

Ursus Americanus

by

Lindsey Birdsall Brown

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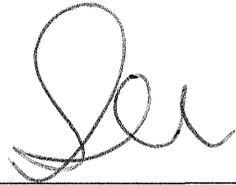
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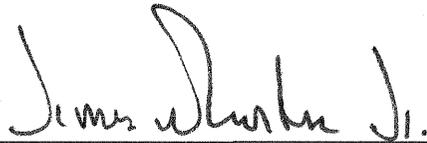
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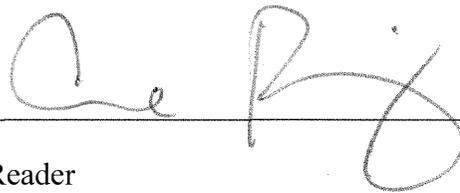
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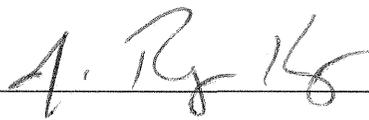
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## Abstract

This essay collection examines my experience as the single mother of a biracial child and uses it as an impetus for posing larger questions about race and class in America. The piece “Good Hair” outlines my first attempt at explaining my son’s racial origins to him, “Peacocks” examines my choice to become a single mother by juxtaposing it with our culture’s mythology about spinsters and brides, and “Ursus Americanus” uses the initiating incident of a bear roosting in a city tree to examine the causes and consequences of human cultural and class migrations in Rochester, NY. Although grounded in the personal, these essays use techniques of accumulation, juxtaposition and non-linear chronology to reveal the fundamental misunderstandings that lead to White America’s problematic constructions of Black and Brown.

Reading a book about the documentation of torture in Brazil, I come across the distinction made by Thomas Nagel: ‘...the difference between knowledge and acknowledgment.’ He defines ‘acknowledgment’ as ‘what happens to knowledge...when it becomes officially sanctioned, when it is made part of the public, cognitive scene.’ The essay, is a form for the ‘public cognitive scene.’

-Susan Griffin-  
“Red Shoes”

...the reservation recalls the white girl with no name or a name which refused memory...Captive, somehow afraid of the black hair and flat noses of the Indian children who rose, one by one, shouting their names aloud. She ran from the room, is still running, waving her arms wildly at real and imagined enemies. Was she looking toward the future? Was she afraid of loving all of us?

-Sherman Alexie-  
“Captivity”

#### Truth Disguised as Fact: The Political Education of a Former Fiction Writer

When I was twelve years old, I pulled a book off of my father’s bookshelf and opened it up to the title essay, “Notes of a Native Son.” “On the 29<sup>th</sup> of July, in 1943,” I read, “my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born” (63). I closed the book and examined the cover. It showed a sepia picture of a black man’s face: the book’s author, James Baldwin. The picture, composed of matrix dots, mimicked the newspaper photos of the day. There was something unsettling and magnetic about the book, a juxtaposition of elements that cracked my mind and chest awake. The opening read like a news account yet contained the sweeping symmetry of a novel--*happy families are all alike; unhappy families....*

The specificity of the date, the cover suggesting both self-portrait and mug shot, the casual yet studied use of the word “notes,” the ironic appropriation of the term

“native” that, in turn, ironically evoked Richard Wright--all of these things recombined within me, provoking a breathless tingling behind my eyes. I sat on the cold wood floor of my father’s study and read the book in one sitting, only noticing nightfall when the room became too dim for me to make out the words on the page.

I wouldn’t know until years later that this was my “if I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me” moment: I had found my genre.

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About the term Creative Nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, dubbed the Godfather of the genre by *Vanity Fair* magazine, writes: “The word ‘creative’ refers simply to the use of literary craft in presenting nonfiction—that is, factually accurate prose about real people and events...” (12). Gutkind’s use of the word “simply” seems, to me, a somewhat frustrated and impatient evasion. Any writer as accomplished as Gutkind knows that the framing of events, even in something as fact-driven as a chronological news account, is never simple. Any narrative frame creates a double of the lived experience that echoes but does not reproduce the time-bound fact.

“...[T]here are lines,” argues Gutkind, “real demarcation point among fiction, which is or can be mostly imagination; traditional nonfiction (journalism and scholarship), which is mostly information; and creative nonfiction, which presents or treats information using the tools of the fiction writer while maintaining allegiance to the fact” (12). In the course of his treatise on the ethics of Creative Nonfiction, *Keep it Real*, Gutkind maintains a curious obsession with facts. “Creative nonfiction’s greatest literary power,” he contends, “comes from its essential connection to fact” (71). He believes that “the process [of fact-checking] is painstaking and important,” that “facts are the

underdogs of Creative Nonfiction,” and that “facts hold creative power and possibility” (53-57).

Facts are not so venerated by John D’Agata, today’s foremost practitioner of something called the Lyric Essay. In the “To the Reader” section of his anthology *The Next American Essay* D’Agata writes, “...I know you’re expecting...facts from nonfiction, but henceforth please do not consider these ‘nonfictions.’ I want you preoccupied with art in this book, not with facts for the sake of facts” (1). He further states that the words such as “artifice,” “counterfeit,” “façade,” and “superficial” are all derived from the same Latin root as the word “fact,” using specific, artfully chosen facts to undermine the credibility and objectivity of facts themselves.

Gutkind’s obsession with naming and defining the genre is also subverted by D’Agata (who turns the head notes of his anthology into a curious hybrid between polemic, history and personal essay) when he writes, “Maybe the essay is just a conditional form of literature—less a genre in its own right than an attitude that’s assumed in the midst of another genre” (41). Genre definitions and facts seem to occupy similar space for D’Agata; they are useful only to the extent that art reveals them as slippery, prismatic and beautiful.

But Gutkind and D’Agata are only the current figureheads in a longstanding unresolved debate about the relationship between life and literature. In the eighties and nineties, one of the scholarly practices du jour was to tease the author’s biography from her fictional narratives or superimpose her life story over literary events. The biography, scholars argued, would illuminate the art. In reaction to this trend, Nadine Gordimer, a short story writer and novelist, writes:

...[T]he writer selects and mixes *difference* in what the roving imagination seizes upon to its purpose....For this creature formed from the material and immaterial—what was beathed upon the writer intimately...-- this fictional creature is brought into synthesis of being by the writer's imagination alone, not cloned from some nameable Adam's Rib or Eve's womb. Imagined: yes. Taken from life: yes. (4)

Although Gordimer is clearly talking about the relationship between fiction and reality, it seems to me that these same tensions play themselves out analogously in current debates regarding creative nonfiction. Even the most journalistic of creative nonfiction practitioners, John McPhee, for instance, breathes intimately upon his facts so that they pulse on the page as art objects. The writer, necessarily, alters her subject—that is her job.

Also, it seems to me that too little emphasis is placed on the author's experience at the page. All writing contains a bit of autobiography because the writer committed a portion of life to the construction of sentences and paragraphs and chapters. "...[T]he author's life," writes Gordimer, "is the 'actual event' of the making of the work" (13). The actual event of the work is then re-enacted when the reader reads the author's words; the work, for its duration, becomes the actual life of the reader.

In my creative nonfiction, I want the reader to experience something distilled from reality, but aesthetically separate. My work juxtaposes unexpected slices of life: bears and Puerto Rican immigrants, peacocks and single mothers, revealing them in ways that feel both unreal and true. There should, in my view, be a hyper-real quality to the

“literature of reality,” a quickening, that calls our habitual, patterned perceptions into question.

\*

The mingling of fiction and nonfiction is nothing new. In his essay “Novels Disguised as History,” Mario Vargas Llosa links the fabulist “true” accounts of life in the new world to the Spanish Inquisition’s ban of the novel in the colonies. He writes:

Although for three centuries novels were abolished, the goal of the Inquisitors—a society free from the influence of fiction—was not achieved. They did not realize that the realm of fiction was larger and deeper than the novel. Nor could they imagine that the appetite for lies, that is, for escaping objective reality through illusions, was so powerful and so deeply rooted in the human spirit that , once the novel could not be used to satisfy it, all other disciplines and genres in which ideas could freely flow would be used as a substitute. (24)

Vargas Llosa is tracing the roots of what would later be called “Magical Realism”—a term as ambiguous and difficult to define as “Creative Nonfiction.” But, it seems, that similar functions. While creative nonfiction borrows techniques from fiction to enliven reality, magical realism often uses nonfiction conventions and forms to undergird the fabulous.

Four of the essays collected in John D’Agata’s *The Lost Origins of the Essay* are written by writers (Octavio Paz, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Clarice Lispector) who have been, at one time or another, classified by critics as magical realists. It bears

mentioning that each of these authors is primarily known either as a poet or a fiction writer and that at least two of the selections were originally published as fiction.

Of Spanish colonial texts Vargas Llosa writes:

History and literature, truth and falsehood, reality and fiction mingle in these texts in a way that is often inextricable. The thin demarcation line that separates one from the other frequently fades away so that both worlds are entwined in a completeness which the more ambiguous it is the more seductive it becomes because the likely and the unlikely in it seem to part of the same substance. (25)

It shocks me how close this reads to a contemporary description of creative nonfiction. I am also struck by the idea of creative nonfiction as a subversive vehicle for the expression of the explicitly forbidden, as well as the genre's attempts to express new world landscapes, new world cultural and political realities by appropriating and expanding an ancient European rhetorical form.

Maybe because I read so many magical realists during my undergraduate years as a Spanish major, or perhaps because I write about Puerto Ricans (whose hybrid culture embraces and recombines aspects of European, Taino and African culture) my writing has moments where the fantastic intersects with the realistic. The endings of my essays "Pierre's Coiffures" and "Peacocks" allow the protagonists to escape the realist confines of the prose and take a lyric leap into the fantastic that gestures back to the larger themes of the essay. This, for me, is the magical draw of creative nonfiction.

I believe the personal essay is especially suited to illuminating the moral imperatives contained in the cultural present and past of the Americas. It is no

coincidence in my mind that Jamaica Kincaid, perhaps the greatest living master of the genre, hails from Antigua. After publishing a short story collection and a novel, Kincaid turned away from fiction and began to write essays that immersed the deeply personal in a sea of political and social imperatives. Her extended essay *A Small Place* is written entirely in the second person. “You disembark from your plane,” writes Kincaid. “Since you are a tourist, a North American or European—to be frank, white—and not an Antiguan black returning to Antigua from Europe or North America with cardboard boxes of much needed cheap clothes and food for relatives, you move through customs quickly” (4). By placing herself between her white readership and her African roots, Kincaid indicts her audience’s desire to touch the exotic “other” while continuing to perpetuate the economic and social injustice that brought its presence into being.

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In North America, nonfiction became a vehicle for describing and justifying the European extermination of the Native Americans. “From the start,” writes Daniel Mendelsohn in an article tracing the roots of memoir, “there had been a strong taste in the Colonies for tales of rescues and escapes....The seventeenth century saw a number of best-selling accounts by settlers who had been captured by ‘savages’ and later escaped” (70). The heroines of these stories (they were largely, although not exclusively, female) survived menacing treatment at the hands of Native Americans, and the depiction of their threatened sexuality became intimately tied to the wholesale violence against Native Americans that allowed for westward expansion. This narrative would be reincarnated and used later to rationalize the lynching of black men, flaring up especially under the threat of increased economic and civil rights for African Americans.

But if nonfiction had the power to justify oppression, it also had the power to expose and undermine it. "...[A] hundred years later," writes Mendelsohn, "another, new kind of escape memoir began to emerge, one that combined previous strains—the memoir as record of dangers overcome and as a road map for spiritual renewal—while giving them a powerful new political resonance: the slave narrative" (70). The slave narrative also contained something else characteristic of the genre: testimony of speech and experience that had been politically suppressed.

Revisiting Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Written by Herself* was an absolute revelation to me. Not only does Jacobs expose and testify (in an artful manner that steals liberally from the domestic fiction conventions of the time) to the evils of slavery, but she also links racial oppression to gender politics in a way that is shockingly and courageously subversive. Jacobs vividly illustrates the ritualized victimization of the female black slave at the hands of her master as well as the emotional consequences for the biracial, explicitly fatherless, progeny.

In addition, she shows how black men become emotional pawns used by masters' daughters to rebel against the sexual authority of their fathers. Jacobs writes:

I have myself seen the master...whose head was bowed down in shame; for it was known in the neighborhood that his daughter had selected one of the meanest slaves on his plantation to be the father of his first grandchild. She did not make her advances to her equals, nor even to her father's more intelligent servants. She selected the most brutalized, over whom her authority could be exercised with less fear of exposure....In such cases the infant is smothered, or sent where it is never seen by any who knows its

history. But if the white parent is the *father*, instead of the mother, the offspring are unblushingly reared for the market. (52)

This passage masterfully illustrates the way a white woman uses her racial privilege to rebel against her disempowered gender position. The portrait is incredibly nuanced because it shows both the predatory nature of the girl and as well as the ultimate futility of her act: her child is smothered, her brother's child gets to live.

(Perhaps it is no coincidence that Lorrie Moore and Junot Díaz choose to parody a nonfiction form when writing the highly subversive short stories “How to Be an Other Woman” and “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie.” The nonfiction form simultaneously invites and undercuts sensationalism. The nonfiction form dares the reader to speak the universally known unspeakable.)

Danzy Senna, in her memoir *Where Did You Sleep Last Night*, writes with clear-eyed, ironic precision about our country's unacknowledged history of miscegenation. She is biracial, but light-skinned enough to be mistaken for white. She describes moving in, visibly pregnant, with her darker-skinned husband. She writes, “What we have now is multicultural to the point of absurdity....There is so much approval and friendly anticipation of our baby before he is even born that I begin to fantasize this is a secret cult....It strikes me that my husband and I are only passing as an interracial couple. I wonder if these same people will be disappointed when they find out...that we are in actuality something far more old-fashioned—a redbone black man with a high yellow woman...” (17-18). On every page of the book, in down home New Orleans shacks and Pentacostal revival meetings, walking down LA's skid row, Senna makes the daring choice not to exoticize the mix of cultures flowing in her blood. Her radical step is to

dare her readers to awaken to the proximity of what Morrison calls the “Africanist presence.” Our folly, she insists, is to continue to see them as separate at all.

Although there is a great deal of passing in American literature, there are precious few interracial relationships, and the few that exist have inevitably been written by black or mixed-race authors. (Jim and Huck, the most notable exception to this, is an explicitly unromantic relationship between a man and a boy—an interesting choice that we have no room to explore here.) In fact, white authors—especially contemporary ones—tend to avoid race altogether. “[I]n matters of race,” writes Toni Morrison, “silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate....the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture” (9-10). Since Flannery O’Connor, a shroud of political correctness has fallen between white authors and the subject of race, and while the impulse to avoid might be understandable, it is also cowardly.

I know why white authors avoid. We are afraid to speak and reveal the fears and attractions that characterize our relationship with Morrison’s “Africanist presence.” Our words would break through the paper thin wall that separates us from our history, revealing our security and material privilege to be always dependant on the economic and social oppression of a dark-skinned other. Our words, if spoken, would implicate us as participants in an exploitative relationship that we may not have chosen, but nevertheless continue to benefit from.

There are white writers, especially recently, who have dealt directly with race. In his book *Black Planet*, David Shields spends a season with the Seattle Supersonics and

writes about our cultures' objectification—its fear of and attraction to the black male body. The book does not choose a side, and Shields does not let white liberal guilt measure his words. Instead, he moves back and forth between stereotype and reality until the reader begins to sketch a nuanced connection between the two.

Eula Biss also deals extensively with the subject of race in her book of essays *Notes from No Man's Land*. However, despite a somewhat nuanced treatment of her subject, the author's voice is curiously neutered, as if race and sexuality are mutually exclusive topics instead of two themes mingled in our nations' very blood. An essay that sets up to be about the history of the telephone pole entitled "Time and Distance Overcome" abruptly becomes an essay about lynching—about the black mens' bodies that were routinely suspended from telephone poles. Biss accumulates a collage of material that includes references to white women. "In Pine Bluff, Arkansas," she writes, "a black man charged with kicking a white girl was hanged from a telephone pole....In Shreveport, Louisiana, a black man charged with attacking a white girl was hanged from a telephone pole" (8). Biss fails to position herself explicitly as a white, female narrator, instead writing the paragraphs in sexless, emotionless news copy. This, for me, is a missed opportunity that borders on irresponsible. I ache, as a reader, to know how Biss feels when the protection of her (feminine, white) sexuality is used to justify acts of political violence. Instead, Biss deflects the question and in the last section, echoes the essay's falsely redemptive title by having the telephone poles, earlier compared to crosses, sprout "small leafy branches" (11).

I am haunted by the idea that a white writer contending with racial themes is perhaps more likely to be published and celebrated than a person of color writing about with the same topics. “[Publishing houses],” writes Zora Neale Hurston in her article “What White Publishers Won’t Print,” “will sponsor anything that they believe will sell. They shy away from romantic stories about Negroes...because they feel that they know the public indifference to such works, unless the story or play involves racial tension” (1431). An African American or Native American or Latino author is expected to address racial themes; they must; racism is an inescapable reality of their lives. When white authors write about race, the public often perceives the subject as chosen instead of inevitable, and occasionally deems such a choice “courageous.” (For instance, Steven Hill in the *Chicago Tribune* writes of Shields’ book, “*Black Planet* accomplishes a rare feat by tackling race head on.” Since it is hard for me to name an author of color who has not directly “tackled” the issue of race, it seems that Shields’ subject only becomes “rare” and a “feat” because of the simple fact that he is white.)

Although I perceive racial themes to be as inescapable for white American writers as they are for American writers of color, I am also aware of Joan Didion’s incisive and true-to-the-bone warning: *writers are always selling somebody out.*

Yes, we are. We always are.

## Good Hair

Six weeks ago, Yuniór cut our son's hair so short I could see the red-brown skin ripple beneath the fuzz. "Mira!" Max-Yamil yelled as he pulled one of his father's knitted caps off of his head. Yuniór wore a brown-and-beige-striped cap in the frosty delivery room the night Max-Yamil was born; I remember it hovering above me as I labored. On Sundays, he always sends his son back to my house wearing one from his collection.

Max-Yamil is handsome enough to pull off a crew cut, proving my theory that the diversified genetics of mixed-race children render them better looking. My current boyfriend informs me that in a post racial world, parents will wait to find out the race of their children the same way they used to await the discovery of their sex. I resist the urge to tell him that it is already like that—how, the night he was born, Max-Yamil's aunt marched into the delivery room, unwrapped him from his receiving blanket, and examined the color of his testicles to determine the future cast of his skin. "The only thing we can't know," she whispered to me in Spanish, "is whether he is going to have good hair or bad hair."

"It's growing back curly!" Max-Yamil squeals, devastated. He is standing on a footstool in front of the medicine cabinet mirror. He's naked, and only five years old, but his shoulders already insinuate the build of his father. Sometimes I smooth my palms over his chest with longing.

"Don't tempt the *negro* in me," Yuniór would say in Spanish just before he hit me. He backed me against bathroom doorways, into bookshelves, across stairway

landings. He clocked me hard with his knuckles just above the hairline where the bruises wouldn't show.

Today Max-Yamil reports that Diamonique, his classmate, told him that he was African. "Because of my hair," Max-Yamil says. "Well," I say, stalling. He pulls the globe off the dresser in his room. He finds the island of Puerto Rico and taps at it with his index finger. "My *abuela* lives here," he says. "This is where I'm from."

The night I told him that he had to leave, Yunion stood in the nursery gripping the rail of Max-Yamil's crib and staring blankly at the globe sitting tilted on the dresser. "I wanted to build a castle with you," he said in Spanish. He looked me in the eyes then, let go of the crib rail and brought his fist down hard against the globe.

I gather Max-Yamil in my arms and sit the globe on his lap. I explain that many many years ago the Spanish settlers needed workers for the sugar cane fields and that they brought these "workers" over on boats from Africa. "They must have paid them a lot of money to come all the way from there," he says. His fingers, trace the route of the Middle Passage, slipping into the cavernous dent left in the Atlantic Ocean by his father's angry fist.

### Pierre's Coiffures

My mother's hair was the color of my sister's gerbil, and once a month she dragged me through the doors of Pierre's Coiffures where I perched underneath the glass dryer globes. The twisting candy cane barber pole mesmerized me. Pierre was from the old country, trained back in Italy when cutting hair was still a trade like shoemaking or carpentry. Francis, his partner, whose thick accent made me nervous, loomed in the back, sweeping the fallen hair into neat stripes. Sometimes he took pity on me and fed me anise-flavored ribbon cookies rolled in granulated sugar or sent me home with one homemade rum ball sealed in a Ziploc bag.

My mother called women who colored their hair "frivolous," but she showed up at Pierre's every third Saturday without fail for her perm. Pierre stood behind her, his shoulders curled in an old man slump, nestling Pepto-Bismol colored curlers around her head. A few dark strands of his hair stretched over his bald spot like tentacles. Behind him loomed Francis, broom in hand gathering the fallen curls from the parquet floor, blonde and black and two-toned red.

"Mom," I said one day, straining forward in the back seat of the car, "do you think Francis saves the hair he sweeps up so that he can make a wig for Pierre?"

\*

In ancient times, people believed that both good and evil spirits entered the body through the hairs on the head. Barbers performed marriages and baptisms and followed the ceremonies with a ritual haircut to banish evil spirits and trap the good ones in the body of the baby or groom or bride.

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“Your hair keeps on growing once you are dead,” my father said in the same voice he used to announce the day’s weather at the breakfast table. I did not believe him. He had fooled me once before. During a car trip to North Carolina he convinced my sister and I that he had surgical hair implants inserted years before we were born. My mother maintained a polished poker face when he said it. “How many?” my sister pressed. “There? Just above your ears? Can I pull on them?”

\*

I thought that my short hair might keep me safe. Francis cut it in the back room of Pierre’s while piping Puccini arias over the hi-fi. He didn’t have any customers of his own, preferring instead to sit behind the faux-oriental screen in back of the cash register and chain smoke Diana cigarettes. His white hair poofed soft and beautiful around his head like a cloud, and sometimes through the settling smoke I almost caught sight of him rising off of his chair.

He cut my hair just like my mother’s, pixie length, and when she walked back to collect me, I felt like I was looking up at my own reflection. Back at home, I clinked my jacks into a Dixie cup and stood on a stepstool in front of the bathroom mirror while my mother showered for work. The white bolt of cloth that she ironed into her nurse’s cap hung over the shower curtain catching steam.

My sister’s butterfly barrettes lay scattered across the back of the sink, and a shiny blue bottle of AquaNet hairspray watched over them. She was only nine, too young for hairspray according to my mother. My father had bought it for her during one of our evening trips to the drugstore when my mother was at work. My sister put on a calculated pleading expression, but my father hadn’t taken much convincing. Instead of

hairspray, he had bought me a bag of Troyer Farms pretzels which I savored slowly sucking the salt off and letting the dough dissolve against the roof of my mouth.

\*

In medieval times barbers extracted teeth and performed bloodletting. The red and white stripes signified bandages; the pole itself represented the staff that patients held onto during the bleeding. Early poles were simple tree limbs wrapped in both the clean and blood-stained bandages of that day's patients.

\*

My sister had a double bed with a red-striped bedspread that always made me think of the pole outside of Pierre's Coiffures. I slept in a twin inherited from a neighbor boy who had plastered the headboard with Superman stickers. On nights that it stormed, I listened to the wind shake the pine trees outside our window until I was on the near edge of tears. "Larisa," I whispered, "Are you awake?"

"Yes." She propped herself up on one arm and reached out the other. "Are you scared?"

*We should sleep like this every night*, I thought crawling into bed beside her. I grasped two shocks of her long hair in my fists and wrapped them bandage-like around my jaw.

My father never came on nights when it thundered. No tapping tree limbs or still midsummer fog heralded his entrance. I always awakened after the downpour had begun, my sister's bedspread pulled back to reveal its solid red underside, her hair fanned across the pillow like the bough of a Norfolk Island pine. I told myself that it was my sister's long hair that brought him, but even then I knew I was only waiting my turn.

\*

My father is sixty-nine years old and does not have a single gray hair. Still thick and curly, it holds the tracks of a comb if he does not wash it daily. My sister got my mother's straight hair, but mine is shaggy and oily like my father's. I will never have to dye it.

\*

Pierre died almost twenty years ago, but my mother keeps the same perm and still resists coloring even though the hair around her ears and at the nape of her neck is slipping to gray. She looks hardly different from the woman who peers from the wedding photo taken on an October afternoon in 1963. Her hairstyle, a June Cleaver finger-curl perm, swept unchanged through the mushroom bouffants of the sixties, the long straight shimmers of the seventies, and the teased stringy cataracts of the Reagan decade. It is as all-purpose and timeless as the Ajax she still uses to scrub the toilet and sink and bathtub.

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The medicine cabinet claps shut with a living groan, the kind a tree makes when the wind tears one of its limbs off. "Close your eyes," says my mother, "this could sting you." A mist of hair spray wafts to where I crouch beneath her; I don't blink my eyes until the hiss stops. She poises her ironed nurse cap above her set hair, six bobby pins pinched between her lips.

This is the story I tell myself as I watch: *Today will not be the same as all the other days. Today when she pins the cap to her head, the cloth will become wings. Today when she pins the cap to her head, she will reach down and open my mouth. She will grasp my tongue with her calloused hand and fly with me to an island made of*

*feathers where our hair will grow and grow, as long as the starlight stretches, long  
enough to reach the cold beating of my father's frozen heart.*

## Peacocks

The peacock let us down. The peahen, a wool-blanket shade of gray, was close enough to touch, but her mate stood with his back turned in a far interior corner of the pen. He had his tail extended, but we could only see the tuft of common poultry feathers on his backside. “The peacock,” wrote Flannery O’Connor in her essay “The King of Birds,” “is equally well satisfied with either view of himself.”

Whenever we visited Springdale Farm, I saved the peacocks for last. I weathered the duck pond, the chicken coop and the one horned mountain goat who was forever rubbing his stump against the wall of the barn. I dutifully asked my son Max if he had to pee when we passed the Port a Potty. I smiled nervously at the group of developmentally disabled adolescents weeding the flower garden.

I always savored the moment of approach, letting Max tear ahead of me and hook his fingers into the chicken wire that circled the peacock’s coop. When I caught up with him, I smoothed the coarse curls on his head that white women, uninvited, ran their fingers through at the grocery store.

“Mommy,” he said, “Make him turn around.”

“I can’t make him do anything, Honey.”

As if to agree, the peacock ambled indifferently away from us.

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A thick-waisted woman in a bowler hat and work apron glowers from the cover of the 1977 paperback edition of O’Connor’s *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. A fan of peacock feathers extends from her back like spine-sized fingers each with its own iridescent eye. The book, one of the few in the Hollins collection that had not been

rebound by the college, had a cardstock textured cover that I used to rub against my cheeks during my ritual Friday night trip to the library.

Hollins was a women's college—the last Dixie holdout of the finishing school age—still teeming with tobacco heiresses and lawyer's daughters. I was a Yankee which meant one of two things: lesbian or scholarship student. Every Friday night, the heiresses road-tripped to Washington and Lee and Hampton Sydney in search of men. The headlights of their shiny SUVs licked the floor-to-ceiling library windows as they passed, obliterating my own reflection.

A map of the South the size of a twin sheet hung in the basement of the Hollins library. At sunset, the narrow ceiling windows flooded with rusty light, and the African violets on the windowsill glowed an oppressive shade of jade green. I stood in front of the map with my arms raised, my fingers tipping over the scalloped edge of Virginia, reaching for home.

Beneath the map were shelves and shelves of *Spinster*, the Hollins yearbook. My favorite volume was embossed in silver, a gray haired old lady in a rocking chair staring from the spine. Her escaped ball of knitting yarn rolled across the front cover.

I studied these yearbooks endlessly, especially the ones from the late fifties when my mother would have been in college. Page after page of nineteen-year-old eyes stared back at me, their eyebrows plucked, their hair curled back from their foreheads. I searched for my mother's blunt nose in those photographs. I scanned the pages looking for her veiled green eyes, her sparse eyelashes, the crisp, unrepentant curve of her mouth.

I never took that copy *A Good Man if Hard to Find* out of the library. Instead, years later, I ordered it new on Amazon. That cover showed an odd cut-off picture of a woman's mouth and nose. I imagined that she was my mother, even though her teeth were too large and my mother never wore red lipstick. The nostril was big enough to crawl into.

\*

I told my mother I was pregnant seven hours before she and my father left for vacation in Belize.

My grandmother's avocado colored suitcase sprawled on my parents' bed, a handful of Cross-Your-Heart bras spilling from its elastic pocket. My mother stood barefoot on my grandmother's embroidered footstool digging through the top shelf of her closet.

"Is it the Puerto Rican one you brought over here to fix your car?" she asked. "Or is it someone else?"

I watched her tapping, polished toes.

"Does he even speak English?" She tore a short-sleeved sweater off the shelf and threw it on the bed. Slowly, without breaking her stare, she unbuttoned her blouse and shrugged it off. Her cesarian scar winked white in the midday sun.

"How many weeks?"

"Ten."

She jammed her arms into the sweater. "I suppose it won't help to tell you that you have options."

She buttoned the sweater and turned to size up her profile in the mirror.

\*

When I was pregnant, Max-Yamil's father used to cook *arroz con gandules* in his mother's battered stock pot. "That baby needs to eat rice and beans," he'd say to me in Spanish. "That baby is going to be Boricua."

I sat at the kitchen table scratching the skin around my belly-button and watching him tip packets of adobo into the boiling water. He had his back turned to me. The hood of his Avirex sweatshirt cloaked his ears, but the skin of his hands glowed the dying-ember color of his Taino mother. The purple and green swirls on the hoodie made me dizzy. I sat there, breathless, waiting for them to turn into tropical feathers.

\*

Of course, Max-Yamil's father and I didn't make it; my mother could have told you that.

I could recreate her monologue, sentence by sentence, on the importance of picking a compatible mate with a common heritage to fall back on during dark times. I could even have her deliver it from atop that same embroidered footstool. I could give you my mother's rumpled silk nightgown, her reading glasses, the chipped china dish where she kept her unmatched earrings.

\*

I met Mike in a Spanish class while I was still on and off with Max's father. During class, he'd spotted the Antonio Machado quote I'd used as the epigraph to a paper. "You're a poet?" he said.

"No," I said. "Not a poet." I shook my head. I swallowed hard.

The first time I visited his apartment, I waited for Mike to go to the bathroom and walked directly to his bookshelves. His books were earnest and serious with an occasional nod toward the fantastic (a collection of Haruki Murakami's stories, a hardcover edition of *The Master and Margarita*.)

Listening for the toilet to flush, I thumbed through a volume of Borges until I found what I was looking for: *the Aleph's diameter was probably little more than an inch, but all space was there, actual and undiminished....I saw the teeming sea; I saw daybreak and nightfall; I saw bunches of grapes, snow, tobacco, lodes of metal, steam...*

I clapped the book shut. In my purse, next to my toothbrush, my concealer, and my spare pair of underwear, I'd brought my copy of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. I slipped the slim volume in next to Borges.

\*

When I brought Mike out to meet my parents at their lake house, my mother turned more girlish than I had seen her in years. Her cheeks flushed; she drank gin and tonics; I thought I spotted mascara.

"No, no," she said to my father as he handed Mike a plateful of barbequed chicken. She whisked the plate away. "Mike's a vegetarian." She replaced the plate with a bowl of barley chili. "It's from Moosewood," she said.

After dinner, we left my mother reading *Fox in Socks* to Max and walked arm in arm out to the pebble beach at the edge of the lake. "Sit down," Mike whispered, patting the grass next to him. When I sat, he reached over and rubbed the goose bumps on my calves. I could feel my history beneath me—the sigh of my older brother's fishing pole,

my sister's long dark hair floating like seaweed on the surface of the lake, the warm tickle of first menstrual blood collecting in the lining of my Speedo racing suit.

My mother had put Max to bed by the time we finally came inside. She stood at the counter, teary-eyed from too much wine. "Mike," she said. She reached out to take his windbreaker. "Max adores you—he talks about you all the time...it's all 'Mike told me this' and 'Mike showed me that.'" She held the windbreaker up and brushed a few stray beach pebbles from the folds. "I'm so glad," she said. "He's aching for a strong masculine role model in his life."

\*

The next summer, Mike's sister got married. The soles of her shoes were peacock blue, specially designed to answer the "something old, something new" riddle. After the ceremony, I stood next to Mike in the receiving line, checking from a distance to see if the ironed crease in Max's suit pants had held. He had gotten ahold of one of the bubble wands that the wedding party had used during the recessional and was lying on his back sending streams of pea-sized bubbles to the sky.

"Look at Max," I said to Mike's mom. "Look how much fun he's having."

She smiled at me. Her eyes were wide-set and brown just like Mike's. She had sturdy shoulders and ample breasts that I sometimes had the urge to bury my head in. Mike turned to me, and I stood, waiting, basking in their gaze.

"Lindsey," Mike said. "We're going to go take pictures now. With the bride and groom. I'll see you at the reception?"

\*

Peacocks are serial monogamists whose pairings seem more "disgruntled retiree" than "newlywed." They screech and shudder and keep their distance from each other. It's an honesty that anyone who has ever read Flannery O'Connor will recognize.

When we were first dating, Mike used to read to me over the phone. He read me "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." He read me "Babylon Revisited." He read me a short story called "Honey Pie," where a man ends up marrying his best friend's ex-wife and helping her to care for her three-year-old daughter.

"Read me something, Lindsey," he said one night.

I read him a Flannery O'Connor story called "The Enduring Chill." In the story, a failed writer comes back to his mother's southern farm to gather material for a play he is writing about the plight of "the negroes." He hangs around the dairy barn offering cigarettes to two black farm hands and encouraging them to drink milk straight from the cow. "Take the milk," he says, downing a glass. "It's not going to hurt my mother to lose two or three glasses of milk a day. We've got to think free if we want to live free!" The black men turn him down, and the playwright ends up catching a debilitating strain of bovine fever from the unpasteurized milk.

When I finished the story, there was silence on the other end of the line.

"Go ahead," I said. "Laugh. It's funny."

\*

"Mommy, when you get married, are you going to have lots of bubbles too?"

Max stood beside me in front of the mirror peeking his chin over the sink. I had dragged him into the bathroom to avoid the ritual Father-Daughter dance. Frank Sinatra's voice slid under the crack of the reception hall door—*Love is lovelier the second time around...*

“No,” I said. “Mommy doesn’t want bubbles.” I watched him reach on tiptoe up to the soap dispenser and fill his hand with foam. “Mommy wants peacocks at her wedding.” I stared at my champagne-reddened cheeks in the mirror.

I imagined Max chasing them on a fine late summer day. His shoes shone black against the clipped grass and his crisp shirt caught not one wrinkle even though the day was humid. He chased the peacocks, his dark head bobbing among lines of white folding chairs, arms extending to reach for the brilliant trailing tips of their tails.

## Ursus Americanus

Half past midnight on June 16, 2009, a two-year-old male black bear took roost in an oak tree in the northeast quadrant of Rochester, NY. The oak grew from the embankment between the sidewalk and Parkwood Road, a residential street in the heavily Puerto Rican section of the city. Tom Fox, a resident of the street, noticed the furry body hugging a lower limb of the tree and called 911. “At one point,” he said, “there were eight [policemen] and they had their guns drawn....They didn’t know what to do.”<sup>1</sup>

I heard about the bear the following morning on my local NPR station. I was getting my son Max-Yamil dressed, telling him to lift his arms so I could peel off his pajama top. His bones, I noticed, were no longer stubby like a toddler’s, but purposeful and reaching like a bird’s. His skin had taken on its summer tint, shifting from taffy-colored to full-on brown.

A bear in a tree! It was like a children’s story. Max-Yamil and I clattered down the stairs and logged on to my computer to see if we could find a picture of the bear. Even better, on the *Rochester Democrat & Chronicle* website there was a video. I clicked on the triangle to unfreeze the screen.

The oak tree’s leaves shimmered when the bear shifted its weight, but all you could see of the animal was a fringe of brown fur hanging just below the foliage. After the bear shot, the camera panned down to the crowd: cops in sunglasses leaning against their patrol cars, teenage girls with slicked-back ponytails, an old man smoking a hand-rolled cigarette and walking a white Bichon Frise. They were looking up at the bear,

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia Vargas, “Young Bear Meets Sad End,” *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* 17 Jun. 2009.

giving the impression that they had been simultaneously struck with the same neck injury.

After showing the crowd, the camera panned out to the neighborhood. City houses: cavernous, square, separated by a driveway and a strip of grass, expansive shadowed porches with inlaid oak panel ceilings. I knew because I'd relaxed on them in summer. I knew because I used to live in that neighborhood, just three blocks south, in the public housing project that was my son's first home.

\*

On a map published by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, year-round black bear habitats show up as two splotches of red over the Adirondack and Catskill mountain ranges. The summer and fall habitat of the bear are highlighted in yellow: a skinny vertical stripe extending over a lesser range known as the Green Mountains southeast of New York City and a wide swath stretching over the bottom lip of the state.

The southern shore of Lake Ontario, where the city of Rochester sits, falls outside of what state DEC officials call "Bear Country," but the population of black bears has been booming nationwide over the last decade. The Maryland Department of Natural Resources did a study tracking the number of bear visitations to a collection of sardine and oil bait stations scattered about the state's western counties. Only 10% of the traps were visited in 1993, but by 2003, over half the traps had become regular black bear pit stops.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Maryland Department of Natural Resources, *Black Bear Population Status Report* (Maryland: Maryland Department of Natural Resources, 1995).

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The Genesee River bisects the city of Rochester, runs directly through the middle of the skyscrapers that make up the business district. Looming a stone's throw from the river is the public library, the only place within the city limits that I regularly frequented before the age of fifteen. I remember my mother feeding quarters into a parking meter on the bridge near the building, looking over her shoulder and clutching her oversize pocketbook to her hip as the wind whipped through her hair. The library, built in an age of public transportation when more than half of bus patrons were white, had no parking lot.

The only other time I went into the city was when my father took me into his law office during school vacations when my mother, an evening nurse, covered a day shift. He was a legal aid lawyer, working in an office full of idealistic white men and women who had kept their children in city schools during the high-water mark of white flight. I was particularly fascinated with Leanna, a white woman married to a black man who wore her hair in tiny braids capped off by colored beads. Her hair clicked along with her heels as she walked down the hall on her way to and from the bathroom.

My father and I ate lunch at a tiny white restaurant called the Red Front wedged between an adult bookstore and the headquarters of a bank. My father always ordered tomato soup and grilled cheese and made a big deal of reading the menu aloud to me. I favored plates of crinkle-cut French fries drizzled with ketchup, relishing the absence of the green vegetables and peeled fruits my mother ensured were part of every meal.

One day my father took me to get Chinese takeout instead.

“But I want French fries,” I whined. “Let’s go to the other place.”

“I’m not going back there,” my father said. “I heard the owner refer to a black man as a nigger. He’s not getting a cent more of my money.”

\*

In 1974, the year before my older brother entered kindergarten, my parents moved from their spacious Victorian in the city to the cramped cinderblock house in the suburbs where I grew up. Brighton was heavily Jewish with pockets of Indian and Korean families whose fathers were completing biochemical post-docs at the University of Rochester or residencies at Strong Memorial Hospital. Two years before I graduated, my district topped *US News and World Report*’s list of best American high schools.

“One thing we love about Brighton,” my mother often said at dinner parties, “is that it is so diverse.”

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My father’s secretary was a tall severe woman named Inez with heavy eyelids and black hair who allowed me to seal envelopes by running them across a moistened ceramic wheel. Days when I came must have been onerous for her. My father left me ensconced next to her desk and disappeared into his office for hours at a time. Inez, whose name all of the lawyers pronounced *Eenis*, was a favorite punching bag of my father’s—his nightly complaints were often littered with drawn out descriptions of her stubbornness. My mother said she was a perfect living example of a ballbuster. One night, after a particularly long Easter dinner, my sister and I sat under the dining room table stuffing Peeps into our mouths and chanting “Eenis Penis, Eenis Penis, Eenis Penis,” before toppling over in shrieks of laughter.

It didn't occur to me until years later that Inez was probably Puerto Rican and must have doubled as the office translator. In Spanish, the stress is on the final syllable—Inez, which rhymes with nothing at all.

\*

A color-coded map of the city could be divided into three roughly-equal, firmly-bordered wedges of brown, black, and white. The southeast section houses two sprawling parks designed by Frederick Law Olmstead, the University of Rochester and the mansion and gardens of George Eastman, founder of Kodak. Any white people left in the city live here. There is a Christmas mansion tour of the quadrant, each historic house themed by a different European country. Mass plantings of daffodils burst open in spring. Young professionals occupy tastefully subdivided American foursquare houses, their cars ticking out of their driveway at 8:30 and back again at 5:15.

Head northward and you enter the brown wedge, as if crossing an inverted equator. An old car showroom has been converted to a shimmering Dominican salon that resembles a stacked chrome wedding cake. Souped-up hatchback Honda station wagons with immaculate silver rims weave in and out of traffic. One towering project is named Los Flamboyanes after the unofficial tree of Puerto Rico—an evergreen that turns a stunning red in midsummer.

Cross the river to the west and you're in the 19<sup>th</sup> Ward, the neighborhood containing the highest concentration of African-American professionals in the county. Yards are meticulously mowed, porches festooned with rotating flags and other tasteful decorations never allowed to linger past their season. Move northward, though, and you'll hit the remnants of tottering slums razed in the late sixties to make way for public

housing projects with edifying names like Robert F. Kennedy Towers and Ida B. Wells Estates. Barber shops blossom and wilt, their slang-flecked placards—“Smooove Moves” “Spin ‘n Wave”—dating them before the spray paint dries. There are pedestrians, even in the dead of winter, and cars idle double-parked outside of convenience stores streaming exhaust into the frozen air. It is not uncommon to see a man on an old ten-speed, dodging potholes on rainy days, as he balances a lit cigarette against the handlebars.

\*

I met Max-Yamil’s father Yuniór in a Medicaid dental clinic in the middle of Rochester’s northeast quadrant where I took medical histories from Spanish-speaking patients because nobody had bothered to translate the triplicate form. It was my first job out of college. I escorted the patients into the closet-sized conference room and asked them personal questions in the stiff continental Spanish I learned as an exchange student in Spain.

“Have you ever been hospitalized?”

“Do you use intravenous drugs?”

“Are you allergic to latex?”

“Do you have AIDS?”

Yuniór, his jaw swollen with an abscess, had large, almond-shaped eyes and brown skin that glowed clay-colored when he blushed. “I took the test,” he said in gravelly Spanish—a gruff voice like Louis Armstrong’s that he would later pass on to our son. “I came out clean.” His smile made me feel safe and nervous at the same time.

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The clear-cutting of eastern seaboard forests during the last half of the nineteenth century reduced the available black bear habitat to critically low levels, but the maturation of second-growth forests has made the east coast once again viable for the grizzlies' smaller cousin. Suburban sprawl, which dots rural landscapes with enclaves of widely-spaced homes, offers an exceptional habitat for the ballooning population. Often it is the yearlings, young male cubs who are expelled from their mother's range and dare not encroach on a mature male bear's established habitat, that occupy these borderlands.

The cubs eat almost anything: salmon, acorns, garbage, human compost, birdseed from a feeder. An animal that has encountered a dependable human food source is dubbed a "nuisance bear" by DEC officials. Rangers used to trap the bears and drive them hundreds of miles to less populated areas, but bears are masters at navigating any kind of trail, natural or otherwise. They follow deer tracks and riverways, paved and dirt roads until they find their way back to the town dumps or restaurant parking lots where they began. Now nuisance bears are euthanized after only two human encounters, which, officials assert, saves everyone cost and headaches. Most are males between the ages of two and five.<sup>3</sup>

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The Jones Act of 1917, passed nearly twenty years after the United States invasion of Puerto Rico, extended United States citizenship to all island residents and imposed military conscription on the male population. Sixty-five-thousand Puerto Rican men served in World War II, almost all of them in the segregated 65<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment.

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Esch, "Black Bears Find New Territory in US Cities," *Associated Press* 4 Jun. 2009.

Many took their families to the mainland when the war ended. In 1920, there were 135,000 Puerto Ricans living in the continental United States; by 1960, there were more than a million.<sup>4</sup> Rochester has one of the oldest Puerto Rican communities because it was a manufacturing center close to the original colony in New York City with humming factories along the Genesee that turned out cameras, copy machines, men's clothing, specialty hot dogs and Genny Cream Ale.

By the time Yuniór arrived from the island, many of those buildings leaned vacant and crumbling along the riverbank. Xerox and Kodak had outsourced most of their production to China. Hickey Freeman, the men's clothing company, had reduced its Rochester workforce to a skeleton. Only the brewery still prospered—you could see the large white holding tanks of Genny from the entrance of the welfare office, both structures standing straight and still against the river's rushing current.

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Yuniór had a bachelor apartment on the top floor of Los Flamboyanes with a bird's eye view of the river. The yeasty smell of beer flooded my nose when I sat on the balcony at dusk watching him smoke cigarettes. His apartment had a futon, a TV, and three framed photos: his parents; his cousin, Yamil, who died of sickle cell disease; and Ferdinand, his best friend from the island.

Yuniór referred to Ferdinand as "El Negro" even though he wasn't much darker than him. In the photo, the tall, thin twenty-four-year-old lay in a white coffin with his

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<sup>4</sup> Juan Gonzalez, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America* (New York: Penguin, 2000) 81.

arms folded over his chest. A banner with two AK-47s crossed in an X hung above his head.

“After the funeral,” Yuniar said, “my father put me in his Jeep and drove me up to the top of the mountain. He pulled me out of the car and we walked three miles to the river.” Yuniar flicked his half-smoked cigarette over the balcony railing and watched the sparks shatter against the pavement below. “He made me kneel down and pushed my head under the water over and over saying, ‘Yuniar come back to me. Yuniar come back to me.’ It was the rainy season and the water rushed over my head so fast it made me dizzy. When I was under, I saw me in the coffin. Not Ferdinand. Me. Yuniar. And I knew I had to leave.”

\*

I left Yuniar when our son was two-years-old and moved into condo in the suburbs four miles from the house where I grew up. There were sidewalks and mansard roofs and faux colonial lampposts in front of each house. For the first month I lived there, Yuniar would pull his white van into the parking spot next to my car and idle there for hours. I’d stand at my son’s bedroom with the lights off, staring at the dull glow of the van’s interior light and aching with a longing I still can’t reason myself out of.

\*

For weeks after, my son kept asking me to replay the video of the bear in the tree. We downloaded it to our computer and I showed him how to open it on his own. Every afternoon after getting off the school bus, he’d plunk himself down in front of the screen and watch the bear with the same amazement and joy. I found myself thinking of the

bear too, while chopping onions or walking our golden retriever or deadheading petunias in the garden.

I imagined him, leaving his mother's den and casting out for his own territory, following the deer trails along the river, using the open light above the water as a guide until he crosses the naked bank where the city begins. He stands up on hind legs, considering the checkerboard of roads, the flat-sided, limbless houses. He finds a tall tree with a thick trunk and reaching branches. Its wide, green, gaping leaves remind him of home.

\*

The bear incident happened nearly a year ago, but Max-Yamil still asks me about it sometimes, "Mommy, what happened to that bear?" It's April now, and in forests all over New York State a fresh round of cubs have emerged from their mothers' dens.

On Friday afternoons, Yunior's white van screeches across the parking lot of my complex blasting *bachata* through its open windows. My neighbors pull up their blinds to look. Max-Yamil runs barefoot out the door and launches himself into his father's open arms.

I am relieved and sad when they drive away. I listen to the silent hum of the house for a moment before getting out the dog leash and strapping on my sandals. The daffodils are almost past their prime and the lilac bushes down near the club house already show green.

They have uncovered the pool for the season even though it won't be open for swimming until Memorial Day. I stop and weave my fingers into the wrought-iron gate

between the pool and the sidewalk. I lean forward and fix my eyes on the still, blue water, waiting for it to gather current and slowly sweep me away.

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