

for all the other ghosts

for all the other ghosts
true fiction by Justin Sanders

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very special thanks to Jill Muth, without whom this book would not exist.

for Mary, for Jessie, for George, for Josefa, for Malina
for Jay and Lena and Rhose

and for all the other ghosts

*will it be said, in order to minimize them, that these corpses
don't prove anything?*

Aimé Césaire

tule vieja

The call came from inside the house. It was made by Black Aggie who came downstairs and bashed the babysitter's pretty little brains out before she stole the pretty white children. She tucked them under her large breasts and left a trail of sour milk and ants out the door. No one bothered to look for her but they did arrest the middle aged woman (Perla) who worked the kitchen at Casa Lita. "Thank god they caught that bitch," everyone thought.

That's the story the papers report to the TV anchors, and the TV anchors report it to the websites, and the websites report it to every mother and father in America and they all tell it to their little Brents. Brent from Miami who's posting on Craigslist, looking for a roommate (FEMALE ONLY).

In the ad he posts a photo of himself, shirtless, and asks that any girl whose interested send pictures (under 35, around 110lbs. preferably).

When the first woman shows up she'll have her long curly black hair tucked under a hat and her nails painted like eagles and her tits jutting out from her chest like howitzers. He'll greet her by wagging his finger at her and saying, "Oye loca ven pa 'ca" and she'll shake merengue and cook gallo pinto and feed it to him on the couch and Brent will dream of her calling him papi and moaning, "Fuck my panocha" and when Brent goes to stick his fingers in her he'll touch ash and her tits will nurse sour milk. In the morning Brent wakes up in a bathtub of ice with his liver missing. The story makes the 9 o'clock news. All the men agree it's horrifying.

Down South Carolina, George Stinney's ghost was resurrected by a hoodoo niggress. They forgot to cut his dick off before they electrocuted him and now the great-granddaughters of the lily-white women in the audience, the ones who stared into George's eyes when his mask slipped off, they all love big black dick. George's ghost drives a black Impala and flashes his headlights at them and when they flash back he follows them home and fucks them. They have black baby after black baby after black baby. The TV anchors crane to watch through the glass. In his hospital bed Brent cries for how they've been ruined.

In Maryland the roads are full of women in white. They're all followed by large white dogs. I'm driving through Rising Sun when I spot one and offer her a

ride. “Where are the children?” she asks me. I don’t know where the children are. I haven’t thought of them since they went missing. “They’ve gone down to the river,” is all I can think to tell her. Hearing that she takes her hat off and her hair falls in vines. I drive out of Rising Sun before sunset, like my father was told to do, and when I drop her off her dog is black now. She leaves a trail of ants on the seat.

The children are found one day. The TV anchors speak for everyone. They tell them they’ll go to heaven. They don’t tell them about the white hood their father wore.

At a roadside diner on 95 I meet Ian. On his way to Miami he tells me. “I’m looking for a roommate when I get there,” he says. “Hopefully a woman, I’m not much good with cooking and cleaning.” Ian asks me if I’ve ever heard the story of Black Aggie. “What scares me,” he says, “what really scares me is spooks.” He smiles. Then he asks if I know any other ghost stories.

I put up the hood of my shirt and Ian sits uneasy. “Drive through Valdosta,” I say. “look for a tree with a whiskey bottle at the base, a cigar stuck in the neck. That’s the grave marker for Mary Turner. “Bloodied Mary Turner,” I call her. Ian shifts and grins. “Her husband was a convict bought off the chain gang. One day he was too sick to work so his owner beat him. He vowed revenge and two nights later the owner was shot dead. Police arrested Mary’s husband, they had him in jail when a crowd took him from their custody. They hung him then castrated him. Mary protested. Said, if she could, she’d swear out warrants on all of them. Days later a crowd

of some two hundred people converged on her. She was eight months pregnant at the time. They hung her upside down, soaked her clothes in gasoline and then lit her on fire. And while she burned, a man from the crowd took a hunting knife and cut her belly open. Her unborn child fell out and gave a cry, before someone crushed it with his boot. Then they shot her over a hundred times.”

“She should have minded her unwise remarks,” Ian says. And when he looks over my hair is growing in vines and my mouth is full of black glass. Ian stands his ground and I vanish from the diner, just another hooded nigger disappeared off the road.

There are footprints in the ash of George Stinney’s bones. In jail Perla who worked at Casa Lita’s, rocks back and forth praying her albescence, “Por mi culpa, por mi culpa, por mi gran culpa.”

the ugly

We were swimming down in McKeldin area and Lauren started getting naked. First dropping the straps on her tank top and pulling the neckline down. Flashing me her ass as she bent into the water. She was so pale she glowed as the sun bounced off of her and the water's surface.

So I got naked too and then it was just playful. We were splashing each other and I dove under and came up with her on my shoulders, and she was laughing until I stepped into murky sediment and fell backwards, her weight immediately pushing me down. I could still hear her laughing over the water in my ears. She was swimming above me and my hand found one of her breasts and

felt fire. She pulled away. When I came up her face was light and the yellow had come into her eyes. She said, "As above, so below" and then her hands plumbed the devil. And I remember what she breathed into my ear the whole time, her voice hot and low, a hiss over and over and over and over, "Every nigga is a star."

My palm stung and burned where I touched her, a hard purple blister was forming in the webbing of my thumb. Those were beast days.

Afterwards we went to the corner bar for cheap whiskey and sandwiches. A brace of white stallions was grazing in a field across the street. One of them whinnied as we went through the door, a white shock of sound that made my breath catch.

While we ate I told her I was scared of horses.

"They make me think of lynchings," I told her.

"That's silly," She said and flipped her menu over.

"The Rebel Burger," I read aloud off the menu's back, a picture of the Confederate flag beneath a faded picture of a pound hamburger with bacon, egg salad, and barbeque sauce, drizzled with Jack Daniels to finish.

"You should get that one," she said.

I pointed her to the picture of the flag.

"Don't be stupid, that doesn't mean anything," she said and I laughed black smoke that coiled out from between my teeth and caught in the bar's AC. Outside the stars were visible against the low sun. The moon was a scythe. And the air suddenly smelled of roses and tobacco and tequila. That's how it would have been the night my Uncle Clarence died.

He would have been walking down the street in Hampden drinking from his flask and thinking, “Was a fine last meal.” Thinking, “Every nigga is a star. Every nigga is a star.” He wouldn’t have seen the man with a Confederate flag tattoo walking up behind him, but he heard, “Fucking nigger!” and then BANG and the shadows bent and draped, then wove and set into a cloak of ermine and stars.

Back in those days they said the trees in the country all sang “nigger,” and that’s true. Crows fed on the hanged bodies. They learned to wait in the trees. They learned to mimic the sounds. They learned to caw nigger. They learned that word meant “meat.”

Today I know the smell of death more intimately than birds.

In the restaurant, Lauren did not notice the skin tearing off my face to the skeleton beneath. She did not see the oceanic flow of galaxies hurtling through the holes where my eyes once were. She couldn’t have known about my uncle. She couldn’t have known that they left his body in the street for 3 hours or that the police refused to investigate it because the murder was rumored to have been KKK related and investigating the Klan would have meant investigating themselves. So I told her,

“I saw a horse kick my aunt.” I told her how she’d stopped breathing for 2 minutes. How that was the worst part, “Not knowing if each second I was looking at her was the last second I would see her alive. She was dying I thought.”

And that she seemed to feel something about cause she stared and didn't really say shit, just sucked her teeth. Then her phone rang and she stepped out to take the call.

I still fear horses. I think about them running up my street at night. I think about the difference between the quiet of nothingness, and the quiet that's about to be shattered. The same feeling of impending terror that I feel when swimming in lakes—not being able to see what's below my feet.

Bridgeways

Jay and I were pioneering through the snow. It was one of those endless winter days. There wasn't much to do indoors so we'd trekked out into Leakin Park to hike the frozen trails and ice rivers and dare each other to walk out onto the frozen water and talk about fightin' and feelin' titties. Violence and sex were always there. In truth, neither of us had had any experience with girls, but we were nonetheless experts.

"Nigga you couldn't find no pussy with a team of Sherpas and a trail of breadcrumbs."

"You best save all that spit for your girl's snatch."

"Keep fuckin with me nigga, you won't walk out this park today. End up a ghost in this muthafucka."

And it could have been either of us talking because we both thought the same back then. Until Jay broke the banter with sincerity, “Yo, word is bond God, I’m tryna get with that Jane down the way.” I knew immediately he was talking about Lena cause I’d seen the way he practically drooled around her.

We didn’t break stride when we came up on the crumbled stone bridge, a pair of red and white Nikes sticking out from the snow, but all our words turned to steam.

It wasn’t the first time either of us had seen a dead body, but it was the first time we’d seen one together. Immediately the rules of boy world took over.

“I dare you to go touch it. Hold your hand there for ten seconds, come on don’t be a little bitch about it.”

We argued over who was gonna go first, but I remember that it was Jay who upped the ante. “I’ma get his shoes,” he said. And I laughed cause I thought he was joking at first, till he climbed down the hill and crept up on the body, moving slow like he was careful not to wake him, and I really didn’t believe he would go through with it until I watched him start to undo the kid’s laces. He did it so gingerly too, almost reverently. Holding the foot up on his thigh and unworking the knots slowly. Then he slid the shoes off and tied the laces together and slung them over his shoulder and climbed back up to meet me. “Dead man’s shoes,” he said grinning. “Got me some free Air’s.”

“You know that’s a curse,” I said, and then was immediately teased for believing in fairy tales.

6 years later those shoes are in the back of Jay’s SUV as he parks in front of a house on Poplar Grove. Lena is with him. He’s holding her door open and helping her out of the car, saying, “Just a few hours okay? I know my folks can be a lot, we won’t stay long, I just wanna check on them.”

“Fine, but if your mother starts giving me shit about us not being married yet I’m waiting in the car.”

“This ain’t no place you wanna be sat in a car, pregnant and alone.” He kisses her forehead and her belly and looks down the street just in time to see a brown Hyundai turn the corner and slow roll up the block.

Maybe he heard the first shots, or maybe he smelled it in the air—roses and tobacco and tequila—or maybe Lena’s eyes went white and the baby kicked and Jay followed her gaze and saw it coming. It doesn’t really matter in the end. Bullets sprayed from the Hyundai’s windows. Jay pushed Lena down onto the SUV’s floor and threw himself on top of her and caught three shots that took his head off and all his red leaked out, like a line breaking.



I remember I took Lena tagging one time. She chose the name “Witch” and neon orange Krylon and we climbed the billboard across from Penn Station and she reclaimed the space in fat bboy letters.

“You got some of the devil in you,” I told her afterwards as we walked through the alleys back towards her house. She grabbed the cross she was wearing around her neck and kissed it.

“I’d rather be like the sun, beautiful and terrible,” she said.

I laughed. She reached over and traced a pair of horns on my cheek. Then she handed me back the can of paint and her eyes turned gray.

“You ever feel like, what’s the point of having wants?” she asked. “I mean why bother wanting anything? What’s the point of even making plans? It’s not like life gives a fuck about what anyone wants or what anyone plans to do.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I just shrugged and shook the Krylon can and knelt down and tagged her name on the curb. A firefly flew up from the storm drain across the street. We watched it blink and hover for a minute before I flashed her a grin and then ran and slapped it out of the air. Lena winced and said goodnight.

A week after that night Jay told me he and Lena were having a baby.

I watched Lena turn hollow after Jay’s death. She stopped eating, stopped leaving the house. She took care of their baby—Rhose—but for the first two years of

that kid's life her mother was a ghost. And even when she finally did crawl back into the land of life, her eyes held that floating gray emptiness. I try to remember her in all the happy hours, Lena catching fireflies and tagging billboards but those memories also exist in the fog of Jay's death.

After Jay's funeral we went back to his house and divided up a few of his belongings. The red and white Nikes we'd found all those years ago were sitting on a pile of clothing for donation. I tied the laces together and slung them over my shoulder.

Later that night I was walking home drunk, Jay's shoes bouncing off my back with each step, and I came up on a construction scaffold outside an apartment building. I started climbing it. I wasn't thinking beyond the climbing. Probably I just wanted to be someplace high, someplace to look out over the city, someplace to stare at the stars and feel how small my sadness was compared to the celestial void. It didn't even occur to me that people lived in the building so it shocked me when I reached the top platform and saw into the window of a home. Saw a man, completely unaware of my immediate presence, engaged in private existence. I know I should have turned away but I didn't. The pull of looking in on something I wasn't supposed to see was too strong. I watched him talk to himself, say over and over, "I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I can do this, I don't know if I can do this." Then he closed his eyes and

crossed himself and started praying. It felt like it should have been a tender moment, watching someone reach out in faith for a strength beyond themselves. His eyes were closed and he was rocking and mouthing his supplication and it was obvious to me then. God wasn't in that room and the help he was searching for wasn't coming. He was alone, unaware that he was connected intimately to me, yet still alone.

I stayed at his window, kept watching him until he opened his eyes again and rubbed his face and walked into another room. I could see the window was unlatched so I slid it open quietly and reached my hand inside his life and plucked an apple from the nearby bowl of fruit. I unslung the Nikes from my shoulder and left them on the floor of his apartment, then I traced a pair of horns in the window glass, and left the message 'pulvis et umbra sumus' underneath them. It would show up in the morning when the light came through.

Some weeks later as I walked by that building again, I overheard two of the tenants on their stoop saying they thought the building was haunted.



I'm at a cafe having tea with Rhose, Jay and Lena's daughter, my goddaughter. She's 11. She tells me about a boy she likes in school and I say, "You're too damn young to be thinking about some damn boys, you need to have your head in the books." She tells me I'm old, "nineteen-ninety-and-late," she calls me.

I tell her I didn't make a graveyard promise to her parents to take care of her just so some young thundercat can come along and fuck her future up.

Rhose's eyes go gray, and for a minute I watch her be possessed by her mother. I'm wearing the cross Lena used to wear and it swings in the air between us. Rhose has asked me about her parents in the past, what they were like, how they died, what my favorite memories and stories of them are. But this time she asks me, "Why didn't God save them?" And in my head I know what I should say, what I probably need to say, "It doesn't matter, all that matters is your parents loved you and if you believe in that and hold on to that they're never really gone." But that's not what I say. Black smoke coils out from my mouth and I tell her, "God doesn't save anyone anymore. God fathered us all to abandon us. God was the beginning but now the beginning is over, and what's left is the end. Her. She that claims all things. She smells of roses and tobacco and tequila. When she enters the room the heads of roses slice off and float to the ground. She is the star, already extinguished but we see it nonetheless."

Rhose straightens up in her chair and the light pouring in from behind her creates a mandorla around her. Her eyes freeze over into black glass and her voice carries the weight of a history far heavier than her frame.

She says, "All we are are dust and shadows to you," and I nod but my blood is running backwards up my veins. She says, "Why cling to flesh?" and I say I don't know any other way. And then she leans in close and I can see through her skin, see her skull brimming with

light. She reaches her finger to my cheek and it's long, skeletal, colder than it should be. She traces horns. The heads on the roses at the next table slice off and float to the ground. "You were never meant to be anything more than what you are right now," she says to me, her voice her own again and her eyes returning to soft brown.

"Tell me again how my mother died," she says.

One Day As Lion or In One of Artemisia Gentileschi's dreams she wore a black bandana with medusa stenciled on it. She and Josefa Segovia threw up "WL" for Women's Liberation, the all women terrorist organization slowly taking over the West.

She dreamed of the day she'd torture Tassi by tying him to a fuckin bedpost with his ass cheeks spread out n'shit, then putting a hanger on the fuckin stove and letting that shit sit there for like a half hour, then taking it off and sticking it in his ass slow like tssssssss.

Josefa was in her kitchen the first time she saw Joe Cannon. He came in with her boyfriend Jose. They were arguing, but jovially, about the Monte game. And she might have known he was a bastard right then, the first time he looked at her and in his eyes she saw only appetite and force. It was the way his shoes seemed not to fit him, and he stepped heavy towards her. His fingers were too long for his palms, constantly rubbing over themselves like greasy roach legs every fucking time she caught him staring at her. His skin was pale, like sunlight avoided him.

Later Jose is out gambling. It's midnight and Josefa is in bed, not asleep, just lying there in the dark. She hasn't told Jose about the pregnancy yet, but she's decided she

will when he comes home that night, no matter what state he's in. She can hear his footsteps. She can hear he's not alone. She can hear that it's not Jose.

Joe Cannon and his friends are outside. They are hooting and calling her "fiery woman." "I hope you dressed in your best for us," they say. Then Joe Cannon kicks her door in. His eyes are wide and his breath is low and husky as he sees her. "Juanita," he says grabbing her. Then he screams.

The way I first hear it is

I was walking and it started to rain. I was just coming up on the JFX so I ducked under to wait it out. And I bummed a cigarette off this guy—one of those shorts in the winter type guys. We're smoking and we get to talking. He asks if I got any good stories and I say only shit that's scary.

He says, "Scary? I got a scary story." Then he tells me there's a town haunted by a Mexican maid, got pregnant from her convict boyfriend. Says, "Well this maid right, she worked for some gold prospector. She decides to kill the guy and steal his gold. So she crushes glass into his food. But the town caught her and hung her off the bridge over the Yuba. They say she still haunts the place. Say you can hear her calling out for her lost child. 'Juanita,' she's called."

Baltimore 2013

I knew this kid named Lion. She was real quiet. Never really spoke at all. This kid, she was about 13; she had burns all over her, she had them all over her face. I thought she'd been in a fire. I thought that until I was talking with her sister and her sister told me straight. Said their mom was dating this cop. Called him, "a real shitheart." Said he used to beat their mom. He never hit them, never laid a finger on them, just their mom. Well this kid, Lion's sister, tells me one day this cop went to throw acid on their mom's face except he missed and hit Lion. Hit her as she was walking in the door from going to grab a burger.

"Like glass shattering," is how she described her sister's screaming. In my head it always sounds like metal scraping stone, like a knife being sharpened.

One day Lion was at the Walter's gallery. She liked the large vacant rooms. She liked to draw the statues she saw. She was walking through a gallery with her headphones in and she stopped to look at a statue of a snake.

The painting behind her

When Judith entered Holofernes' tent he knew his campaign was already victorious. He knew his military was superior. He knew there was nothing to fear 'cause she was a woman, and not young or a virgin either, so God had no more use for her. He licked his lips when she entered his tent. She told him she had information on the Hebrews.

He stared at her tits while she talked. He grabbed her by the arm and pressed his face close to hers, so close his breath pushed down her throat and his spit clung to her lips and cheek. "They'll write this up as you seducing me," he told her and outside the tent her screams sounded like an animal.

That, I'm pretty sure, is the moment she decided to behead him while he was still alive. During those moments of screaming. Because at one point the screaming isn't from pain. It's fury and indignation and promise. It's a howl. Predators aren't concerned with the noises prey make. They never think about the ghosts they're making. They never think about the inevitable day after—which finds Judith telling her handmaiden about the rape. She's standing in the sun, her maiden next to her, both of them drinking whiskey thick as oil.

In the distance they hear a howl. It starts high and loud and sharp, keeps rising, to the sun, steals the heat of the day from their skin, before it bends like glass melting then goes flat, dead and droning. Across the hard clay they watch a group of Assyrian troops harrying a lion with spears. A shaft is lodged in its side and the lance has broken off. The men circle, their shadows much larger than themselves. Carrion birds descend. The lion, on its side now, grunts and swipes but it's slow, languished. The men laugh and press in. They're posing with the lion's head, taking turns wearing it. Its blood glints on their black armor.

Judith and her maiden stare cold.

The men are relaxing in the shade of the rocks. They drink cold sweet draughts of the blood of entire nations from their skeins. One of them shifts the rocks to make better seating and from behind the boulder, pale with mouth frozen into black glass, a snake poured out its awful beauty and struck one of them in the neck, then struck him again, and on the third time its fangs pierced his eye. He screamed. Jumped. Then died. The other men scattered and the snake chased after them, rising up tall as all a man's breath.

Their screams are the high pitched squeak and crunch of a squashed beetle to Judith and her maiden.

Later they are sharpening the knife together. Her handmaiden holds the whetstone.

Lion had no idea about Holofernes or Judith or her hand maiden, she didn't look at that painting for more than ten seconds. She didn't remember the name of the painter, Artemisia. And even if she had known the painter's name, she didn't know that Artemisia was raped by the man her father hired to tutor her—Tassi.

Lion didn't know that Artemisia testified against her rapist or that Artemisia was tortured by thumbscrews to verify her testimony. Lion didn't know that Artemisia dreamed of the day she'd meet Tassi again and in her dreams, he was the one who did all the screaming.

Lion didn't know any of this, but if she did she would have understood. She would have worn a black bandana with medusa printed on it in support of Artemisia.

Baltimore, 2019

A cop is killed in East Baltimore. They say he's stabbed 19 times. In fact it's 8 times. They say the wounds look like bites. They do. They say it's a black girl that killed him, a black girl with scars all over her face and her hair pulled into tight dreadlocks that reached down her back and swept the earth.

"She was a ghost," says one woman. "She only looked like a little girl till you got up close on her, till she wasn't but inches from your face. Then you could see it; see how she was all cracked. That's what happened to that cop. He had pressed up on her and backed her against a wall. He had his hands on her face and in her hair. 'A girl like you should be thankful to have any man,' he was saying to her. 'They'll say you seduced me,' he said. And then it looked like she reached up to cup his face but her arm kept stretching. And all her limbs grew too long for her body. Her skin chipped, turned like ochre and scale. The sun glinted off her, and I thought it was a knife in her hand at first but then I saw it, saw the light touch her. Her skin peeled, like bark rising to meet the sun, before it shattered into a menace of snakes, pale and long as rope, with mouths frozen into black glass. Then they bit. That cop screamed. Then he died."

After all the red

That cop's name was Gregg York. He had a family; wife and a son. They miss him. Three days before he died he'd given every bill in his wallet to a group of kids so they

could buy a pizza. You might have read about it online. A month before that he broke a woman's collarbone while arresting her for refusing to answer some of his questions. Only his wife and three other cops from his precinct know about the "Baby Daddy Removal Team" shirt he'd bought at a law enforcement convention in Vegas two years ago.

Lion disappeared after that. Her sister's didn't talk about her. I mentioned her name and their eyes froze over into black glass and they stared cold into me. The police hunted for her all across the country. Her face went up on billboards and flashed across TV screens on loop. "Bring the murderer to justice," the billboards all read. "Justice for the slain, no mercy for Cop Killers," the TV anchors pounded their fists on the news desk.

Things went quiet.

I think of her often, Lion at 19. Lion in the winter with her hair pulled into two long tight braids.

When I first heard her story I thought, shit happens. Because it does, because the thing about Lion and her scars and her story is that around here, that's nothing new. Same time as I knew Lion I also knew a girl whose father pimped her for drug money and a girl whose father cut off her toes with a kitchen knife and then cauterized her foot using an iron—punishment for not putting away her toys. I can tell you what a newborn baby looks like after it's been boiled alive and I can tell you the smell of a body being devoured by roaches. For every story like Lion's I can offer you twenty more. This is Baltimore, there are ghosts on every corner.

That's why everything that happened was so shocking, though it shouldn't have been. It should have been clear as fuckin' day—the inevitable path these two forces were on, drawn together at the subatomic level. We should have seen it coming, all of us, if for no other reason than Lion was a woman and how could we expect anything less than blood? Men are always the most afraid of women and blood. We know they've seen and will see more of it than we ever will and it reminds us of all the blood we haven't shed, but are due to. It harkens back to an old fear, older even than when Poseidon held Medusa to the floor of Athena's temple and poured himself down on her like stinking rain. Medusa, a woman raped and transformed into a monster because of it. Lion at 19, with scars on her face and teeth for hands.

They found her one day. She was in a cabin in the woods. A SWAT team surrounded the property, circling like kites over a fresh kill before they descended. The wind rose sour, like curdled milk. Trails of ants stretched along the walls as they searched the house. They found her naked in front of a fire.

After they shot her they posed with her body. They held her head up and bunched in close to fit the photo. "Shot a killer monkey tonight," one of them captioned the pic before he texted it to the rest of the group.

Large black birds were on the roofs of all their houses when they returned home that night.

Ghost story

In Holofernes' dreams he's on the bow of a ship at night. The stars are black and cold and fog obscures the waves. He can hear children laughing on the other side of the deck. Salt sprays his face and it's warm, warmer than sea water should be. He runs a hand through the short of his curls and when he does he finds his fingers slick with grease. A boy, the son he'll never have, approaches him with a match and he opens his mouth to tell him stay but his spit has turned to ash in his mouth, ash that pours from him like a broken hourglass. The boy lights the match and tosses it. Holofernes screams and dives into the water, but there is no sea anymore, just space that he keeps falling in. He awakes in an orange jumpsuit with a black bag over his head. Artemisia Gentileschi is standing behind him, a bandana covering her face. She's issuing a warning to all infidels (read: men) not to fight the will of Goddess. She's saying it's the duty of all women to join the fight. Then she forces Holofernes' head down. The last thing he feels is liquid fire shooting into his veins as she thrusts the knife into his throat.

The first woman

For stabbing Joe Cannon in the heart, they lynched Josefa. That she was pregnant made no difference.

She wore a panama hat that day. She smiled and waved at the bloodthirsty crowd assembled on the river banks. She handed her hat to a friend and adjusted the noose around her own neck.

After the hanging, her body was left hanging over the river so the crowd could gawk their fill. Some took souvenirs and photos, making sure to pose her body for the best shot. Then the undertakers took her down to bury her next to the man she'd killed.



We used to catch fireflies in jars, Lena and I. For Lena it was always sport, getting to run around in fields next to rivers and catch these evasive dots of light. She never kept any of the fireflies she caught, she always emptied her jar before we went in for the night. For me, it was a hunt, a challenge to conquer the area. I didn't bother with a jar, preferring to swat the bugs with my palm so hard they popped and their light sprayed everywhere. Then I'd show her my gore covered hands, wiggling my fingers as I chased her. That memory smells like salt whenever I replay it.

Growing up, Lena was the girl up the street who wasn't afraid to enter our boy world and play our games. She could run faster than any of us—a real sore spot for bravado-full boys.

We once tried to trick her with this game we called horns. The rules were that Jay and I would run and she would try to catch us. It was never meant for her to win. She was a girl and therefore slower and the plan was that basically Jay and I would ditch her and go play by ourselves.

She caught me right off the line but it was when she caught Jay that it got serious.

Jay was all tempered iron—arms folded and eyebrows pushed together like he was crackin codes. “Come see me in the street, come see me in the street,” he kept saying over and over. I understood he was incensed at the idea that she’d beat him. Jay had reason to be cocky though. He was the fastest kid on the block, legendary. Some kids said he had magic shoes. Every kid in the neighborhood knew the story of how Jay had outrun a dog, I’d been there for that.

We decided to settle things by foot race. Jay and Lena lined up on the street and I yelled “GO” and they took off and Lena dashed him by a foot, clean. I teased him about it for a week. Everything between all of us changed after that.

Lena and I became friends, Lena and Jay became a couple. There are a hundred memories I have of Lena and in all of them her face changes slightly. More full or with the lines around her mouth hardset. I worry that one day the face I have for her in my mind won’t be her face at all, that her face will have reshaped, traded with a face on the street or in a picture.

“I used to watch white men trade these like baseball cards,” my grandfather told me while showing me a postcard of four women hanging from a high branch. “root the black witches out four less niggers RTL Waco TX” scrawled in sharp cursive on the back. When I look at it now, Lena’s face is there, on one of the hanging women. But in the postcard she looks the way she did the last time I saw her, the night I boarded a plane to Texas.

She was driving me to the airport, one hand on the steering wheel, the other playing with her hair. And when she pulled over to let me out she traced her finger in horns on my cheek and told me, “Leave the devil alone.” Then she drove off, out of the pages of history and behind her the sky gathered into purple and black storm.

On the plane I sat next to this old guy from Texarkana. He was the chatty type. Said he used to be a cop, now he was a rancher. The plane took off, we bullshitted for an hour and then I asked him. I figured he was old and from Texarkana and when the fuck would I ever get a chance like that again, so of course I asked him:

“Were you there for the Phantom murders? Were you there and who do you think did it? Did anyone ever investigate the KKK? They both wore white hoods with the eyes cut out,” I said.

He never answered. I watched his blood run backwards in his veins and his breath go white and he didn’t speak the rest of the flight. While disembarking I realized I had seen a man be possessed.

Driving home Lena’s car skidded out on a slick road.

She crashed and rolled into a ditch. And while she walked away from that accident, she wouldn't survive the man who drove by and offered her a ride to the gas station.

He should have appeared to her like thunder in red clouds but he didn't. He was a plain man in a plain truck. And I think often of how his face would have had to look. Was it soft and full and disarmingly bright? Or was it completely unremarkable? In the movies they make killer boogeymen wear masks. The mask lets us see that these aren't men, they're primal forces who can only understand the world in terms of what they must take from it and how they must make it bend to their will. But in real life the mask isn't wood or latex, it's smiling eyes and feigned sincerity.

"The fireflies are out." He would have pointed to the glittering trees. "I used to run around trying to catch those things as a kid."

"Yes, me too. I tried to keep them as pets."

"Never works out does it?" and he would have laughed at that.

Lena's eyes were hot and sharp and far away, remembering nights as a girl; first laughing as a firefly crawled on her arm, then cupping one in her hands and sneaking it into her bedroom and turning the lights off and watching it hover and flash over her bed and telling it all her secrets, how she always felt this bright blue colored sound in her chest trying to come out and how everything around her seemed too dim. She thought of her first summer with a tall brown boy. There were fewer fireflies that summer but all their heat was inside her it

seemed, and the boy's hands replaced the feeling of their legs tingling on her skin. She thought of how the stars always looked like a map and she would say over and over to herself, "Away, away, away, a way, a way."

On my plane while passing into Texas we flew over the Brazos river. Below us there was a woman. To her my plane appeared as a heretic star cutting across the sky. She rose on the riverbank from face down in the water. Ahead she heard the clip-shod of horses and men singing.

"Strip by strip and rag by rag," they were chanting.

She could smell the fire of their torches. She could see a length of rope dragging behind them.

It was dark out and soon it would be darker. The woman had scrambled into the brush, her hair clinging to her face. The men were slowing now, their horses filling the space with the steam of their breathing. They unslung rifles from their shoulders and pulled white hoods down over their faces.

"This is the way of all flesh," one of them would yell into the night and a chorus of "black witch" would sound from the men behind him.

And then she would have torn from the brush, the seconds playing out in the span of hours as she ran, a gazelle beauty to her body as she tried to leap up the slope of the river bank. But their horses were faster and their hands found her, first at the ankle and then at the neck. They left her swinging from the bridge over the Brazos river, left her swinging long enough for a photographer to pose her body for postcard photos.

She's the woman because we don't know her name. Like we don't the names of all the black women whose bodies hung like ornaments from iron trestles. We don't know their names but we can still see their faces. Look at the water under any bridge and they'll be there, staring back at you. The bodies hung there so long the reflections got trapped in the rivers. Look long enough and you'll see her staring back at you, the marks from the noose still visible around her neck, the same as I see Lena there, in the water below bridges.

Lena is running. She scrambles out into the night and the pouring red storm. He is close behind her, the heat of his bloodlust igniting into fire and boiling the rain to steam as it touches him. Lena's not looking at the ground, just ahead of her. And I can see her body in my head. It looks the same as it did the day she trounced Jay in a foot race, the same way Jay's did when he outran that dog—shoulders dropped, chin down, adrenaline and pure force of will turned speed, "Faster faster faster," I can hear her thinking, "Faster," her breath like hot smoke in her lungs, "Faster run home faster."

She pushes through tree branches and her foot sinks into the earth, a deep pool of black mud. At once she's up to her chest as she falls forward and tries to swim the loose earth. The mud reaches her face just as she sees his boots step down in front of her. The earth pulls in around her to make her bed and she sinks. Her body was never found.

I'm flying to Texas away from Lena as she dies, over the woman as she's caught perpetually dying. And in my pocket is the postcard of four dead women, hanged over the Brazos.

WND

A woman and a girl will be standing next to the old Shell station down on Harlem Ave. The S on the sign above them will be burned out so it now reads hell. The girl, Oyani, will be shaking a can of pussy pink spray paint. She'll tag the redbrick of the gas station wall with "Murderah" in thin dripping letters. The woman, Nefertia, will be standing lookout with her hood pulled up.

Oyani will switch cans to cosmos blue and hit the wall with the letters "WND." She'll draw a coiled snake and then line out the letters, "DGCB" above it.

"What's that mean?" Nefertia will ask.

"Dead Girls Come Back," Oyani will answer. "It's only for wytches."

“Wytches,” Nefertia will roll the word over in her mouth and spits. The name is for an all-girl graffiti crew on the West side. They rock gray hoodies and gray bandanas. Nefertia will know this. “Little girls playing with paint,” she will say.

“We’re powerful,” Oyani will mutter. In blood red paint she’ll draw a crown of thorns over the set of tags and an inverted pentacle star beneath them.

“Boys,” Nefertia will call out as she spots a group of men in suits laughing and walking up the street.

“I have names to drop,” Oyani will say, shaking another can of spray paint. But Nefertia will only be half listening, taking up a stance between the men and Oyani, one hand going to the small gun in the pocket of her hoody.

They will hear the men laughing.

“Like cake, like all that chocolate raining down,” one of them will be saying.

“The devil is a lie,” another will respond.

And then they will be laughing, all of them, loud and chest-full.

They’ll see Nefertia first, and immediately the group’s laughter will shift to catcall.

“Smile boo,” “Pull ya panties to tha side baby gurl,” “Ass that launched a thousand ships,” “Bitch you hear me talking to you?” “Fuck you cunt hoes then.”

Nefertia will recognize one of the men who she often sees outside the corner store and at the gas station. Every man in the group will have the same look of appetite, looking between Oyani and Nefertia as though

they are browsing products on a shelf. Only one of the men will slow his pace as the group walks by, looking at Oyani and thinking, "Mine." Oyani won't know that he has seen her before. Watched her with the same look of want once before.

Oyani will have replaced the spray paint in her backpack and is looking now in the mirror of her makeup case and freshening her lipstick, a glittering black shade. She'll pop her lips and smile at herself as Nefertia comes up beside her.

"Are we done here?"

"There's the billboard down that way." Oyani will point to her left but Nefertia won't be looking.

"I only came 'cause if you're gonna do this shit you should at least have a lookout."

"It ain't shit, it's keeping my friends alive." Oyani will be mad immediately.

"Grow up," Nefertia will say.

Nefertia will not understand that the more she tries to split things apart, the more she affirms their unity. Oyani will not understand that Nefertia is already a dead woman in the realm of ends.

"I'm surprised you didn't say nothing back," Oyani will say, gesturing in the direction the men walked.

"I have no more words for men," Nefertia will say. She'll flash Oyani a view of the gun in her pocket.

"Follow me," Oyani will say, leading Nefertia around the corner of one of the boarded up row-homes. There they'll climb the fire escape of the old building and step onto the roof.

From high up the city will seem cleaner and less full of pain. The trash will be less visible and the sharpness of poverty will be dulled. They'll watch the people below as they move and Nefertia will think how they seem to be set on rails, unaware of the predetermined courses of their lives, utterly convinced of their autonomy. Oyani will think only of the shattering red light of the sunset.

"My dream is of some place wide and flat," Oyani will say. "Some place I can call home."

"Believing in home is foolish. Like believing in meanings and answers, like believing that you'll be lifted out of this into the sky, or that one day you'll be free."

"I don't believe in fate."

Nefertia will pull a flask from her pocket and unscrew the top.

"Ghost," she'll call Oyani, leaning down and caressing Oyani's cheek and staring into her eyes. "Fate did the same to you as your father did. There ain't no place for you or any of us in this world, you know that."

She'll pass Oyani the flask and the two of them drink in silence on the rooftop, Oyani scrunching her face up at the taste but drinking all the same to be a part of the moment. The cheap scotch and sunlight will warm Nefertia's skin for what feels to her like the first time in years. The wind will bring the smell of salt and smoke and tar. "Do you truly believe that any of us can be more than a collection of time?" she'll ask Oyani.

Oyani will smile and take a long drink from the flask, spilling some down her chin, before handing it back. "Ask the first women," she'll say and grab Nefertia's hand.

She'll lead her back down the fire escape and inside the boarded-up rowhome through one of the busted out windows. She'll lead her down through the rotting frame to a graffiti covered basement with a dirt floor. Among the splash-color tags and bombs and wildstyles one wall will be whited out. The tags there will be in ordered arcing lines. Each of them in blood red, all of them surrounding a black line image of a sprawling and crooked tree. The words "wytches never die" will be scrawled diagonally from the base and beneath that the image of a coiled snake.

Nefertia will run her hand over the names. Some she'll know, having seen them before on the sides of buildings or dumpsters. Others will be unfamiliar. All of them girls, all of them taken, missing.

"I remember their names. We all remember each other's name," Oyani will say. "We make everyone else see and remember their names. We make them exist even when they tried to erase them. Put a dead girl's name on a wall and that girl comes back."

Nefertia will understand then, and they will both feel it, Nefertia and Oyani. They will know they are in the presence of something sacred and profane. "Wytches," they'll say in unison and they'll understand that to mark themselves as such means to be viewed as a defiler. But if what they will be defiling are symbols of men and the sickening erased neatness of things, then they will take defilement into their skin. Nefertia will move back slowly and then get down on her knees. She'll need to feel the earth and she'll begin to pull her clothes from

her body. Oyani will watch and then join her, pulling her clothing off and then dropping on her knees in the dirt beside Nefertia. They'll bow forward, outstretching their arms ahead of them and begin to sway back and forth, fingers dragging trails in the earth. "Yes," Nefertia will think. "Yes, bring them back," she'll think and the sway of her hips will increase so that she, they, buck wildly, the swaying turning now to invocation, summoning the old powers, back to ancient women whose hair grew in long loose dreadlocks down their backs and swept, dug, enrooted into the earth. The calling came then, to the ground beneath them and all the power it held running in streams of water and black oil beneath it, to the ebb and flow of tides, the shifting of tectonic plates.

When she touches it she will almost retches; sourness and rot, mixed into the very soil. The ground is sour, and everything that grows from it will grow tainted.

With the invocation done they will stand staring at the wall, silent at first, and then Nefertia will tell Oyani about when she was younger. She will tell her about Raj, the sweet black boy who told her once that she was the only thing real he'd seen.

It had been good in the early years. Simple and sweet smelling. It was the quaintness that first attracted her, Raj was safe. They built a quiet life together. Raj struggled as a freelance artist and she supported him. They bought a small house together and Raj tried to keep all his shit together. And then one night she'd ruined it all.

It was the time she made the fatal mistake of dressing him in a suit, one she'd saved up for and bought for him

when she learned he'd never owned a suit. It fit him well. Solid black with a French cuff shirt. She'd had his initials printed on the cuffs in silver. They went out for dinner that night, the fanciest restaurant they could afford, bought the most expensive steaks on the menu. She saw it that night, the way he changed and how quickly it happened. She saw how easily his mannerisms slid into those of calculated disaffection. How, suddenly, he entered rooms chest first. How he spoke with a constant air of dismissiveness, as though people were there to be picked up and dropped as needed. Except for when he looked at her. Her he looked at that night with purple lust and stone command.

"It's you and me and no one else" he spoke low into her ear. "I wanna see that tight little ass in the air tonight," he said.

When they got home she'd told him to fuck her against the wall and he'd done so, grunting that she was his and only his, the whole time. She'd seen a power he could have had if he chose to seek it. The next morning she'd found the suit tossed atop the other dirty clothes. She walked it to the cleaners down the block. That night she suggested he use the money from his art to start a company.

"I don't know enough about business," he said.

"You could learn, I'd help."

"It won't be enough money to do something like that."

"Well it'd be a start. We could work and earn and save for—"

He was already shaking his head. "It won't work." And what followed was an endless torrent of excuses, all of them simpering and transparent and childish. That was when she saw it finally. He wasn't unambitious, he would have gladly played the role of rich and powerful if it was given to him. It was that he was too scared of falling to reach for anything higher than the lowest sturdy branch. It stopped being cute then, their simple life. The reality of things never changing set in with all its unbearable finality. She saw then that to be with him was to be a bird that plucked out its own feathers and bit through the bones of its own wings.

She found out she was pregnant after she left him.

She'll tell Oyani about her daughter Sera, and say, "She was like a blackbird in winter. She was wise and enigmatic and she stood out from the dead buildings and hunger of this place." She'll tell Oyani about how Sera seemed somehow apart from it all. How she once found her playing in one of the boarded-up houses, how she was scolding her until she saw the garden she had been building.

"She could take something ugly and make it beautiful," Nefertia will say.

Nefertia will tell Oyani then about David. David was adventurous. He was calculating and competent and unafraid to seek what he wanted. He was Raj's opposite and that had been more than enough. David worked out and liked to stand naked in the mirror, checking over his muscles. He liked to tell her how to dress, how to keep her hair, and how much to eat when they went out.

Sera was 12 then.

Nefertia will tell Oyani about the last night she returned home. How the day had been bright and calm and the night even quieter. "It's funny how so much horror can manifest on beautiful days," she'll say. "Always in the quiet. Always on a day just like any other."

She had to work late that night and David agreed to stay with Sera. When she'd called him she could hear the edge to his voice and she'll know that it should have been a red flag.

Sera was in her room practicing singing. David was in the room next to hers staring at himself in the mirror. Sera's voice was high and full and crashing into David's thoughts, pulling the attention, rightful worship, away from him and his magnificence.

When he entered Sera's room, he told himself he was just going in to tell her to shut the fuck up, to tell her that her fucking singing was annoying. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his eyes were hot. He hit her door with too much force, shaking the wood on its hinges and Sera screamed. He grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed his face close to hers, so close that his hot sour breath clogged her nose. He yelled at her to stop fucking screaming but she screamed again, then screamed for him to let go and continued to scream. He lifted her off the floor and her feet kicked at the air and he smelled her fear. He shook her and she kept screaming so he threw her against the radiator on the wall. She hit it head first and stopped screaming. And the rush of it was too great to be denied now, he'd

teach her, show her that she was right to fear him. He pressed in, grabbed a handful of her hair and began slamming her head against the hot iron.

Nefertia would come home to find Sera's body. And she would drop to her knees and cradle her like she'd done the first night she ever held her. Then the police would show up and Raj not long behind them and the night came alive with screams.

Hearing all of this Oyani's face will be stone.

And Nefertia will tell Oyani that she learned Raj knew David, that she'd found pictures of them together on Raj's phone, one with David standing with his arm around another woman. She'll tell Oyani that she'd confronted Raj with it, found him in a bar, and he'd admitted to having seen bruises on the woman in the picture, and hearing some suspect excuses for them and that he'd known, the bastard had known. The stone of Oyani's face will crack and be replaced by revulsion, as though just now tasting so much sourness.

"He didn't even warn me, and I think part of it was him wanting to give me 'what I deserved' for leaving him, even when it put his own daughter at risk," Nefertia will say. "Because that's how men think- they consider themselves as separate. They think of the world in terms of Them and Everyone Else." Nefertia will spit.

"David?" Oyani will ask.

"In jail, dead, or roaming free, what does it matter? My daughter is dead."

"Bring her back," Oyani will say and then pull a can of red spray paint from her backpack.

Nefertia will write Sera's name in shaky script next to all the other names on the wall. She'll push her fingerprints into the wet paint.

That night Nefertia will close her eyes for what feels like the first time in years, for the first time since Sera was alive. And while she is sleeping Oyani will be out tagging Sera's name. She'll be using markers to draw on people's windows. She'll hit fifteen houses so that in the morning, when the light comes through, Sera's name will cast itself inside their lives. She'll be in an alley off Mosher street, walking towards the next house she plans to tag. She won't notice the van that's parked just ahead of her around the corner. As she walks past it the doors will open and a man's hand will cover her mouth. She'll drop her backpack as she's pulled off the street and into the back.

Oyani's vision will be blocked by black cloth over her eyes and the hand over her mouth will be quickly replaced with tape. Through the slit of light left her she'll watch a blackbird land on the power lines. In its beak will be her dropped gray bandanna. She'll stare at the blackbird as it flies away. "Just like me," she'll think. "Just like me, just like that blackbird."

In the morning Nefertia will find Oyani's backpack in a gutter. She'll know immediately that she'll never see her again. She'll cradle Oyani's backpack, rocking back and forth and weeping. "You don't remember but I do," she'll say to the air. "The day we met. The day your mother brought you alive. I was the only other person there with her in that room. I knew it when I saw you," Nefertia will

say. “Your skin was too dark and everything else about you was sun and flowers. This place, the ground is sour, nothing like you could ever grow here.”

She’ll take Oyani’s backpack home and go through it, carefully removing each of the objects. When she comes to Oyani’s makeup case she’ll stop and flip it open. The only powder left will be stark white and she’ll use it all, covering her face completely. In a bowl she’ll mix rubbing alcohol and wine corks, then set them on fire. The smoke will rise around her face and shroud her. In it she’ll speak hexes, “For we who been in the storm so long.” When the fire extinguishes she’ll rub the resulting ash in large circles around her eyes and trail it along her nose and down in finger streaks across her lips. Then she’ll let her dreadlocks down and reach under her bed and pull out a rifle. She’ll stare at her reflection in the mirror of the makeup case and see a ghost staring back. She’ll see the colors and forms of it all. She’ll see that she is water, a tsunami pulling bodies out to sea and that it’s pointless to fight against the wave.

She’ll hear the sounds; chants which were the earth’s heart’s songs burbling up creosote notes; she is coming, she is coming, by chariot or train, she is coming. She’ll see fresh blood baiting the ground to stir the sight of the beast and pushing full on into the wind. She’ll know then, the only reason life was precious was because it ended. And she’ll know that she’d have no need for possessions in whatever comes after life. She’ll see me. She’ll see me typing this and she’ll have all the questions for me that I’m scared of, “What right do I have to possess her,” and

“What role do I have in the order of these things?” I won’t have anything for her except to tell her that I think she’s an answer to a question I don’t yet know.

“When it comes you won’t be spared,” she tells me, and behind her war drums are pounding.

And then like a cigarette lit and left on a windowsill she’ll be taken by the wind.

they always come back

I am sinking into tar. I don't fight it and I don't scream anymore, I know there's no point. When I drop below the surface my skin will burn off but I won't die, I'll keep sinking and then their hands will find me.

Everywhere I go I see a young girl whose face is missing, like it turned liquid and leaked off of her. At night she presses the tar black hole of her visage to the glass of my bedroom window and screams so that the walls shake.

Her name is Ilya. She's a ghost I made.

Her father Rob and I were friends from the old neighborhood. He was older than me and used to call me his little brother. He used to look out for me like that and I took a lot of pleasure in keeping him busy. He

was always getting me out of trouble and cleaning up the messes my temper got me into. I always sort of knew why Rob did it, outside of the immaculateness of his soul. He once told me I looked like his kid brother Sean who'd gotten shot some years earlier and died on the street. He said I had the same smile and sense of humor. Rob had always said that I had a chance to "make it," if I could just keep my shit together long enough. Rob never learned to read or write and to him, that my home had both parents and no drugs meant I had chances few others had. To Rob I was hope. He looked at me and saw someone like him going better places in the world.

He covered for me a lot. When I was 13 I put a brick through a teacher's car window and Rob took the blame for me at school. That same year, after I took a dare to grab a girl's tits on the bus, Rob was the one who intervened when her brother came to kick my ass. Not that he stopped the fight or anything, he made sure it stayed one-on-one, just me and her brother as opposed to all of his friends jumping me as well. He was the one who bailed me out the first time I got arrested for tagging the side of a school, and he claimed the dime bag of weed we got caught smoking in the park when I was 17. In a thousand ways Rob saved my life. I repaid him by getting him killed.

I was 22 and full of booze and stupidity. My temper was a violent itch—a quickness to throw punches and a need to be seen as someone not to be fucked with. Of course looking back now it all seems so fucking stupid, but back then I just remember the feeling of power. I

liked that I had a reputation for being not-all-together there. I used to walk around with a pair of brass knuckles either looped onto the front of my belt or tucked inside my jacket pocket. I did that.

I had gone out to a bar with some friends one night. We were meeting this group of women there and I remember telling my friends in the car on the way down that the order of things for the night was gonna be drink, fight, fuck. We were all laughing and the bass was rattling the backseat and we were speeding around the curves of 83 with the windows down.

When we got to the bar nothing happened. It was a quiet local spot and mostly empty save for a couple of old people. The women we met were not interested in us beyond friendship and everyone called it quits two beers in.

I was feeling sour because I had planned to at least get drunk that night, so I said goodbye to them all and then drove to another bar off Fulton Street. I called Rob on the way because I didn't want to drink alone and I knew he lived close. He met me there. It would have been an uneventful night. We would have sat at the bar and talked shit and laughed until I was too drunk to drive and then he would have either put me in a cab or driven me back to his place to crash on his couch. Instead we got to the bar and I switched to whiskey and got loud and some guy told me to shut the fuck up. I got in his face and he got back in mine and the bartender tried to settle it down but it was too late, the other guy was calling me a bitch nigga and shoving me. And that's the moment that plays

on a loop in my head, right then when I could have just walked away. Instead I pulled the brass knuckles from my jacket and swung on him and caught him just under the chin and then the bouncer was on me. Rob was trying to stop me the whole time.

Outside Rob hit me in the shoulder—a big brother punch that would leave a bruise. I laughed it off at first then tried to apologize once I noticed how quiet he was. He was rubbing his face with both hands and muttering to himself over and over, “Waste,” he kept saying. “Fuckin nothing, a goddamn waste.” That was when I knew he’d seen the real me—that was when he felt the emptiness of his hope for me.

He drove me home, silent the whole way, and I stumbled inside, got high and passed out. I woke up to a voicemail from his wife telling me that Rob was in the hospital.

The guy I’d attacked had recognized Rob from around the neighborhood. He’d gotten some of his friends and they’d gone out looking for Rob. They caught him as he was getting out of his car and took a bat to him. They took turns. They left him on the street.

By the time I got to the hospital he was brain dead. His pregnant wife was there. When she slapped me I knew I deserved every piece of it. That was 10 years ago. I’m a different person now—but that don’t really mean shit. It doesn’t bring Rob back or give his family back their missing decade. It won’t make up for all the years to come. It doesn’t stop the constant screaming I hear in my head and it doesn’t make Ilya disappear.

She's in the room with me now. Rob is behind her. All the lights draw towards them and in the dark areas left behind, only dirt glows. I taste ash. The bruise on my shoulder from where Rob hit me reappears and starts throbbing before my skin splits open to the bone. Ink and scorpions pour out of me, run down my arm and pool at my feet, forming a puddle that I start to sink in. I don't scream.

I tried to visit Rob's grave once. Made it about twelve steps into the cemetery before my stomach went cold and the air lost all smell. I could hear buzzing like wasps in my ears and behind the vibrating zzzz was Rob's voice telling me that it would never be summer again, telling me that there is no more light for me, saying "Ain't no future for you," and, "My daughter, my daughter, my daughter, my light."

These days the sound of me moving is the sound of chains rattling. My reflection tells me we are not the same, that he wants out. I wait for the day he pushes his hand through the silver and reaches into my chest. He'll say, "None of this was ever yours to claim," and then he'll pull a squirming black beetle from out of me and I'll fall apart like leaves. I live in a room without doors filled with awful light. I want to free myself from this prison. I want to leap the crystal wall. I have dreams where I peel my skin off with a razor blade.

I see women in white dresses floating outside the windows of my apartment at night. I hear them call for me to let them in. I hear them call me to come out onto the roof. "We can dance in the air, you and I," they say

to me. I want to join them. I see myself standing on a rooftop. I see myself dangling one foot over the edge and daring myself over and over to jump. I see myself step into the air. I see myself plummet and as I fall, I see myself age—see my hair go gray and my skin wrinkle and thin. I see my eyes haze over to white blindness. My body never hits the ground and breaks open, I just keep falling and aging until my skin peels off my bones like paint chipping.



Rhose is 15 now. She's behind me at an open mic reading, signing up for the first time.

At the mic she starts;

“I never knew my father, he was killed before I was born.” She starts and I can feel the room warm like orange lights turning on. “Growing up, I always fantasized about what it would have been like to bring a boy home to meet my dad for the first time—if it'd be like some TV rom-com type situation where my dad would be all overly protective and make him pass a bunch of weird tests. Would there just be threats and crazy eyed stares or would he just be charming and sweet and full of laughter. It always seemed dumb to my friends,” she says. “They all have Dads and so to them it was just another bullshit parent hassle to

go through,” Rhose shoots me a smirking glance. Her stepmother elbows me in the ribs. “She’s picking up your fucking filthy mouth,” she whispers to me.

Rhose goes on. She tells the story of her father dying, same as she’s heard it from me. At the part where Jay shoves Lena down and throws himself on top of her, an “ohhh” passes through the room.

And then she tells the story of the first boy she kissed, how she kissed him in the cemetery at her father’s grave. She talks about how sweet he was, how he wasn’t afraid or nervous, he just listened as she talked. Then she introduced him to her father. She said he’d seemed unsure at first but then he faced Jay’s headstone and introduced himself in return. “He asked my dad if he could take me on a date—even though we were already on one and he joked about having me home on time even though it was already midnight and way past my curfew. I slapped him on the shoulder and then he said, so sincerely, ‘I really wish I could have met you Sir.’”

And honestly that part chokes me up because I had never heard anyone call Jay “Sir” before.

“Then he moved slow,” Rhose continues, “reaching into his coat and pulling a flask that he sipped from and then poured some out before handing it to me.”

Her stepmother’s face is like quicksand— still and hiding so much danger.

“I drank and it burned,” Rhose says. “Then I took a big step in and grabbed his elbows so he bent down, and then I kissed him, and then I kissed him deeper.”

There isn’t a dry eye in the place after that.

After the reading we're milling about, Rhose and her stepmom waiting on me to finish drinking before we leave. A woman about my age approaches Rhose and asks to hug her and she tells her how powerful her story was and just how much of an effect it'd had on her. Then I heard her ask about Jay.

"Your father, he was killed in a drive-by you said?"

Rhose nods.

"Do you know what he was involved in?"

I don't know if it's the first time she's encountered it, the immediate assumption that her murdered father couldn't have just been a bystander caught in violence unconnected to him; the assumption that, of course, he had to have had some involvement that in some way justified his death.

The look on Rhose's face is the look of some part of her leaving forever and being replaced by the want to shatter, her skin raining off of her bones and suddenly creating a deluge of water, black as oil, that swallows the woman and her question screaming into an unfathomable deep. Then all the lights in the place go out.

End

I'm 6 years old and riding my bike, one of those orange and blue Huffy's with beads on the wheel spokes. I'm riding it in small tight circles. I'm riding it up the big hill at the top of our street. I'm speeding down that hill and braking hard just as the incline flattens, trying to pull off a movie-esque stop and slide. A red pickup truck pulls up alongside me, and the curly brown hair of the woman driving it spills from the window before her eyes, like a mashed blood orange, look down at me to scream, "NIGGER! NIGGER!" Her spit is cold and sticky on me. Later, the spot where her spit clung to me itches, and I scratch at it until I bleed. It existed then like it had always been there—the different weight of my skin. Standing across the street from me on that day was a dark

skinned woman cradling a tarantula. I didn't know it then but that was the first time I met the devil.

The second time I was riding home on the subway, coming up on Lexington Market. The cabin lights were flashing on and dark and on and dark and on and dark again, before going out completely. When they came back on I was riding on a train from Mictlan. The train car was crowded but there was a seat open across from me at the window. I was looking out at the mountains and the stars and the bright corpse moon and the landscape rolling away and me along with it, thinking of all the sainted dead and wondering about the things I don't know that I don't know. And when I looked away from the window and back to the train car, a middle-aged woman with skin dark as burned oak was sitting across from me. There was a tarantula in her hair—hair like sunlight in whiskey that fell long down her back. She was smoking a cigar and as the smoke drifted up around her face I could see all the universe being held together in her eyes.

I asked if she was real and she told me she was more real than my own flesh. I asked if she had a name and she smiled and leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs and ran her tongue across her teeth and in that minute I recognized predator movements. I could feel the subtle immensity of her, how she seemed to fill the space despite the frame of her body. My eyes felt pulled to her face. And I opened my mouth to speak but she cut me off before I could start.

She said, "Nothing I tell you will ever let you possess me," and that was true even though I didn't know it then.

There was an immediate feeling of my body being pulled down. Through the glass door to our train car I watched a pale goat with chains around its neck walk down the aisle. “The cream is sour,” I heard from a woman behind me. Outside a storm was rolling in over the mountains. Four black horses were galloping in the field across from the speeding train, a fifth pale horse was at their lead. Across from me, the smoke around the woman’s face was thick and black, obscuring her. I could see her hair spreading out like snakes. Her voice brought the darkness alive.

She said, “The stars were dead and cold by the time man set foot here. You thought of them as living because you couldn’t have known any better. You thought of them as hope—lights shining in the darkness, illuminating the void and assuring you that you were not alone. But that was all bullshit. The light was just an illusion concealing more darkness. So what does that say about hope? Probably that it’s bullshit too.”

I believe her. When I look back I realize there was never any hope for me.

See what was probably just another day for that woman in the pickup truck—

‘The birds outside her window woke her up. Her husband hated the sound of them but even on gray days she felt the sharp cawing of the black birds fill her with light, pure and clean. It reminded her of the feeling she got in the shower as she scrubbed her skin hard in the hottest water she could stand. She got the boys up for school, yanking the covers off them and ushering them into the bathroom. Once she heard the shower running

and the distinct splash pattern of a body in the water, she went back down the hall to her bedroom and locked the door behind her. There wasn't enough time for sex so she sucked her husband's cock instead. Once they were all out of the door and off for the day she drank her coffee black, savoring the sourness it left in her mouth. She turned the TV on while she started the day's laundry. The TV anchors were crying and talking about the death of a prize race horse. She thought it was sad too, and looked over at a framed photo on her bookshelf—herself as child, her grandfather smiling next to her as she sat on a horse for the first time. The photo doesn't show that her grandfather purchased that horse from a friend who rode it around a burning cross while wearing a red robe and hood. She didn't know that either.

The TV anchors were louder now. They pressed their faces to the glass and licked it slowly and their eyes rolled back to white as they changed to a story about a group of black boys that raped and burned a girl alive. "Thugs," they chanted over and over until the word lost meaning and turned to glossolalia.

Her mouth filled with spit as she listened. She could feel the heat of her blood burning her skin to its whitest. She swore if it were her daughter she'd have hung every one of them black nigger fuckers upside down and shot them one by one. She crossed herself and kissed the small gold cross she wore around her neck. She double checked that all the guns in the house were loaded. Then she went to Target. In her car, the radio voices were repeating the story. "Hope they kill those animals," they all said.

un hombre poderoso, lo llamaron una intriga.” Her voice now sounded like bone cracking against rock. “Pero la confabulacion era simplemente que todo el mundo fingia no dar cuenta de lo que estaba pasando, poniendo ses de acuerdo de cerrar sus ojos y tapar sus oidos mientras estabamos berreando en angustia, lacerados por el enemigo verdadero.”

“Malinche,” I called her then and the lights returned to the car and the smoke around her face cleared.

“Before it’s over the walls will melt around you and you will see that the rules people tell you exist are nothing more than sand held together with spit,” she said. “When the bleeding comes, you’ll know it’s justice.”

Then she laughed and all the skin on her face peeled back in strips to the meat beneath.

Home

These days I see below everyone's skin. Your bones glow neon blue and orange. I see your eyeless skull as you talk. Walking up the street to my house I see bonfires in the distance and your silhouettes dancing in front of them. Part of me has started to believe that even change is bullshit. The more shit changes the more it stays the same. Ain't nobody seeing nothing new out here, all this shit is just reruns. And people have always been talking about change.

What if the only reason we're allowed to scream so loudly is because it's all so fucking impotent? It's really not that implausible. It doesn't matter either. I've long since given up the idea of ever seeing a new world. The only part

of me that will endure will be my voice—disembodied and telling these stories over and over, shouting just as impotently then as it is now. And even that will fade in time. But between now and then I at least plan to fuck this place up enough so that the next person who comes behind me will have an easier time tearing it all down.

So here's a story:

One morning in Black Baltimore we walk outside and see fire in the distance. Not everyone on the street can see it. And those of us who do describe it differently. Some of us see blue smoke and no flames, others see the sky turned burning coral and smell perfume like flowers and salt. I see a world in shades of black and gray and the light beating down from the sun is cold and only illuminates the hard and dirty places. To me the fire is colorless but the smoke so thick and acrid that my eyes water no matter how often I wipe them.

“Must be like a chemical storehouse,” someone says.

“How come you can't see it?” someone else asks.

“I can hear my mother's voice,” says a girl sitting on her stoop and then her eyes go white.

I'm already walking toward the flames, in spite of the smoke and the stinging tar and rubber smell, not really thinking about it, just moving closer because it feels natural to let it pull me in.

I'm on Pratt St, moving past the rowhomes and the fire is still up ahead, the distance to it unchanged. It's day but the moon is still full and visible, black clouds in the shapes of thorns beneath it. Between two sections of rowhomes I see a lamb grazing in the yellowing grass.

Heavy chains are hung from its neck and its bleat is the sound of a crying girl. In the window of one of the homes I can see two children standing in white gowns. They are looking at a man in a pig mask. I watch him raise his hands above the children and mark their foreheads with red. Then the curtains fall shut on my view and the wind turns so cold it stings my face. The lamb has vanished and where it once stood is now a pile of alabaster bones with a large black bird perched atop staring at me. Snow begins to blow in on the wind and then changes from ice to flower petals. It's warm outside now. The fire is close, just behind the next set of buildings, but when I dash behind them the fire has moved, to the left and farther down the road.

I know that it will keep moving. I know that to chase the fire is to see all my demons appear and try to frighten me off. I know that I can't turn back. I unslung my backpack and pull out the spray paint. I'll make everyone remember along the way.

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This book's cover is taken from the lynching photograph of Laura and L.D. Nelson. I have removed their bodies not out of disrespect or an attempt to erase their death and pain, but because I do not believe in further profiting from and tracking in images of death. I do, however, hope that with their bodies out of view, the focus is now, where it always should have been, upon those men on the bridge.

About the author

Justin Sanders is a ghost who writes from Baltimore. His words can be found on city walls and, most recently, in *The Avenue* journal.

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