orange-gray expanse of Orchard street, they could feel the sloping rise and fall of the ribs in Culver's back just by looking at the drape of his shirt, catching. Nothing to do but begin,

"So, um. Did you sleep with someone tonight?"

"What?"

They had agreed to a certain level of relationship-openness, but Culver had run with it with a poorly concealed eagerness. But even Miles had said it was better not to know everything. Until they had started noticing an empty weight that stuck, only patched over when they were together. Culver lifted his hands, helpless,

"I don't know what I'm doing wrong."

"Who said you're doing anything wrong."

Culver had a hard time wrapping his head around that one. Making Miles sad all the time has to be some kind of accusation or some kind of excess of expectation? How could he be perfect all the time? His knee itched by the old scar. Man, when was the last time her rode a bike? His mouth was also sort of dry, was he still high from something earlier? Would it have all worn off by now? Miles was saying that they don't demand perfection, that they were just saying how they were feeling. Culver went with it,

“Well how do you think it makes me feel? That you’re always sad when you aren’t around me? That’s a lot of pressure, you know. It’s like you think I don’t care about you.”

In the wet of the almost-morning, things had cooled off for as long as they can. Miles just on the edge of comfort. Looking over their shoulder, marking Culver’s expressions and trying to match them to the faces from four months ago. Culver keeps his eyes moving. Eventually, they seemed to circle closer to a concrete problem, the spring that feeds the well. Culver was talking vaguely about intimacy, about the general selfishness of humankind,

“You stand far away from things and they look smaller but you can’t stand away from yourself.”

“What? Are you implicating me? Is that some sort of excuse? Or is it a plea.”

“I’m just saying, I can’t get further away. Everything is so close with us I feel like I’m losing perspective.”

Here, Miles found the center, and it meant they’d have to call their sister and say she was right.

“Culver that doesn’t fucking mean anything.”

It was sad, because they should break up. But the hair wisping down the back of Culver’s neck, the stragglers left out of the bun. Miles hated the feeling it pulled out of them: I just wanna be right there. If you want something, why not have it as long as you can? Culver would probably fuck up bad enough that Miles would have to leave eventually. “And look, he really does need me in a sense,” they thought.

Culver started tearing up. He felt the crushing weight of losing something, of drifting away. He spoke resolutely through almost-repressed tears,

“I don’t know what I’d do without you, I care about you so much. Before I met you, I was so lost and confused and you just make everything make sense I,” He crouched and covered his face with his hands,

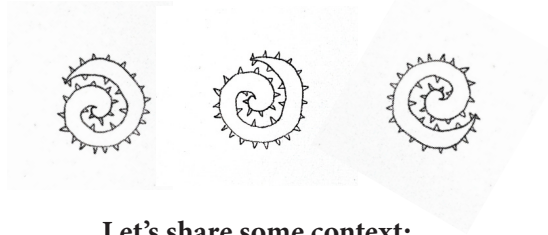
“I just want everything to be ok.”

Miles looked uncertain, they didn’t like to withdraw from pain.

“Culver, you know I’m here for you. I just need you to work with me, ok?”

The sun was getting closer, and the frost was starting to melt. Suddenly all the animals had more time. They shared their food, a woodpecker traded with a bear, grubs for berries. Centipedes exploded into the noise music scene. A Drake’s penis was growing back after the cold months and he noticed the barbs for the first time and cried. Why must my pleasure hinge always on the pain of another?

He was three years old. He had many offspring. He decided to find an old mate, Koachgar, because he didn’t know what else to do. She was standing by the stream that fed into their pond, Yehhcwak, huddled with many other female birds. They do not normally gather like this with their wings around each other. When they looked at him, he saw only deep hatred. He turned around and left before he could see the sadness, or the loss. He sought his answers elsewhere for the time being.



Let's share some context:

Three small children in central New Hampshire flounced around a slow castle their eyes were clumsy their hands blooming.

They rocked back and forth and shared all their moments in silence.

They had invented a ritual that was going to take them far away.

They had communed, eagerly. They were tired of how dreary it could be here. The world had come short in terms of promise. I can not be anyone, Culver said, I want to fly. Could it be that this is all there is? I have not gotten my letter from Hogwarts, I have not seen a fairy. Even if there were dragons, they're all dead. I'm living in a world of dead dragons and witches who don't care to invite me along.

He carefully drew concentric circles in the dirt. They placed precious things at the intersections as offerings. The roundest acorn, the shiniest stone, the Batman Lego figurine, flowers, washers, old bolts.

"This is how the Egyptians set up their dead to go to the underworld, with all the things they would need."

"But we won't die?" The girl in the blue dress was worried about the permanence of transformation,

"And what if we can't get back?"

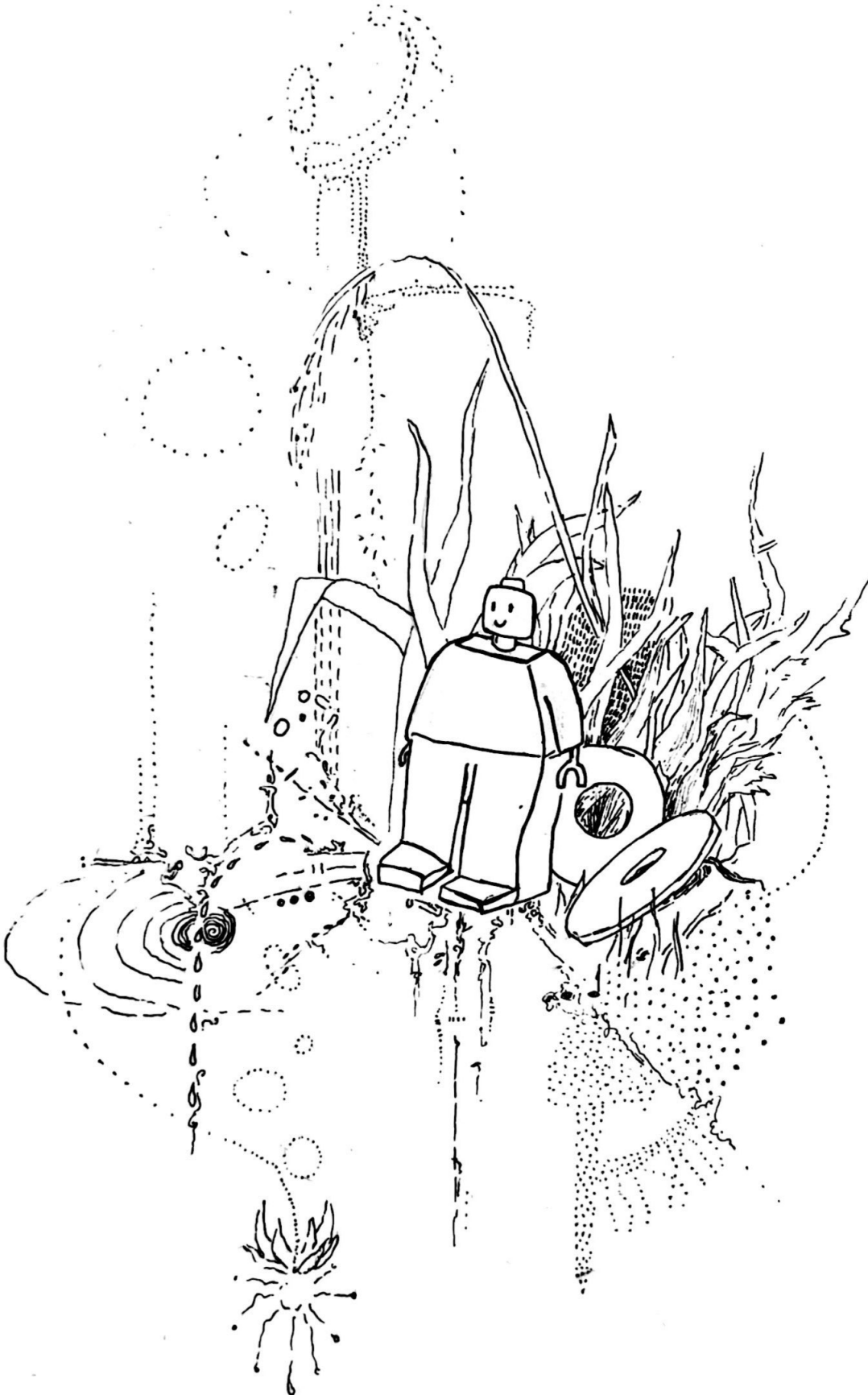
"That's fine," said the leader, "There is nothing for us."

Only Simon stayed, in the end. They sat in the center of the pattern together, sweating, after a fight over Lego Batman. Once material was devoted to the cause, there were no backsies. Jackson was skulking about his newly empty pockets across the yard. Emily was crying because Culver ruined her birthday party.

Two kids sat face to face in the center of a concentric circle. It was a warm, breezy day, and light puffy clouds sped around the sky and dissolved in the north, toward where Lily lived and where Dad took Culver to get ice cream if he did a good job at the baseball game that weekend. The two kids put their foreheads together and closed their eyes and breathed all the sound out of their ears. They clenched their hands, bound together in the sweat of promise, sweat becoming some magical substance emerging from how tightly they believed and held on to the fact that something, sometime, would change.

Fifteen years later, it did. Simon hadn't come to New York, hadn't spoken to Culver since Junior Prom. Culver was looking around his first apartment in the big city. He knew one person. His room was big enough for his bed and his clothes, and that was all he cared about. Suddenly, a pigeon stood on the windowsill. He thought, I need to get screens or something. Then the pigeon said

"How'd you figure you got like this? I've been looking for you for a while."



Let's share some context:

1983, Alison climbed up the chain mail fence by the river, into the old lot where the pit went deep. Her friends yelled behind her, but she followed the light catching Mara's hair. It was the only thing she could see. The steady slap of feet was getting louder as Sam tried to catch up, but by the time he got to the fence, she was already halfway to the other side of the lot. He shook the links, drunk,

"C'mon you guys everyone else is gonna leave you'reso fucking stupid. Alisooooooooon let's go!"

Mara didn't even look back, it was so dramatic. They reached the other side, and there was the pit. What kinda building were they gonna put in here? Must be six stories of basement, at least, with scaffold going all the way. Mara said she liked to throw rocks down, so they did, counting the seconds till it hit. Alison didn't think about Sam at all. Then they climbed things that looked climbable, looking for nooks or cool spots for a lair. Something about being in a building that used to be here. It made everything fake.

They went there every night that summer, watching the basement fill out, the foundation, lying around in bulldozers. They made a game, Construction Accident, and took turns being the worker and the accident. Alison died with gasps and sobs, Mara liked quiet dignity and final wishes. It always ended with one head in another lap, hands closing the eyes,

"May she rise, rise up into heaven, to look down upon us always. She was a saintly woman, out-lived by her two daughters and her dear husband Roland." Then suddenly, Mara still on the ground, Alison now with hair up,

"Elise? Elise! I came as soon as I heard the news! It is I, Roland! Wake up wake up wake up, please..." Alison's tears collected perfectly at the bottom of her chin, Elise made a miraculous recovery, the lovers were reunited in embrace. Elise grasped Roland's face and moved a thumb across his eyebrow. Roland lowered his eyes and watched his hands shaking.

"We should be actors! Alison exclaimed, flopping back to the ground.

"We already live in the city, we might as well." Their feet met at a sixty degree angle, their hands palm up in the dust, a few inches away. Alison felt dizzy from pretending.

In the left pocket of her jacket, a bolt left behind in the construction site, it has moved from pocket to pocket for thirty years. It doesn't mean anything but she can't bring herself to throw it away.

What's the point of putting it into words when you only need them to explain something that used to be

Simply

understood?

Which brother, sister, which one was it that we stopped talking about? Which great grandfather, uncle's uncle, cousin, sat still as they cut his hair, each end like a pinpoint wound, thought about how many years until it would grow back but where would he hide until it was long enough to stay alive again?

Just

Just a kid



You should know,

My mother's mother's mother lost her wedding ring when she was swimming and one time she took a bunch of her clothes

She dragged an old wardrobe full of dresses they were:

White lace collar, cotton beige with flowers, cinched at the waist, ribbon around the sleeves, wedding dress with satin trim, veil hung unbruised over the top

She went through the liquor cabinet and grabbed something cheap, she used it sparingly and had already prepared breakfast for the next morning. It was almost dark outside, or almost light.

When the cabinet went up in flames she realized that this could not be an end. She had dragged it out pretty far, you could follow the tracks in the mud. It was winter, she was way out in the field, the frozen stubble of hay crunching pleasantly under her feet. Her clothes burned slowly at first but picked up fast. She never felt so warm as being in front of that wardrobe, watching the hinges twist and snap as the wood shifted, cracking. The sparks went high enough that you couldn't see them go out, you could imagine that they went on going up forever. Afterwards, she said lightly to her husband how she "Just didn't like how they looked on me" and after that, nobody ever asked her again why she did it.

Her new dresses were mostly black, a-line, like a witch. But everyone understood: when you start to lose your figure, you want to hide it. Still, she always, always, had the most beautiful hands, like a mechanic, that never changed.



You! Learn something new every day

“Watch me.” Culver was pacing back and forth in Alison’s living room. It was a little after nine, the sun had set. They had redone introductions, talking awkwardly over Lipton tea. Alison had decided to dress in her lucky clothes: the red pants she bought traveling through France in the nineties, and her blue cotton shirt that billowed down to mid-thigh. Her hair was pulled back in a claw clip, Culver’s first words to her that evening had been “You have such amazing hair.” They had talked a lot and decided to get to the action part. Alison felt squeamish, she did not want to believe what was coming. Here is an excerpt from the Wikipedia for shared hallucinations:

Folie à deux (French for “folly of two”)
also known as shared psychosis
or shared delusional disorder (SDD),
is a rare [psychiatric](#) syndrome in which symptoms of a [delusional](#) belief, and sometimes
[hallucinations](#), are “transmitted” from one individual to another
This syndrome is most commonly diagnosed when the two or more individuals of concern live in proximity,
may be socially or physically isolated, and have little interaction with other people.

It did not seem that this was the case, so she was simply doing the only things she could think of in terms of “next.” She had been listing friends in her head, trying to find who she could call. Nobody felt right. Culver was turning into a bird in her living room, so she cleaned up for that this morning and got snacks. She liked raspberry chocolate and toast with cheese, so that’s what there was. It made her feel like a royal from some medieval time when bread this sweet and risen would be a luxury.

Culver watched the world beyond the window, where a man in a gray t-shirt was wheeling a plush chair on a dolly, head leaned over to cinch his phone in place. The sliver between shirt and shorts looked orange walking away, from the street lights. In the words of Daniel Johnston: We have to try/ try so hard to get by/ and where are we going to? Or something like that. Sometimes you’re just amazed you lasted long enough to meet someone who can also turn into a bird. Suddenly he missed trees. Not park trees, but the trees that planted themselves. That maybe nobody had ever walked by before. It’s like when being alone is a relief because it matches how you feel around people anyways.

Culver breathed deep and stood still. Alison tried not to throw up. When they met eyes, it was an accident, and something frozen shattered. This was funny, wasn’t it? Somehow. Their laughter was immediate, harsh, it blocked out everything else. Alison’s stomach hurt more now, a mixture of that tight kind of laughter and nausea. She looked at Culver and asked about what’s real anyways? What’s more real than what you see and feel if you’re seeing it and feeling it? Anybody looking for a universal truth is gonna end up fucked, you gotta figure out your own.

In the following silence, Alison thought back to the trivialities of their conversation from before. How are you. I’m good. How was your commute. It was good. Every sentence felt profoundly lacking, yet necessary. It is rare to begin a relationship of any kind with such a deep secret in common. What did she even know about this guy?

1. He is from New Hampshire, he grew up with two brothers. It seemed maybe his mom was absent, but she wasn’t sure.
2. He doesn’t love talking about that.
3. He has been in New York on his own since he was eighteen, which she imagines was at least five years ago.
4. He lives in Bushwick and enjoys walks around the cemetery.
5. He seems to be unemployed (but how?)
6. He can balance on one foot for indefinite periods of time, something they found they have in common. Actually, they both wanted to run away to the circus for a good period of their teen years. Alison for contortion, Culver for trapeze. She can still do a split and he can do a 180 backflip, but not inside.

What could it mean that now they had to, in some way, stay together?

Culver decided to just do it. Alison dug her hands into the cracks between the floral couch cushions and looked out the sides of her eyes.

“Ok, here goes!” Culver’s chuckle was uninspired.

The first thing that changed was his chest. Working its way from the inside out. red-brown feathers spread out like new leaves in a time-lapse, ending in a round taper where his hands used to be. By then his head had changed, too, red eyes spread wide in an oval head, recessed on either side. He had white down underneath. His movements were suddenly sharp, precise, he stepped toward her and cocked his head to the side.

How does one react in a situation that is so outside of anything that should happen? Alison recoiled, unconsciously, and shut her eyes tightly. Then she peeked, shook her head, hugged her knees. Then she laughed, curling tighter, frantic. Culver changed back, starting again from the inside out.

“Alison? Alison, you good?”

She emerged from her arms, suddenly sobered. She seemed at a loss, for words, for other things. What was there to say?

“My husband left me last week.” Culver’s exterior didn’t change, but inside he felt like a rabbit sort of, when you shine a flashlight in their eyes and they can’t move.

“Oh.” Culver stumbled through the awkward shatter of acquaintance. Guess they were bound to get to know each other eventually. She had shared this house with another person for who knows how long and he never would have known. You would never know a straight man had lived here, everything was so camp. Besides, she didn’t really seem like the relationship type. Alison continued,

“Is it bad that I’m worried about him eating well? I don’t know why I should feel bad about that, but I feel like I should. Who am I hurting, hurting myself? That’s my decision isn’t it? Oh don’t look so appalled, Jesus, don’t act like you haven’t had the same thought. I just can’t help but picture it, and she must be so fucking stupid, you know? I swear I don’t think that man has had a relationship with a single person he actually liked, but at least I was interesting. At least I had something to say. You know when we first met he thought I was crazy! I made some joke at a dinner or something and someone actually choked on their champagne. I thought, if you’re drinking champagne like that, I’d rather you choke! I said that part too, and then people really got quiet. You ever say something and the whole room gets quiet and then they change the subject? People think it’s because of something like, oh, like they don’t wanna have that conversation, or they don’t want to say something stupid, but I know! They just can’t think of anything to say! I mean, if somebody else had said that about me, you know, choking on the champagne or whatever, I would have said something like ‘Choke on what?’ Or no, that’s not good, maybe more like ‘I’ve heard that before!’ or even just ‘Well, you too,’ and then everyone would be laughing and all forgotten, or not even forgotten, just more familiar and enjoyable than sitting around like ‘What do you order when you go to a bagel shop? How’s your dog? How’s your kid? Oh no, your kid died! I didn’t know, my deepest condolences. It’s stupid, is what it is, and it’s not like people have any more common sense than they have humor, so what’s even going on in there? What are they thinking about, how best to iron their fucking husband’s fucking knickers? Give me a break. And my best friend ever, in highschool. Mara. I haven’t talked to her in thirty years. And my knee started hurting for no reason a few days ago and I can’t sit on the ground comfortably.” Culver nodded,

“Seems to me like you’re in need of a change.”

This thought, precisely, had not occurred to her, but it struck her as profoundly true. Alison always had a penchant for the truth, it sometimes put her in strange situations. She liked to say things she felt should be said, even if she knew it might cause some level of social tension. She would never admit it, but she liked the feeling of saying something that made somebody else have to change the subject. It is

generally impolite to allude to someone else's embarrassing public breakup (that you're not supposed to know about) in front of them, but it's also funny. And it's not like she couldn't take as much as she gave. Usually she'd have already told the story herself.

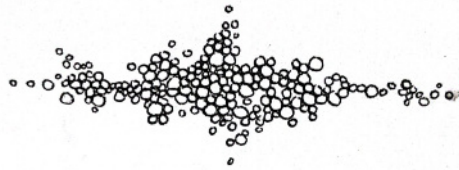
So it was her turn.

"Just sit still, and really focus on your body. Work your way up from your toes and feel each part. Let the feeling spread, sort of a knowing thing? You can imagine a light moving around your body too, my friend Miles likes yoga, and uh, they told me about that."

Her feet felt nice on the floor. She had always been able to stand really firmly, always had good balance. Moving up her legs, she realized she could feel a breeze in the hair there. She hadn't shaved her legs since John left. She hadn't thought about it. It was rare to feel her body from the inside, the boundaries of skin become the feeling of everything around you.

Alison was soft and hard at the same time, she curved into a shape that felt eternal. "You're like grass in the wind," an ex had told her. She had ignored him, she felt she had nothing to say about her body. Looking for it in the sounds other people made. "If you weren't so combative, I think lots of people would be drawn to you. You'd make them comfortable." Maybe.

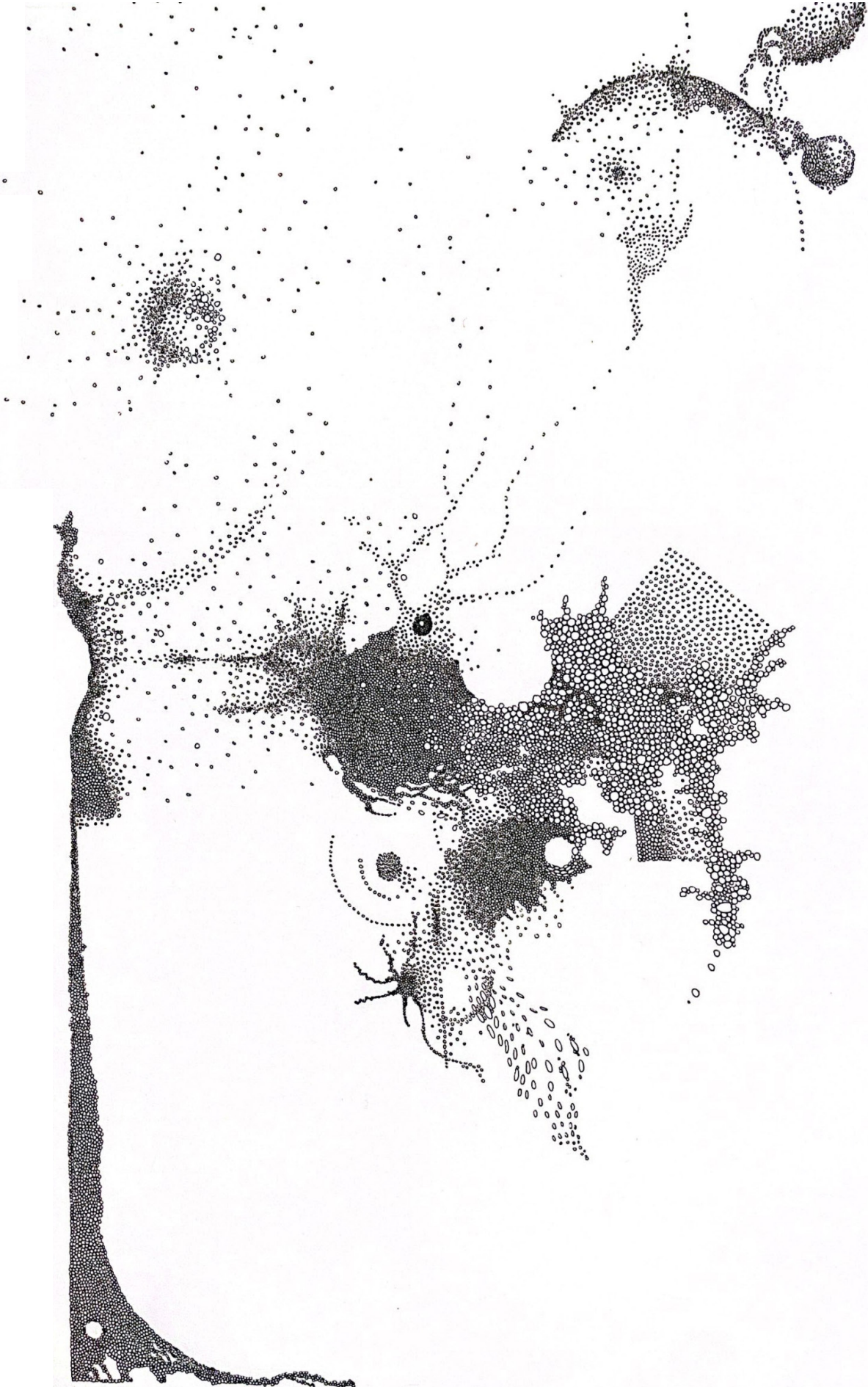
She felt something starting, a low hum, some sort of vibration. A shifting of materials, everything scraping against everything, and pooling. What began as a purr turned grinding, she couldn't breathe. Her vision was distorted. Sudden glimpses of new colors, nauseating 180 degree views would flash and disappear. A sudden keen awareness of smells sitting in space, distinct, an internal torque near snapping, sharp pain in her stomach and down her legs, she fell onto the couch heaving and retching, the world very close and dark, and nothing.



You know that space around an object sitting in the snow when the snow is getting thinner, and there's that little space around? Like an outline?

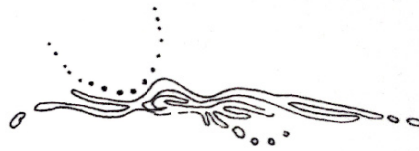
Distance can be split in half infinitely, as long there is distance. No matter how small. It is hard to see all the things that can happen in such a small space.

If the world ever feels tight, Culver looks for the space around. It is a slim length of warmth where infinities split so fine that you can start to believe in things that you notice. Like how hitting people doesn't actually make you feel better. Or that you're not the reason you do what you're supposed to. He advises all to remain wary of where the space ends, so you remember there are things you haven't noticed yet.



The space around

A hand. On her leg. A weight against her shoulder. It was Culver, asleep, curled around her on the sofa. He can just fall asleep like that? When was the last time?

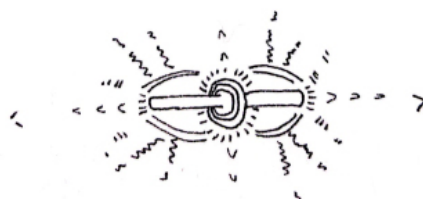


She had rushed home, lurching up four flights of stairs to retch into the bathroom sink. She kept her eyes closed tight, but still saw the flashes of black feathers, the tight scales seizing at her feet. Her hands clutched at the plastic of the sink, spilling a cool glow into the black of her vision. The familiar smell of John's aftershave, her toothpaste, began to relax her shoulders. She straightened up to glance at the mirror. *No no nononono*- the sound of her voice seemed to propel her backward as she staggered away from the black eyes and slick feathers. She slid down the tiled wall, hugged her knees to her chest. The warmth of her tears spread against her skirt as she pressed her head down into some sort of safety.

John found her curled up on the bathroom floor thirty minutes later. He slicked his wet hair back, set down his backpack, and hiked his jeans up to crouch down and place a hand on her arm. Alison? She was asleep. He sat down behind her, grabbing a towel to put under her head. Tilted back against the wall, he remembered the first time he saw the tile job in here. Reds and purples in blurring patterns. She said he lived in a colorless cave, which was extreme, but maybe true. The yellow tinge of the bathroom light was definitely nicer, though, than his old harsh-white one. He was lost in fixtures when she woke up and saw him sitting above her. *John? Hey, hey it's ok. Been a while, though, what's wrong?* She felt she couldn't speak. His hands were warm against her shoulder, she curled over his leg. He sighed and leaned over her, dripping onto her cheek. She let him put his hands around her head to sponge out the grief.

It had finally rained. The heat breaking and spilling back up into space. John made tea, it was too weak, Alison didn't say anything. He walked everywhere quietly, to make her feel better. He knew that almost anything he said wouldn't make her feel better, he knew not to say *don't cry*, even in a nice way, he knew not to say *it'll all get better soon*, He didn't think to say, *and how are you feeling now, I'm here for you*. He felt it safer to stay quiet. She felt that odd hollow where the thing you want doesn't fill the need. Growing up.

Later, Alison reveled in the feeling of her fingers dry against the blue cotton of John's shirt. Proximity was some kind of security, if nothing else. *What are you thinking about?* He didn't answer, his eyes sliding over to her across a perfectly still face. *Well?* He curved his shoulders up and sinking into the bed *Oh I don't know, I think we're almost out of something. Out of something? Yea, like maybe eggs but I can't remember. Oh.* She turned to her side and stretched her arm across his chest. *Alison. Yea? I know what you're doing.* She sat up on her elbow. He pinched his eyes together, *I'm just not in the mood today ok I need you to just respect that. Well, what if, what if I just want to be close to you, what about that?* He squeezed his hand onto her waist and let it sit, *You always do.* Then his hand slunk back to his chest like a slug. It must have weighed a million pounds. Inside, the words played behind his eyes, *I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying.*



She let Culver sleep until her neck started to hurt and her arm went numb. She didn't know what else to do. Or maybe she enjoyed it. He smelled the good sort of bad, the kind of body smell that people seem to dislike these days because it gets bad press. One of the world's greatest tragedies is the lack of language for scents of specific people and spaces, but how do you name them if each is different? Maybe people could study them, break them down like wine connoisseurs. Hint of oak, dash of alpine, walnut, summer.

"How long have we been here?" He rubbed his eyes and leaned back abruptly. She didn't know. What had happened to her, did he know? What was the deal with the blackout? He didn't, he had theories though. Have you ever had a sore throat, chronic? Post nasal drip, etc, and then one day you finally say your piece to whatever person was fucking up your life, and then boom! Sore throat gone. I feel like this is similar, but opposite. You need to let go, you need to figure out some stuff before the transition can happen.

This sounded uncomfortably like she was working toward becoming a pigeon, not away from it as she had thought. He smiled and looked at her intently, figuring out next steps and making sure he was getting his read right.

"Let's go out."



The trail stretched behind him, alternating triangles in the snow.

He didn't follow a path, there wasn't one. Koachgar wasn't sure what it meant to see him go, she did not miss him. She had been spending her days with new friends, preening and sitting in the sun, telling stories. So much memory, now, loss, and pain. They wonder what sort of gift it is, to remember the pain. What will they build with it?



Both Alison and Culver were typically quite comfortable approaching strangers, but something about their pairing made that seem unappealing, awkward. They went to a club. Alison enjoyed the jolting bass and the weird DJs and tried her first Yerba Mate soda, two shots of tequila,

"Is it cool or sort of unhip to drink this?!" She shouted over the music, Culver just shrugged. They were surprised to share another interest in common, they both had a knack for dancing without any outside awareness. Alison was fluid, she had that command of her hips that was impressive and also harkened back to the 80s if anyone paid attention. Culver liked to go trance, throwing in gestures that Alison found absurd and delightful, "Hey Culver. Culver! Look I'm doing yours-" And she would bounce rapidly on her feet, bobbing her head at intervals, shaking her hands to the beat as she raised her arms in a circle.

Culver had dressed them with items from Alison's closet. This had been a big moment for him. Upon opening the painted wooden door, old brass doorknob, he stood back agape, hand over his heart. He turned to face her, rapt. Alison was reminded of the scene from *The Lord of the Rings*, when they put the fairy lights around Cate Blanchet to make Galadriel's eyes sparkle.

"Alison. This is incredible."

Inside the closet: tightly packed garments in varied colors, sequins, things diaphanous, some mysterious object velvet green, blue brocade, suit jackets with massive shoulder pads, gold bejeweled dress with a scoop back, belts of every variety, metal chain work, soft brown leather monogrammed,

wide silk with a tie or stone clasp. Then shoes. Culver breathed deeply, the images coming in waves. Purple high heeled slim fit, elegantly demonstrative, orange platform with stemmed flowers painted, delicate silver sandal with a slight heel, leather boots, more leather boots, modest pink canvas sneaker, and hats. Oh, the hats. Veils and pins, wide brims, fake flowers cascading, broad straw that looked hand-woven, but mostly the knitted ones. Purples and blues, marbled yellows, magentas, beaded, delicate lacey or solid stripes, hats that turned into hooded dresses (maybe the other way around?), hats with beaded landscapes, contorted bodies, women lying eyes half open, hands turning blue, grown over with raspberry bushes, pierced with thorns, bleeding.

Culver reached in, pushing through crowded fabrics toward a hat that drew his attention. It was quieter, a pearly-white balaklava that scooped down to fit over the shoulders. Alison called it a coif, or a cowl. It was patterned near the bottom, blue-gray variegated like leaves, like lace, like tree branches. But what Culver really noticed was the face, woven and beaded carefully onto the front of the hood. A face, slim, bearded, effeminate, piercing eyes, slight smile. Crowned again with raspberry vines, thorned, threading soft to net through the rest of the hood. The way the light caught the beads caused the face to shift and reflect, it seemed blurred.

"It's so beautiful," he breathed, "Who is this?" Alison smiled,

"Not any one person, I guess. I was raised Catholic, sort of, my mom was conflicted about it, but we did a lot of the things. Anyway, somewhere in that time, I learned this story about the Veil of Veronica. It goes that as Jesus was carrying the cross, she used her veil to mop his sweat I think, and then, a miracle, the image of his face appeared on the cloth. The true face of Christ. Something about a 'true face' really struck me as a kid, and I developed this fascination. With faces, or moreso expressions. An idea of truth that you can see. I started drawing faces obsessively, like if I drew one just right it would be "true" and something magic would happen. I wanted there to be more gods, maybe. Turns out badges depicting replicas of the veil were given out on pilgrimages to Rome, back in the day. I actually ended up going to Rome in my early thirties, not quite the same thing, but something. A revisiting for myself. I wanted to make a more refined version of what I was making as a kid, but I wanted the face to be less clear, more what you make of it. I made it so you can pull down the top part if you unbutton it - here - and look through the eyes. Kind of blasphemous, huh?"

Culver had to think back a couple of paces, asking wide-eyed if she had really made all these things.

"Collected and made, or collected and then remade, yes. I barely even look at this stuff anymore." Alison faltered at the end of her sentence, regarding the decades of work stacked and stuffed together. At least the colors hadn't faded, hidden in the dark. She was content to make for herself, though, she was. Her hands traced the curve of Christ's eyebrow.

"Do you want it?"

Culver couldn't help but feel he had stumbled upon some buried treasure, some sleeping kingdom. He felt a staleness, a cold sort of immobility moving through the dust in the closet.

"Alison, you cannot give any more of these away for free, do you hear me? Promise?" She was taken aback by his sincerity, felt oddly fluttery when he put his hands on her shoulders and spoke again for emphasis,

"You are insane. You're insanely talented and I might have never known. Invite me to the parties when you're famous."

She almost said, well it's not like I'm a painter, but decided against it for some reason. Their pinkies locked.



Everything that I believe in

Before we begin, please picture

Culver in:

Low-rise white skirt above the knee, wide belt, thin cropped shirt with a pegasus on the front, stilettos. *I got that in California in the nineties. Wow, it's amazing.*

Alison in:

White button down sleeves rolled up, rust-colored cotton skirt to mid calf, pink sneakers. Her Grandma's gold chain with the pearl on the front.

There are always endless things to notice, that is one thing they can't take away from you. Alison had been pretty decidedly bored as a teenager, and for a while after that. People would ask what her art was about, but she just felt it as an urge. Where do those come from if not from inside?

Late summer night. Breaking through the grease, garbage, sweat, fumes, every once in a while you get this bigger smell, something omnipresent. It was a smell that sat right in Alison's chest. Damp, sweet, wind. There was something conflicted about it, like the end of a romance movie where you're grateful, or happy for the good parts, but crying. She could almost imagine she was near trees. They were standing outside of a club along one of those long diagonal streets, where the reverberation of the train lines echo, or maybe something older. Culver offered a cigarette and she accepted, then regretted, feeling immediately nauseous. He tapped the end carefully against the plastic of his lighter, saving the rest for later. That must still be embarrassing? She couldn't help but feel out of place, but something about having Culver there made it seem alright. He was like a guide, or maybe more a pass, a reason to be there. Smeagol leading me through the swamps, luring lights twinkling all around.

The music was twining out into the street, liquid pooling in echoes around trash cans and dirty yellow newsracks. Culver was suddenly hugging a tall, netted figure. Withdrawing with hands still on arms they talked while Alison picked at her fingernails to look busy.

The figure was introduced as Sara. Piercing eyes melting stale. Like she was seeing through things, seeing transparent, because everything is gone. She reminded Alison of an old acquaintance from art school who had disappeared some time in her sophomore year. You get the feeling of having to dig to get anywhere real with them, and they wouldn't help you in the digging.

Still somehow Alison was convinced to join Sara, Culver, to a hang out a couple streets down. Everybody at the party was deeply attractive, in the way where it seemed they might eat you. Alluring sirens. Pecking.

The apartment felt uncanny in its familiarity. Like transplanted from Mia's apartment on Wooster street in the 80s, but exaggerated and shrunk down. The room was sparse, all the furniture in various stages of structural collapse. She appreciated Culver sticking close, she felt weird enough. Despite the looming threat of alienation and age difference, she found she couldn't leave. Couldn't stand the thought of being alone.

Alison could not find a cup. Unless she was mistaken, she imagined there were only about six cups total within the apartment. So she shared one with Culver. He was talking to another tall, angular blonde, low murmurs about a common acquaintance. Alison looked around at everyone's feet, trying to decide who she would switch shoes with if she had to.

Suddenly, there were thick soled boots between her and her game. A short girl, a couple inches shorter than Alison, which was uncommon, was looking up at her. Alison felt confronted by an expression she herself had put on a number of times. She came to a sudden awareness of how stupid older men were, or how terrifying, that they had found her advances appealing. Did I really look just like that?

The girl in front of her was pretty, with long dark curls that blurred into some sort of gauzy garment that misted down from her neck to her feet. Her makeup was two silvery blue lines above each eye

that shifted as she tilted her head to ask,

“Now what are you doing here?”

Alison wasn't one to avoid confrontation, but she felt caught in a strange mix of pampered vanity (and self-loathing as a result) that made it difficult to want to stick around for the rest of this scene. She hoped her hesitation might communicate a sort of aloof indifference, but it only seemed to egg on this mysterious curled assailant,

“Mmmm I guess that your life must be pretty fucking crazy right now to be hanging out with Mr. Culver there.”

“Yea I've been having these images I can't control of knives burrowing into my skin and twisting, like in my stomach and arms. And also slicing up my hands, and my fingernails being ripped out.”

“Mmm, one time I stepped on a nail and it went straight into my heel. Like the whole length of it.”

“One time a piece of glass got into my eye while I was on mushrooms and my friends tried to get it out but then they realized I could scratch my eye or something so I had to go to the ER.”

“One time I was biking and I hit a rock and I was launched forward over the handlebars and landed on my back and I had a chunk of hair missing from the back of my head that grew back a different color.”

“Do you wanna get more drunk?”

Sitting in a circle, Sara explained the game. Everybody goes around and answers a question in a monologue, really try to sell it. Alison's question was vague because they didn't know her. Alison, tell us a little bit about yourself. Life story and why you're here. Alison liked to perform.

“I grew up on the Upper East Side, not in the fancy part. My mom was a single mom for all the time I can remember. I guess my dad was around, sort of, but not really a parent. They were divorced which wasn't super common at that time. I'd see him some weekends, maybe a holiday. He was a charming guy, the kind who could avoid answering any real personal question without you realizing it. People automatically felt very close to him, I think. And he was really good with kids in the way guys can be- where they sort of don't try and kids are intrigued instead of disinterested. Anyway- and I guess I should tell you I'm a person who shares this sort of stuff- but anyways, I found out he was abusive when I was about thirteen and then I didn't ever see him after that. He, uh, he'd hit my mom, his girlfriend, whoever. Not me though. Crazy enough, a couple years ago this woman got in touch with me, a bit younger, a marketer for some tech company or another. She told me she was my half sister. We didn't turn out to have much in common, but yea, it seems pretty obvious now he had maybe more than a few, uh, family-type excursions after I came along.

My mom hated him, she really truly hated him until she died. The intensity of her anger never faded, I mean. She was a pretty bitter person generally, she had wanted to be a dancer, that's why she came to New York. Apparently she had a pretty promising start, got a scholarship with ABT I think, but yea she kind of crumbled under the pressure. She gave up her dreams of me being a ballerina pretty quick, I got boobs early and she would tell me how I “Just don't have the figure for it.” She was pretty mean, but man she had taste. She ended up working admin at assisted living place on the West Side for pretty much her whole life. I don't think my dad paid a lick of child support. And you know, I say they got divorced but I am honestly not even sure they were ever married. I don't think I ever asked.

So it was just me and my mom. I was a terrible student in high school and all I could think about

was moving out. So right when I graduated I married this much older guy. George Coleman. I'd been seeing him. He was loaded, needless to say. I mean I imagine you can all guess how that whole situation wasn't great, but he actually ended up dying about a year and a half after we got married. Now I wonder why he married me, instead of just paying me and putting me up in some apartment. He was a, uh, he was a very successful property manager. It's embarrassing.

So he died, and I got a hefty settlement from that. I was pretty alienated from all the people I had known growing up by this point, but suddenly I had all this money. And! And I knew all these old, gross people in New York real estate. Of course, it sounds pretty awful now, but at the time I considered myself lucky, really. I did.

And holy shit, I whisked through that money. The first thing I did, though, was apply to art school and set aside enough for tuition. I was 19, I didn't know what the fuck I was doing. My dead husband had this financial advisor, who was helping me, but I didn't know, I just didn't know. And it felt like a lot of money at the time, which it was, but in comparison to the rest of all this stuff he owned it wasn't much of anything. His daughter got the properties and stuff. She was older than me. I honestly don't even know how the whole ordeal with the will panned out, I could hardly pay attention. I couldn't be bothered to attend most of the meetings, court hearings or whatever, I just waited it out until I got my lump sum.

I got into SVA, so I decided to go traveling the summer before. I went to France, and I met this guy Bernard. He was in his mid-forties at the time. We had a very romantic time in Paris. He took me around to all these museums, complimented my paintings, took me out to these fancy restaurants with his friends and their mistresses. I'm still in touch with one of those girls, actually, she turned out to be from Wanaque New Jersey which isn't too far from where my dad grew up. She's in Colorado now.

I never married Bernard, even though he sort of asked me to, I learned my lesson the first time. After my second year of school, he moved to New York and we lived together for about six years. When I was 25, he died. He was an alcoholic.

Next up was another old guy, I guess by that point I felt the most comfortable with them. I had never really, never found my people in the art scene. I wasn't making enough money selling my pieces, textile stuff also wasn't taken as seriously back then. So yeah, I got used to subsidizing my life with miserable people. He turned out to be nuts, just a total problem. He emotionally abused me, really. And you wouldn't believe it, but he died just eight months after our first date. Pulmonary embolism.

I figured I was fucking cursed! I was still working odd jobs at that point, so I just up and left, I was 31, and I went traveling again.

Sorry this is dragging on so much, I'm almost through.

It was time for my big love affair. Someone my own age, finally. His name was Matthew, he was a photographer. We had so much fun together. I felt like maybe I had figured my shit out finally. Then I found out he had an affair, or more than one. I confronted him and he slapped my, hard. Well, I admit I had done the same in previous relationships, but nonetheless, it crushed me. I was able to get this little apartment in the Lower East Side in my early twenties. It's where I live now. I'd been renting it out for so long, moving from place to place, but after the sublet was up I moved back in.

I was single then for about six or seven years. I mean it's not like I didn't get around and meet people, but nothing serious. I kept to myself. I reconnected with some old friends, finally. And then I met John at this dinner. Publisher. We got married two years later and separated just a few weeks ago, actually. So now, now I'm here."

The room seemed thoughtful, or maybe bored. There was a general shuffling as people refilled their empty cups. A jab-

"What is it that you want?" The voice came somewhere from a dark corner.

Culver laughed and added,

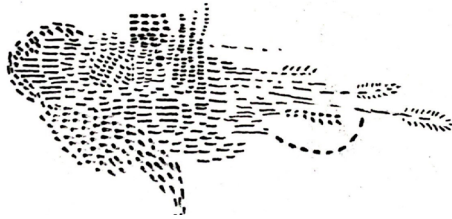
"Seriously. That story wasn't even about you! Just a bunch of shitty dudes. So. Like Carmen said. What was driving you that whole time, what were you looking for? I mean, what did you ever even lose, really? If you hated the people you lived around?"

Alison had not considered this, so she just said,

“It was a different time.” Culver rolled his eyes, cop out. But someone new was already standing up, her turn was over. Alison felt heavy. Affairs, love, betrayal, isn’t that what makes a good story? It isn’t bland pandering, it’s real. The pink mulleted man was talking about Victor, an Irish cabby he had met traveling last year, and the alluring curve of his neck. A tale of heartbreak, apparently.

Culver leaned over to whisper, see the wounds that don’t heal? These are the things that bring us closer.

How macabre, how reductive. How naive.



In between the sounds of cars and sirens, wind, voices drifting, shouts, laughter, they breathed together. It seemed like they always sunk up without trying. Things didn’t normally happen to Alison, she happened to them. She didn’t understand having someone around who wasn’t part of what she was building (money, future, family, stability). What was she doing here? Mara was never going to be cool, never going to make money and let go of all the people she was helping all the time.

They had stalled, there wasn’t really anything to talk about right then. They both liked how they could be quiet together, it didn’t happen with many people. Alison’s shorts were pressing in her stomach, she imagined the red line of it splitting open,

“You ever think about what if one of those cranes fell right now, boom, right down on top of us?” Mara turned out of looking the other way. Her hair was getting longer, short spines turning into tight curls,

“All the time.” She smiled. Alison felt something pluck. It was like looking in a window where most people would only see the reflection of the outside. It was sudden when Mara’s eyebrows pulled together,

“Fuck. Okay. Alison, is it true what I heard about Sam?” This was unexpected. Alison looked down, avoiding the sinking directness of Mara’s gaze,

“What do you mean?”

“God don’t make me be the one to say it.”

She was crying. Alison felt confused, straight through like all her body was melted out of one material. She explained how that kind of thing happened all the time. Where do you live Mara? What kind of place where that kind of shit doesn’t happen? I don’t even fucking remember it, honestly, it could be so much worse. And it doesn’t even involve you, why the fuck are you bringing this up to me, how could you.

Mara mentioned that Alison had been acting different, more tense, and distant, that she had waited a couple weeks.

“A couple weeks? It’s been that long?”

Sam had not been the first. Both in terms of her, and in general terms. Sam was more the proof of a point or a pattern. Alison’s mom’s first boyfriend that she can remember, she can’t remember his name. She remembers screaming, and silence. Heavy breathing when someone is trying to reign it in, make it less obvious. Her mom moved like all the hands, on her shoulder, on her waist, were always there, holding her down. Stiff.

Looking down at her hands, Alison wondered if one day she’d start to move like that.

“Besides, it doesn’t matter anyways. I’m gonna marry George.” Mara stood up, hands over her head and down her face. Alison stayed fetal, upright.

“Alison, you can’t. You fucking can’t. Why do you have to make everything such a nightmare? It could be so easy, you know I got into Clark, full ride. Just come with me to Worcester if you wanna get away from your fucking mom so bad!”

The sky was lightening, you could see the tops of the cranes silhouetted against the blue. It was getting colder every day.

“If you marry George- which we both know is ridiculous- if you do that, you know I can’t fucking speak to you again. I know you’re not stupid. More than that, actually, I know you fucking love me. You do! You’re so scared. And yeah, I guess I have to accept that that’s not gonna change.”

Mara felt, for a moment, that she had gotten through to her. Like maybe being straightforward was what was needed all along. Then Alison pulled her head out of her arms and looked up.

“I just can’t.” Alison’s words fell out in a slow drip, like shoving a bunch of paper towels into a drainage pipe.

“Ok. Ok.” Mara paused considering. She said,

“You know, it’s for the best, Alison. I’m not a tool you get to use to figure your shit out,” then laughing,

“Don’t call me when I’m famous.”

Alison doesn’t remember what Mara looked like walking away, just the sound of music coming through her headphones lying on the ground.

*You’re like a woman
Hag
You’re just like a woman
But sometimes
Under the stars
Under their light
You’re everything right*

Or is it

You’re everything, right?

She had shut off the world inside. It was a reaction to sensitivity. She was still volatile, but she claimed she handled that herself. What she forgets to account for is how other people have to handle it, when they choose to stick around.



He traveled for days, walking aimlessly. He was without purpose and without self. The woods seemed to stretch on forever. The ground was still tough, packed, though broken up here and there by crocus shoots. I never realized how beautiful they are. When he slept, he had strange dreams. Soft singing, sounds he had never heard. We will never be, the voice repeating, we will never be. And a sweet taste, like the smell of flowers. He walked all day, eating only when he felt he could walk no longer.

One day, he came upon a puddle. In this puddle, a worm. Turning pale at the edges and bloating. He picked the worm up in his beak, carefully. His stomach clenched, and he thought suddenly he might eat it. But the moment passed, and the worm recovered slowly in the soil. Upon waking, the worm spoke. I am in your debt. When you are in need, you need only say my name and aid will soon be brought to you. This is all I can offer, for I can see you do not yet know what you are seeking. What you desire. The duck bowed his head and asked, what is your

name? You will know, Kouach-Aurghk, when the time comes. You will know.

The next day, the duck emerged from the wood. Black asphalt was all around him. Lit up in the mottled sheets of leftover rain, the ground pushed the sky back up and made it smell like the heavy damp of early spring. And beyond the road, stretching, a row of identical structures. Light brown, like a leaf that has been long dead. This place filled him with fear. The strange shapes, angular and menacing. How could such an alien world smell like home? But he had come so far. How could he go back?

Then without warning, a new scent, fresh like blood. But with no iron, and lighter. Following the smell, he let the slick, black road obscure the edge of the wood. It was beginning to rain again, lightly. He walked and then he slept.

Lost Causes

After the party, Alison stayed with Culver. It was nice to get out of her apartment. There were always people coming and going here. They ate Annie's mac and cheese and shared stories. Alison decided to take a pigeon break, if she could, for a little while. Culver sometimes would go out flying at night while she was asleep, she just asked that he try to avoid shifting in front of her. The refrigerator broke on Tuesday morning, but there wasn't anything in it to really go bad. Besides mayonnaise. There wasn't any food at all, really.

Sitting on Culver's bed, leaning against his bedroom wall. Alison looked up from her place on Culver's shoulder.

"Is it bad that I'm still worried about him eating right?"

"What's bad, even."

They were heavy, mattress on the floor, slumped against the white plaster. Culver had kicked his crumpled sheets to the bottom of the mattress and flung his fuzzy blue blanket across their outstretched legs. Staring up at the window, they had watched the sun set, and the orange street lamps rise. This city always is glowing, she said. What's that from? Nothing.

Suddenly Culver started, stood up and grasped her hands in an urgent circle. His t-shirt was so big it pillowed and almost touched her nose.

"What do you want to eat?" His eyes were wide and urgent. He luxuriated in his moment of motivation.

"Um, I don't know?"

"You don't know!?" He lifted his hands in exasperation and spun around on a bare foot, catching the blanket in a spiral.

"What would you eat if you could eat anything? Because right now you can just worry about what you want to eat! It's a whole new thing! We could make anything, we could go shopping and buy all the stuff and my roommates are out so we could make the kitchen into a total mess."

He cupped his hands around her face solemnly and intoned,

"This is my dearest wish for you. Please, get on your shoes."



Alison tread carefully along the lines in the sidewalk. Culver walked ahead, impatiently gesturing back to her and jumping up and down the stairs of the brownstones. The misty blue-gray sky pooled around them. July was ending.

“So, Alison. I wanna know what your first real crush was. Who was it and where’d you meet?” Alison slanted,

“Oh I don’t know. I’m still dealing with John stuff, the rest of it is all a blur. You tell me, Culver, I don’t hardly know anything about you. Who was yours?” Culver didn’t need encouragement. He projected onto the street,

“My first love, real love, was a boy named Stub. It was short for Stanley- you know Stub Fadden, Jr.? No? - Anyways he was a racecar driver from New Hampshire. The original Stub, I mean. And my Stub was named after him. We met in fifth grade. He’d just moved. I walked into the classroom and he was standing face to face with this guy Mark. Mark was a bully. So I walk in, they’re standing there for just a fraction of a second and then boom, this kid punches Mark in the face so hard he literally arcs backwards. And then a second time- boom- in the stomach. Mark was doubled over on the floor so fast I could hardly figure out what happened. Then, the fuckin best part, Stub leans down and kisses Mark on the top of his head, like this,” And Culver took Alison’s head in both hands and slowly, solemnly kissing the top.

“Jesus, Culver, that sounds terrifying.”

“I know! He was fucking crazy, but man he was such a performer. But at the same time he had this aura of complete indifference. It was like he couldn’t give a fuck about anything if he wanted to. And at that time I think I wanted to care a lot less than I did. Sensitive kid, you get it. We used to nab whatever liquor we could get our hands on and bike out to this pond a little ways away from where I grew up and light fires and do witch rituals. He could climb any tree, you name it, he’d climb it. He could chug down three beers in a row in like 20-30 seconds.

He made all these things, these boring, fucking nowhere things into a new world. It was such a relief. I mean he’d say stuff:

‘If I die, I’m gonna collect all my thoughts into a ball so hard, I’ll concentrate so hard that it’ll pop right out. Then you gotta get someone to eat it so I can take over their brain.’ And I’m thinking- If I die? You know? But yea, he struggled with a lot. I mean both our parents were homophobic, all the phobics, but I think he couldn’t deal with the disconnect. In his own head. So we’d be having a good time, but if I did one thing, if I put my hand on his arm when he was in the wrong mood, he’d dissolve about how I’m a fag, how I’m shit, how he’d rather pull his brain out of his ears than be like that. And you know that’s kind of what he was doing, really. Next day he’d act like nothing happened.”

“It’s funny you say that, my mom was pretty old-fashioned too. She had this much younger brother who came out when she was in her fifties. He was already forty-two when he told her, so you can imagine what their parents were like. But I never met him, was never allowed to contact him.”

“Not even now?”

“Never really came to fruition. But tell me the rest, tell me what happened with Stub.” They turned the corner, along Wilson Avenue. Stop One Supermarket has everything we could need, and we could also get sandwiches if we decide we don’t want to cook. So many more people in this area since that club opened down the street. Or maybe the other way around. Culver pulled out his shirt, letting the breeze pool inside.

“Ok. Things really turned shit our junior year of highschool. I hadn’t given up on him, I never could do that. He had this smile in him, this intensity of love that can only come from being really fucking observant. Like ‘Oh look at how that little rock by my foot has a purple coloration, how do you think all the minerals in there aligned, all the photons bouncing off or whatever, to see such a perfect color lying

on the ground like a rock.' But yea, junior year. Drugs. He always had a girl or two sort of following him around, even when we were little. And I swear every one of them thought they were gonna be the one to last. But I mean who was it sadder for- me or them? One night I go to visit him. I could actually get into his house through his window, I ripped like eight shirts doing that. He wasn't there. So I start biking around, from place to place, sort of aimlessly. Around one or two I get to the pond. And he's there with this girl, *Tracy* if you can believe it. And man they were fucked up. Heroin. He was barely awake and she was unconscious. I've never really known much about drugs or been into them, it freaks me out. I took Stub and Tracy to the emergency room. He was so angry at me, I think more for finding him than anything." They were standing on the corner now, waiting to go in. Alison felt the weight of it all.

"And what happened? After that?"

"Oh they broke up two weeks later. Now she's a preschool teacher in Concord I think. But he didn't have support, you know, and he couldn't quite pull it back together on his own. He got beyond my reach. I had to let it go." Culver turned to gauge Alison's reaction, she was looking at her feet perfectly parallel to the center line in the sidewalk. There was a heaviness.

"Sad ending, I should have warned you." She glanced up and smiled, like what kind of other endings are there, really. He wanted to know about her, next, who are the people she keeps around?

"I don't know" She spoke with a resigned sort of ease.

"Don't know?"

"I've relied on people. For sex and for being there. I don't know if it's the same thing."

The pause gave Alison a moment to wonder where Mara might be. She couldn't help but think she was in that same construction site, pointing out invisible stars. Culver wished he had a good camera to photograph the moment, How orange Alison was against the black of the sky. How could she not know? He settled on moving forward for now,

"Would you wanna watch a sad movie and then a funny movie when we get home? Like a release-repair."

They made green curry with the nice paste, red bell peppers, chicken, mushrooms, spinach, onions, garlic, ginger and cilantro. The whole apartment smelled green. They watched *Past Lives* and then Alison showed Culver *Romy and Michelle's Highschool Reunion*. They fell asleep lying on their backs, touching along the edges of their hands.



Going back to where you pay to live

Lying back in her own bed, early August. Heat accumulated over time hid in pockets around her room. Today she had started her first new piece since 2016. She had also reached out to five friends from SVA, calling in favors to see if she could get a place to sell her work. That and lunch was all she had done today.

She used to masturbate all the time. She had always been proud of her extensive imagination, she had essentially built a catalog of material to pull from. There was classic time travel: one day she wakes up in the 1800s and is taken in by a wealthy landowner with a reserved disposition. There was the one with the alien society coming of age ritual for the newly appointed queen. There was one where she gets caught by a wizard who can make her float in a sort of incapacitating way but then he falls in love with her and teaches her magic, the one with the knight, relatively basic, the one with the sentient tree, and others

forgotten. Ropes that turn alive and become snakes. She meets a man who falls in love with her, but then it turns out he has a curse on him so he can't cum until someone falls in love with him, and one night they have sex and he cums and that's how she knows.

But everything was feeling stale and porn felt polished in a nauseous sort of metallic way. She still hadn't shaved her leg hair and was sick of people being so clean (robotic) and she felt too aware of the interpersonal dynamics of the homemade stuff. It was more like watching a shitty documentary. She had talked to Culver about it, he said she should go out and meet people. He said he'd help her make an online dating profile.

Lying down now, she couldn't sleep. And masturbating felt mechanical, like cooking the same dinner again. Eventually, she reached some sort of spasm, but still couldn't sleep. There was an uncomfortable bump in her mind. That girl with the loose curls. The party back after she had blacked out trying to shapeshift, or whatever you call it. She had sort of looked like Mara, hadn't she? Some things follow you across time. God, mom had hated Mara so much. Not in so many words of course. She didn't mean to be a hateful person, she just really didn't see everybody as people. What was it that had made Alison blow that whole thing up?

"It is hard to be brave enough to understand yourself." Mara had said that so long ago. Maybe it was the suffering that pushed her to wisdom so young.

"But didn't I," Alison wondered,

"Didn't I suffer enough?"



Sam had his hand over her face, her ear pressed to the ground. When he was confident she wouldn't move, he put his mouth right up to her ear. His breath, hot, made her mind convulse in disgust, but somehow she didn't move. I don't understand. He leaned down and whispered,

"What are you doing all night with that black bitch. Huh? You like to let her toss you around? I know. I know what's been happening. I know she's a fucking dyke and so are you. You're sick, Alison. You know people are dying from that shit now? Just count yourself lucky I didn't kill you. Just cause I know you'll rot in hell one day all the same."

She can remember the slow string of spit as it dripped from his mouth, in between his crooked teeth. His face contorted and so she wasn't a person. The spit caught the light, it shimmered a bridge from him to her cheek.

When he walked away, she could see the confidence in the stride. The shoulders back of someone who knows they did the right thing.



“What am I wishing for now,” she wondered. She hadn’t looked up Sam in years, to see where he’s living now.

“For someone to comfort me?”

She closed her eyes and focused on her body. She felt for a center of movement somewhere in her chest and forced her hands to relax. She thought maybe she could sense a beginning of a shift, a warm buzz vibrating out blue light. But somehow her hands still caught in fists, her stomach grinding.

“I’m angry.”

Facebook revealed that Samuel Thomas Carter was living in New Springville, Staten Island with his loving wife and four kids.

She packed a bag with Cabot extra sharp cheddar, half a loaf of bread, an apple, and a bag of Dove chocolates. It was gonna be a long trip. Her hair pulled back, she chose her favorite old pair of jeans from before all this spandex stuff, they fit like a trash bag. Three minutes later she was walking toward the J, it was 11:45pm. The city felt sharp, exact, the sounds amplified like each rush of a car passing had a corner. She felt consumed in an ultimate purpose. She walked fast, deliberate, eyes straight ahead, pushing off her back foot like she’d learned in dance class, extending her steps. She could feel her heart move across the surface of her skin, rounded the corner to the train station and,

“John?”

“Pleasejustletmecomehome”

John was clean shaven, and wearing an outfit that appeared ironed. His stance was sideways, crouched, like prey. He’d always had such big, wet eyes. He explained how he was sorry, how he had been thinking of her, how lately whenever he braked to a stop his car would stall out and it made him realize how he had been going about living his life, how it was so selfish and he was always afraid of the future, and he couldn’t stop to take in what he had because he was afraid that if he stopped he would never move again, become stuck, but in that fear he had becomes stuck.

She screamed. You asshole you- you incredible asshole. She threw an apple at him, get out. He noted they were outside. She threw a loaf of bread at him. He repeated, pleaseletme- she started to cry. He was mid-sentence, “Alison, Alison please I made a mistake-” when he watched her collapse to her knees on the floor. Her sobs were heavy, the weight of them in her chest had been compacting her, charcoal, over time. She did not know how it was possible, as she was sure she had lost her body, but somehow it felt so good to be held.

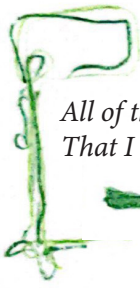
He walked her home.

After they had sex, Alison felt nauseous. No matter the colors of the room, the whole experience felt gray, a relentless pounding reminder of bodies falling apart. She decomposed, melted over the bed, wondering when the endless assault might stop being so anesthetizing. She imagined all sensation floating out of her mouth in a cloud, till she was like a god, uncaring and everywhere, and so, loving of all things equally.

Looks like you need a change

She regarded John as he entered the room in his sweatpants. The familiar gray-brown of his chest hair caught the light from the bedside lamp. She could see all the lean discolorations of skin, browns and flecks like a mirror of some alien sky. The mild curve of his stomach when he bent down was so familiar. He was wearing glasses. His hair was grayer than she imagined. She had thought him so free, so earnest.

“John? Would you read to me?”



When he awoke, he preened his feathers and stood up. He was hungry and alone and so he wept. All of the things I miss feel stale, because I know they were predicated on a sickness that I could not control. That I couldn't even see. He could not kill himself because he had no hands.



Keep walking

He had reached the ocean. At first, he did not understand. How could this be? There is so much water, on forever. The air buffeted him away. He lost his feet in the sand. Where did they go? It was the end of the world. He felt he should go right up to the edge.

Who are you?

The voice was a hole, a space. A feeling like before you know a thought. Almost-existing,

Creature, what is your name?

He replied,

There is no name, anymore, for what I am.

What do you want?

I don't know yet, what exists that I could want. I know only suffering and the suffering that I have caused.

What do you dream?

I do not.

Yes you do.

I dream of singing.

Go on?

I dream of singing, and a sweet taste.

And?

And that's it.

And?

And- and a body. That I cannot see. I cannot see if it is next to me, behind me, within me. It is just a feeling.

What feeling?

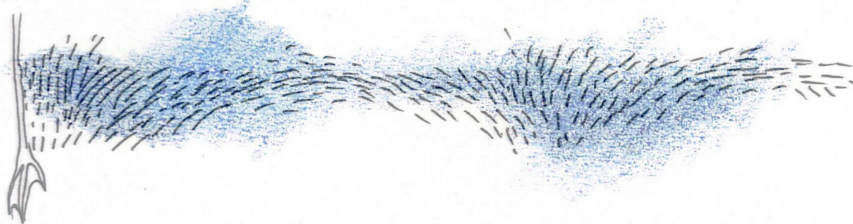
A feeling of rest, I think. Being content.

How long have you been walking?

I do not know.

Why did you not fly?

I never thought- I think somehow I forgot I could.



When Alison woke up, she immediately knew. Looking down she saw the covers flung off, wet dark feathers mottling the white sheet. Her head was pounding, dizzy, she couldn't see. And a pulse of emotion, so distinct as to be a voice,
Get up.

The room was dark. When she placed her feet, four-pronged and clawed, onto the ground, it felt soft.
Get up.

Where was John? The hallway to the bathroom seemed to stretch forever. Right up into the moon, sitting in the ceiling like her old light fixture.
Get up.

In front of her, a shadow. Dripping. A face, scratched and bleeding, blue with cold.
Would you make me a monster?
I could help you





When Alison woke up, John was in the kitchen making coffee.
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 When Alison woke up, John was in the kitchen making coffee.
 When Alison woke up, John was sleeping and drooling on the pillow.
 When Alison woke up, John was in the kitchen making coffee.
 When Alison woke up, John was in the kitchen making coffee.
 When Alison woke up, John was sitting up rubbing his eyes.
 When Alison woke up, John
 When Alison woke up, John
 When Alison woke up, *what's so*
 When Alison woke up,
 When Alison woke up,
 When Alison woke up, *scary?*
 When Alison woke up,
 When Alison woke up, *I love you*
 When Alison woke up,
 When Alison woke up,
 When Alison woke up,
 When Alison woke up, *no matter what*

When Alison woke up, she picked up her phone and googled “Mara Blunt.” Then she called Culver. Put on a sweatshirt and shorts, and left. John said, where are you going? She said, get your shit and leave before I’m back.



Culver was in the park, head in Miles’s lap. Holding his hands in a triangle, Culver smiled, “And this is the shape between a woman and her arm, placed just so on her hip after her boyfriend says that he totally gets why she is still upset, but that she has to understand that he just names things and then moves on, it’s not repression.” The shade from the tree was sliding away as the sun moved, coloring Culver’s toes and the grass tufts poking out of the compacted dirt. Miles made a circle, “This is the shape of a fruit called stonasta that grows on Mars. If you eat it, you sprout a retractable hand underneath your belly button.”

Maybe things weren’t so bad, after all. Miles liked to look down at Culver and comment on all the things that made him pretty.

“Your eyes have so much depth.”

“I feel like you have this desire for play that is so transformative” This one was harder to stomach.

Miles liked to ask questions,

“Do you feel like you really understand me? Like, do you really see me?”

Culver twisted his head,

“Of course, I mean does anyone fully know anyone?”

This did not appear to satisfy, so Culver tried again,
 “I really hope so, I really like you.” Success. Miles dug his face into Culver’s shoulder and then tossed his head back onto the pillow. Miles changed the subject, mundane,
 “How was your day?” But their cheeks were hot and Culver could feel his heart speed up because he had been pinching Miles’s thumb with his fingers like he was squeezing out toothpaste. The heartbeat echoed under his arms, he felt curiously aroused.

Don’t tell Culver, but he was being turned on by the idea of someone being turned on by him. It was a circular way of being that allowed for very interesting sex in which he and the other parties involved existed in quite separate worlds. Neither of them had to find out, usually, though.

Miles was suddenly quiet. They were thinking about how glad they were that they had worked through it, that Culver had stuck around. They asked Culver what he wanted out of life, what his plans were. And then, a chime in his pocket,

“Sorry I should take this, it’s Alison.”



Miles and Culver had decided to take her to an open mic they knew about, *Dykes Talk Back, No Questions Please*. Alison was in the front row.

She stared at the words until the words split open. It was red hot inside, and it made her quiver. She wanted to do cartwheels across the dark room. It wasn’t funny.

The speaker had dark curly hair strewn along her narrow calves. It peeled away in blooming tangles. Her slight mustache breathed when she spoke, riding her words in waves of confusion and day-breaks of clarity.

The lanterns sitting across the room blew silent warmth all over the floor. It was a strange meeting place, but it felt like it could be some sort of home. She leaned over and whispered,

“Do you go to stuff like this all the time?” He nodded and grinned, grasping her leg

“I am so happy you are finally here.”

After the speaker stepped back into the rest of the people all sitting, she pulled up the neckline of her brown tank top and pulled down the back, checking the shoulder seams to make sure everything was in line. All of Alison’s heat shot up at that and radiated out so she thought maybe her head glowed. Not so bad, though. Everyone was glowing after that.

Culver said he’d introduce her. It was like a smooth smoke let all the lines in the room touch, everything was one shape. The speaker leaned forward and brushed her leg after they had been speaking for only a few minutes. Alison decided she wouldn’t break eye contact first anymore ever in her life.

They carried the house with them all night, taking turns. Alison would say “I wanna hold it,” and then she’d slide it into her pocket and lean back against the wall. When they kissed for the first time, the speaker’s mustache planted dandelion seeds on Alison’s face. The most beautiful weed.

Turning through lapses of sense, fading sensation melting to a desperate ache, then a deep jolt of clarity curled her around the soft folds of her stomach. Alison monitored every gesture. She lounged in the pull of the speaker’s hands in her hair, any attempt to get closer.

“Have you ever done, that, with someone as old as me?” The speaker just laughed, watching what used to be the tip of her cigarette jump off the fire escape. She bumped Alison with her hip, slow. There was an agreement about a closeness that existed in the dark, so Alison stretched her arms around the length of the speaker’s back and slid her hands over their shorts and along the length of the wonderfully hairy legs.

Culver said, after the gathering dispersed, that he was right, that she should come to Brooklyn more often.

She said, simply,
“Thank you.”

He could tell she meant it.

Rhythms can be surprising

September came and Alison got a job subbing at a kindergarten teaching art. It was a small school, only a few other teachers. One of them, Ellen, was also in her mid fifties. They had been getting dinner after work sometimes, Ellen liked to sew, too, so they would do that together. Culver had been on a trip back to New Hampshire with Miles for the week, he had said it was going to be a reckoning. They had found Mara together one night, she was a professor of art history at UMASS Amherst. Alison had her school profile in the UMASS directory in a permanent browser on her laptop, but hadn't called. She had also added “get a therapist” to her to-do list.

Before Culver left, they had set a date to go dancing when he was back. He had said he'd return on the sixteenth, so yesterday, which meant that they should be getting together tonight. It was warm, but not uncomfortable. It was perfect for going out: you didn't need a sweater, but you could easily wear something with pockets. Alison had made herself some new items, and decided to break out her latest creation. Green cotton dress, a take on Japanese styles, with a simple neckline, very straight on the sides. She put dusty purple pants underneath with the bottoms mended in pixelated blues, pinks, greens and yellows. She'd gotten a chest binder from one of Culver's friends, so the ensemble went over that. She felt solid.

No response from Culver for a few hours after she texted him, which was expected. She made a peanut butter, banana, and cocoa powder smoothie at nine to prep herself for the journey into Brooklyn. Still no text from Culver, so she gave him a call,

I'm sorry, the person you are trying to reach has a voice mailbox that has not been set up yet. Please try again later, thank you. Goodbye

And again. And again. She went out by herself instead and got five compliments on her outfit. It wasn't until a few days later that she started to worry.

She called Miles to check in.

“Hi Miles, this is Alison, I was wondering if you've heard from Culver?” A gap weighed through the static,

“They're not here right now.”

“Do you know where he might be? We were supposed to meet up a few days ago and I haven't-”

“No, no I don't know where he might be.”

“Well, have you seen him since your trip?”

“Fuck, he didn't mention it to you? We never went on the trip Alison, he never showed.”

“Oh. Well that's a bit concerning, I-”

“I assure you that it is not. Culver has some, some good qualities, Alison. And I am sorry to have to be the one to inform you that he is an unreliable ass. Trust me, this is not the first time he's disappeared.”

Alison considered this,

“Miles are you ok? Are you-

“I would really fucking appreciate it if you just don’t call me about him anymore. Did you know he’s a liar, Alison? He literally scams people. On the phone. And I’m pretty sure he’s been fucking people for money the whole time we dated without telling me. So. Yea. I’m gonna go.”

The call ended, three cold notes.



Alison was trying to get inside. Culver’s apartment building seemed low traffic, there was nobody to let her in. He wasn’t answering the buzzer, either.

I feel dead inside. He kept repeating. The voice didn’t let him go, why didn’t you fly. I don’t know. I guess I forgot. He felt frozen in place. He couldn’t feel himself anywhere. Just the wind, and the harsh salt of the water. The sun had set but he didn’t remember it moving. Ah. You are lost. I am sorry it is so hard. Deep ache. I can’t just walk forever, but I can’t stay here. It is a rupture. Am I evil?

Through the intercom, Alison heard,

“Hello?”

“Culver let me in.”

“No.”

Standing in the doorway of his apartment, Alison could see the color of the bones beneath Culver’s skin. His arm extended straight across the door like don’t come in. She didn’t know precisely where to start, so she asked if he was ok. He laughed and hung his head. She wondered if he’d be able to pick it back up. But he did, looking at her. For a moment it seemed his eyes glowed red. And gone. He wanted to know what she wanted. She wanted to help him.

Culver knew, for a fact, that Alison did not want to help him. He felt, so surely, the weight of the seeds planted inside him. He was contaminant, the vines were going to split through his skin any second, demon bird, cursed. He tried to tell her,

“Alison, Alison please just fucking get out.”

“No, I’m coming in-”

She tried to push past him, and that’s when he leaned his head back, then brought their foreheads smashing together. She stumbled backwards, the world zipping between a fuzz of color and a black haze. He was laughing, standing over her,

“Alison you think we fucking stand a chance? You think I give a shit about any of this? You’re sad, you’re a sad person with a sad life. You never loved anything. You never tried to get anywhere. You know shit, you don’t know what you want, you don’t know what you have. Your so fucking full of all this self pity, man, who hurt you so bad? Pretty girl from the Upper East Side. Even I pitied you. You put on a great show. ‘All I want is love, all I want is to make beautiful things,’ no. You want control. You want to hit back, hit first. That’s the language you really understand. I know you’re angry. You’re just another asshole, like me. Full of hate-”

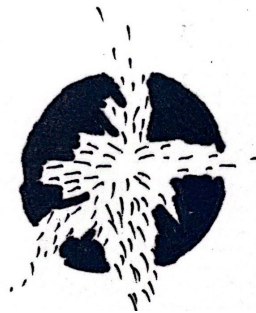
It took a moment for her to gauge what was going on, exactly. He was doubled over, head on his knees. But then she saw, flickering. His hands, his shape under his shirt, was jerking, glitching. His hands shook, hands then claws then wings. Feathers. He hit the ground, convulsing, eyes rolled back in his head. He was trying to speak, but he was choking on his spit, his neck curved back impossibly.

Alison crawled as quickly as she could to his side, lifting his head up into her lap,

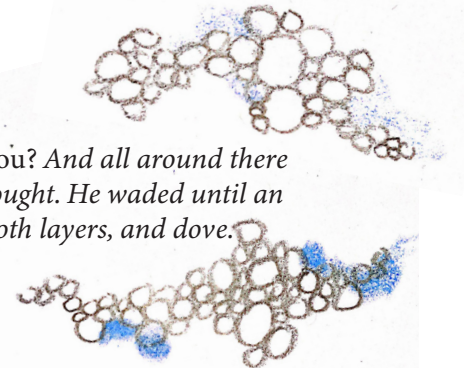
“What? What is it?”

When he smiled, his mouth was black inside. He stuttered,

“W-wa-w-ww-we a-are c-ccc-cursed.” His eyes lit up as he laughed through curled lips. And then he dissolved.



Am I evil? He repeated again, but there was no response. Worm? Is it you? And all around there were little bubbles in the sand, crabs hiding. I guess there is only forward, he thought. He waded until an oncoming wave spit a dark blue shelf across his sky. He closed his eyelids, both layers, and dove.



Alison held Culver’s empty clothes in disbelief.

The water was icy cold. He could feel it moving through his feathers, the groggy pull of oil starting to freeze. I could let it end here, he thought, it’s so dark. The red edge of light through water faded as he sank. His wings relaxed and stretched outward. He felt small, compressed, all his molecules bound together as tightly as possible. It is easiest, he realized, when no one misses you.

A sudden bubbling sensation slipped through his feathers. Warm, and that sweet taste, like flowers. And a new voice, lighter and foreign, “Who’s there?”

She gathered Culver’s clothes in a pile, and carried them into his apartment. Picking them up, she thought maybe she felt a slight weight, unexpected.

Who's there? He didn't want to open his eyes. Open your eyes. He didn't want to open his eyes, I don't want to. He opened one eye first, then the other. He was floating in a strange, blue space. Light filtered in from every direction, the world rendered flat and bright. In front of him was an animal he had never seen before. Strange, no feathers or fur. Except on top of his face, a long cascade of light hair. Do I know you?

She felt carefully along the folds of the blue t-shirt, until she felt a small lump. Reaching inside, she felt something warm, soft.

Neither knew how they got there or where they were. Why did you wake me up, I was dying. The strange animal replied, I was going to ask you the same thing. The blue space was melting around them, and the taste of flowers. Where were you going? The Animal asked. I was going away. Away from what? Pain I caused. Oh. Me too. He felt a strange urge to approach this Animal, suddenly, like old instinct. Like before he saw. The Animal rested a hand on his head. I always liked ducks, I think they are so beautiful. But we, ducks, we hurt each other. The Animal tilted his head confused, so he showed him his penis. Oh, I see. I am very sorry. I have hurt people too. Are you sick, like me?

I don't think I know what sick is anymore.

Pulling out her cupped hand, Alison saw a tiny baby bird. A pigeon. It was breathing rapid, shallow breaths. Culver? It had little blonde feathers and a huge beak. She couldn't decide if it was ugly.



He mulled this over. What is sick? He thought it was to hurt other people. So he said, I don't want to hurt people anymore. The Animal shrugged, then don't. It is not that easy I think. Yea but you can try. And how about you? The Animal paused, and then smiled. It is easy to hurt people when that is all you know. And how do you learn anything new?

The baby's eyes blinked, then shut. Its head rocked back and then tucked. I need to feed it, I need to- Alison closed her eyes and felt for some center, in her chest. A warm buzz that started to move so fast that it became smooth, a soft pull along her fingers.

She felt light. The moon was coming in through the window, the curtains blowing. She wasn't sweaty anymore. She felt air through her feathers. Her feathers were blue. She could see all around, she could see new colors. Purple where it hadn't been before.

She felt a sudden well of energy, she leaned over to the baby's mouth and watched the white, curd-like substance slip into his beak. His eyes squeezed shut and then relaxed.

So how do you learn something new? He sat with the Animal to think about it. I think you have to ask a lot of questions, said the Animal. The duck replied, I had this dream. A body. That I could not see. I could not see if it was next to me, behind me, within me. It was just a feeling.

What feeling?

A feeling of rest, I think. Being content.

What is your name, by the way?

There is no word yet, for what I am.

Me neither.

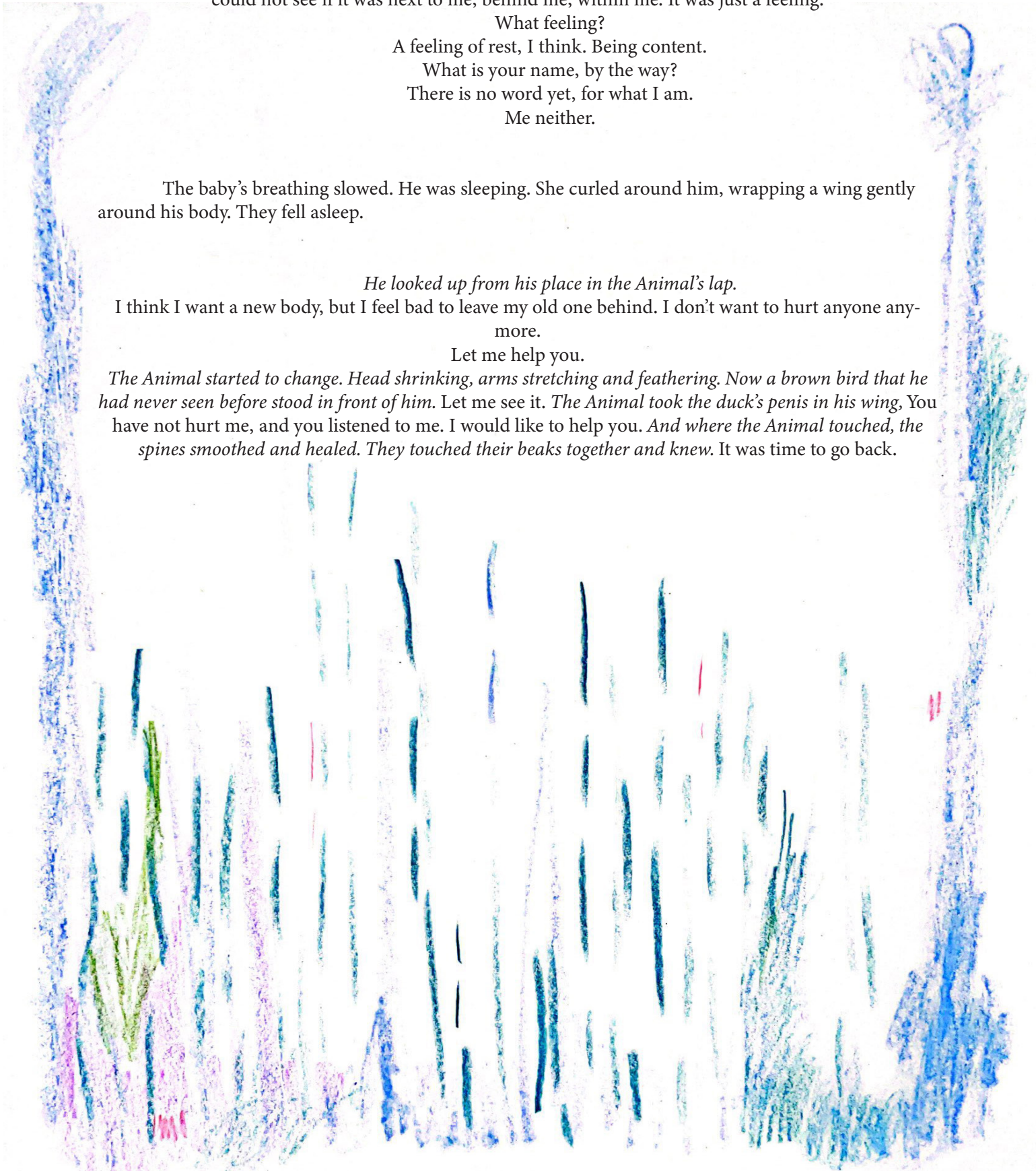
The baby's breathing slowed. He was sleeping. She curled around him, wrapping a wing gently around his body. They fell asleep.

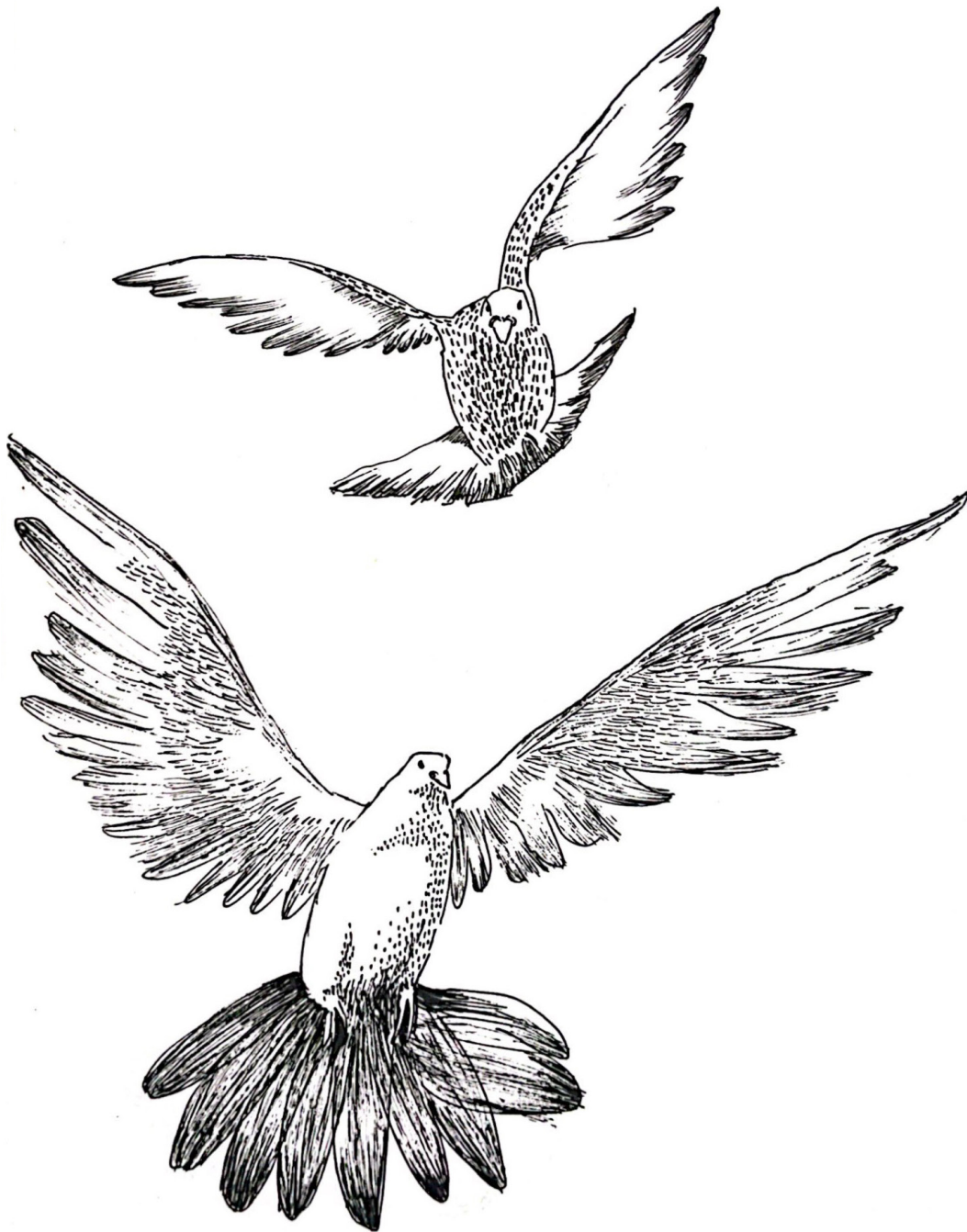
He looked up from his place in the Animal's lap.

I think I want a new body, but I feel bad to leave my old one behind. I don't want to hurt anyone anymore.

Let me help you.

The Animal started to change. Head shrinking, arms stretching and feathering. Now a brown bird that he had never seen before stood in front of him. Let me see it. The Animal took the duck's penis in his wing, You have not hurt me, and you listened to me. I would like to help you. And where the Animal touched, the spines smoothed and healed. They touched their beaks together and knew. It was time to go back.





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