Cantaloupe Kingdom

by

Peter Camilleri

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CANTALOupe KINGDoM

Peter Camilleri
State University of New York at New Paltz

The thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Arts degree, hereby recommends acceptance of this thesis.

Heinz Insu Fenkl, Thesis Advisor
Department of English, SUNY New Paltz

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Manuscript

I. In that wild country called the Pang Yang I knew Maurice Morrigan, who tried to make me a murderer. I know it’s true because he whispered to me—in the beginning, when he knew I could hardly contain myself—that he would make me do it.

“But you’re a filthy little coward, aren’t you, a sick little thing, your mother’s mongrel,” he said to me. I said nothing.

A yellow spotted turtle disappeared beneath the duckweed surface of the irrigation ditch. Maurice spat and missed. The spit trickled down his goatee.

“I know your type,” he whispered.

In the field under the sun, on the 6th day of my secret fast, I knew I couldn’t hit him. I wouldn’t say anything. The owner needed him more than me. And anyway, I was supposed to love my neighbor.

About halfway through the Trump term I found myself at wit’s end and stripped of things I once took for granted. Destitute, lonely, and ill, I dragged my limbs out the slaughter house of New York City, ninety miles north, to the relative peace of Ulster County.

After a few months of scrounging around and squatting in dilapidated garages and barns, I found residence in a farmhouse. It wasn’t long before Anselmo—landlord, owner, boss, housemate—acquiesced to my request for work. I was a twig, but he told me he could use the muscle.

He entrusted me first with the lawn, then the cats, the chickens, the goats, the donkey, and finally, he handed me over to the manager, Maurice Morrigan, to whom the farm owed any semblance of success.
The farm should have been a swamp. Ages ago, glaciers had sliced the land flat and deposited enormous pools of decayed vegetable muck in their sluicy wake. It seemed the pools were still draining. The soil was called black dirt—technically and colloquially. The government made it illegal to sell, or else the farmers there would have gotten too rich. The black dirt was so dense in nutrients it seemed as though you could drop a rock in the mud and it might sprout green veiny wings and fly away, or, sink to bottomless forever.

A stream flowed through that farmland, joined the Black Creek a few miles north, and emptied out into the Hudson. Polish immigrants had thought to dig irrigation ditches from the swampland to the stream. The Dutch hadn’t trusted the black dirt. They’d sold the land to religious pilgrims, cheap. But maybe their reluctance was wisdom. The irrigated tendrils would flood the fields in storms, and when no one had broken up the beaver dams. The fields would become a lake. Then the crops would rot and the peninsular fields crumbled into broken islands.

Some looming indifference to human endeavor haunted that land and the people who tried to tame it. Legends told of travelers on horseback gobbled by the mud passes. The ditches sunk inevitably. And every season sent men to their knees pulling weeds. Nature spoke in the innocent form of African nutsedge, razor sharp almond grass that pierced the plastic landscape covers like flak through sky. The seeds of countless flora would find home in the tattered plastic. Stiltgrass, mugwort, mustard. Milkweed, buckwheat, rose. You had to slice and tear through a weedy jungle to get to the crops, as though nature had decided to impose a tax in the local currency of sweat, human frustration. I saw farmers stick adhesive to the back of their salty caps to capture the buffalo gnats assaulting their skulls. There was a black, twitching horde on the back of Maurice’s cap as he spoke to me.

“You could never do it,” he said. “You would never do what you wanted.”
I said nothing. I knew I could do what I wanted, but it took me a long time to find out what that was. And I wouldn’t let him know what I thought I wanted, for him. I felt sorry for him. I felt sorry for him, alone in those crazy fields, in his damp dirt caked slacks, singing to himself, heaving his wheel barrow. One flat foot trudge squeezed past the next, the wheel carving a stiff perfect line through the mud. He was a self-proclaimed socialist, and his back had already begun to fold in on itself at the ripe age of 27. He would call the farm the “Cantaloupe Kingdom” because sometimes, in late August, if they ran out of time to harvest, the back fields would burst with overripe cantaloupe and their thick skins would split, rot, and lay there until the fields simply ingested them.

It’s funny what time can do, and how sometimes you need to do nothing to make it work for you. Before I earned his trust I was sorry for him, even as he berated me. I wouldn’t hurt him. I was alive already. I had a roof, a bit of a job. I was alive under the sun in a field of buzzing bees, gnats, and all kinds of crazy, endless pulsations. I could outlast his taunts. But I didn’t understand why he needed to be like that. The ambiguity almost made me burst with laughter. I was still enamored by the idea I was innocent. Maybe that’s why it was easy for me to make the words that came out his thin Irish lips meaningless against the incessant hum. His words were like a breeze. I was overcome by a desire to love him, to let the words thrashing my ears sear a bond to my heart to remember the great speechless earth, the invisible humming, me. His lips were reeds.

“You won’t make it here. I’ll be sure you pay,” they whispered.

I said nothing. I pried a cantaloupe off its stem and placed it in the crate between us.
III. It was cool the first morning Maurice set to work. The sun dawned red ochre tangerine, swept over the ridge with the silent rush of the morning mist, assured the inhabitants of those fields another day of madness. Down in the fields the mist lay like a blanket, and the crickets already letting loose a racket.

On the hill above the fields in the farmhouse Anselmo owned the dog lay splattered across the carpet. Maurice, on the first night he slept in the creaking room that leaked mosquitoes, dreamed of black chickens mauled by the dog, the sorrow of a hen curled to sleep beside her headless lover. The vanishing ecstasy of the momentary respite between dreams, the horrible hung neck of that same dog who greeted him with snarls hung from a tree, was it Anselmo or his own brother with a whip in hand? He hauled himself from the faceless sleep and let himself sink into the deepest valleys of his steaming blankets where the terror of black silence ringing through the dramas of his mind could no longer overwhelm him. The warm, wet sheets irritated his legs. Against the fear of the night he launched furious invectives without expression or word. Anselmo’s snores snuck through to his room and he swore he would never cry again. The morning began when the Mexicans arrived and the dog greeted them barking.

"You got to jiggle it a little," Anselmo said. "It won’t start for nothing if you don’t jiggle it."

The tractor spout spat a stream of black smoke like billions of noxious spores. Maurice pulled his shirt over his face and dropped it down immediately. The dog watched them through the window. Maurice was pouting.

"It’s not catching. Maybe it’s the ignition. Sometimes if the spark plug—"

"You got to jiggle it," said Anselmo. His belly was tight like snake sinew and his muscles curved and bulged across the seams of his ancient shirt. The Mexicans pretended not to listen. "You’re not jigging it."
"I'm trying," said Maurice. "It's not starting." He looked at the Mexicans by the wash bin. Manuel and Felix, Anselmo had said, were equally illiterate and never really picked up spoken English. But they could work. They were men. They stood over the wash basin like gargoyles over a buttress, not even their eyes moved as their hands tore independently rotten leaves off the cabbages.

"It starts when you make it start. You got to jiggle it."

When the tractor started Anselmo told him to shut it off. In the fields a quarter mile below with the crickets and the hoppers and the mile-long rows of carrots and corn Maurice had two buckets and a wheelbarrow. When the day was done, before he lay still dressed and immobile and listening to the sounds of lovemaking condensing in the room beside his newly own Anselmo inspected the crates he had filled that day.

"Not half bad, your first day. You might learn enough to compete with the Jamaicans, you give it a year or two. With the Mexicans too."

Maurice swayed in the wind. Manuel and Felix nodded. Anselmo said, "Tomorrow you start again when the men arrive. I need the greenhouse greens cut before it's too hot. And anyway, they're due to bolt. I told Beth to take what she wants, so make up the crates in the high tunnel and tell the troops it's victory or death—today we fight, we give everything, here, and now, to show them what a real man's made of. You hear me? It ends today. They want hell, we'll give it to them. We can put an end to this once and for all. You hear me?" Maurice nodded. "I got to freshen up now," Anselmo said.

In the unfamiliarity of his new room Maurice made a new vow, to never again relinquish the trails of his thoughts for the sake of another man who deserved his take by accident, never for the sake of the pigs who paid him, never for the sake of the half-souled havers who demanded the body he would supply with honor—but he would never give up what he heard inside.
Maurice came to the farm after an unsuccessful stint as a copy editor in midtown. Before that, he had rejected an offer to star in an off-Broadway production called 'The Iron Curtain' because his mother, who had a voice prettier than his own, suggested to his father, a workhorse lawyer, that the producer, a graying, gay photographer, wanted Maurice in the lead role for reasons that had nothing to do with his talent.

Yes, daddy—

You want to ruin my investments to the ground? Keep sucking me and your mother dry? Not my son—no—I’ll cut you off—nothing to me—You don’t know anything about the world. Even I, your nothing father, I won’t let you do it—it’s a joke, isn’t it? You’re joking.

Okay, daddy—

I won’t let it happen. Do you know what they would do to you? To my son? Do you have the faintest concept of what it would do to us? Do you have the slightest inkling of respect? Not my son—freak, bum, punk—Never—we made this all for you—

Daddy, please—

His mother, in a fit of pity and confusion, purged herself to multiple friends as the shrieks whispered up the steps to her room, and as fate would have it, evoked sympathy in the ears of her conspirator who called a friend who knew a friend who knew a man an hour north of the house who owned a farm and could use someone like Maurice.

Maurice learned he might keep his plans to himself if he wanted them to happen. His parents helped him move up and out, and with a quiet cursory glance Maurice said goodbye to their home and stuffed the disorderliness of his affections where no one could find them.

Before he took to copy editing Maurice had attended Hampshire College where assessment existed only behind the instructors’ lids, in the expectations and fiercely invisible competitiveness of his peers who each seemed to possess something vital he lacked. It was there he finally felt the
power and pleasure of possessing another, even solely in his imagination. When she deserted him, he 
chivalrously concluded it was his duty to defy the sanity of her resolve—not in words, not to her, 
but with his pudgy untrained fists and pale purple heart. He was knocked out under a waning moon 
by the basketball courts and the winner and his contested bean brought Maurice to the hospital 
where he came to, thanked them sweetly on awakening, asked for privacy, wept bitterly, and stuffed 
the magnitude of what he could only conceive as his failure to the place he might forget.

From an early age his father feared the type of coward Maurice would become. He 
strategically prohibited in his presence the manifestation of Maurice’s incidental pleasantries, his 
sweet and soft responses, his inclination to pastries, poodles, ballets, grandmothers—anything he 
considered stereotypically belonging to what he called the female race. When the child was born, he 
came with two others. They and the ones who already existed showed no signs of irregularity. He 
would let Maurice play baseball, box, serve mass, but not join the choir. He would let him get fat, 
but only if he could maintain the pleasure privately. The secretiveness of that gesture Maurice’s 
father passed to him joyfully, intensified by the sorrow he developed while the triplets absorbed 
almost everything in their mother’s womb, cracked her nails and brittle her bones until her 
husband could hardly help but despise the destiny his love co-created.

I found that all out about him because he told me, in the end he told me everything. It was 
better than that by the time I moved in, but it was still lonely for Maurice, with Anselmo and Beth 
screaming, and the dog who snarled at him. Something in me wanted to cry for him when I first 
pulled up to see the room. It was the way he choked curiosity before he could really see you. He 
looked me up and down with a crate of broccoli on his shoulders, gauged my strength, and I wanted 
to cry because he could have been beautiful and sweet and inspired but he was bitter and mean with 
ticks and weights and levees in him and I knew it was so because he was the hiding person who I 
was going to be if I couldn’t toss my need to get paid, like my friends, who needed to go out and
dress up and eat out and take cabs and hook up and sleep late and take pills and powders and smoke cigarettes without feeling them while loitering at the most recently fashionable place where you wore leather pants long after it signified someone filled by resolution or bravery. I could see Maurice denying all that, yet wanting all that, and pretending it was a homey possible thing to squash away for endless seasons of organic radishes and garlic scapes. Those seasons he sought for the sake of a future conditioned by a neglected past. I was sad and scared for him when we first met.
IV. When I first arrived at the farm, before I got to working, Maurice told me I should learn to shoot rabbits.

“As long as you’re going to live on a farm, you should learn to shoot.”

“I’m vegan,” I said.

He ignored me and I followed him to the basement where they kept the rifles. There was the safety, the scope, a way to hold it, and a way to carry yourself as you carried it, he told me. He demonstrated, like a little tin soldier. Then he put it in my hands and took his own. Two tin soldiers.

I was silent as a mime following him down the fields to shoot grazing rabbits. The time before twilight under the eaves of the trees where we stood made me feel happy and rested and alive. I had forgotten I could be alive. We looked out at the fields of cabbage and lettuce where they would scurry and at the paths abutting the crazy bushes. I looked for signs of rabbits on the edge of the bushes like he told me. But I liked the jewel weed against the greens and the primrose against the ditches and the purple loosestrife erect against the sun. Orange yellow purple, almost alien, glowing, luminous. Then the shot rang out. It wasn’t death or the subsequent skinning or the seven leverets enclosed in the amniotic sac but the quiet simmering rage I watched him transmute to stillness before the trigger rang that terrified me forever, his perfect monstrous poise someone like Greco would want to witness that terrified me forever, that same indifferent response to an impulse responsible to rape, cruelty, or the absolute sterility that incinerated Hiroshima, Nagasaki.

Truth is hard to talk about because once you hold it up like it’s something different from you you change it, and it’s not really truth, or you, anymore. That’s the best way I could introduce you to me and my friend, Maurice. He put so much of himself outside himself for the world to see it took his offer and snatched him up until there was nothing left inside him worth the truth he paid for. I tried to stuff him full of true things he put outside again, my noble misery. Then I tried to take it out to clean and unclog him. You can’t really unclog an Irish Catholic.
V. Anselmo was excited when I moved in. He wanted to throw a party, in general and secretly for me. I told him not to but he did anyway. I think he was glad to have someone around besides Maurice, and I was good looking, and he didn’t know who I liked yet, or that I was a freak. He made Maurice prepare for it, as I feared, and then he invited too many people. He even hired a band, a couple of college kids itching to perform. I was menstruating heavily when it happened and I was glad to look and feel a little sick.

“I'm bleeding,” I told him, “I’m really grateful for you and I feel really welcome, but I'm bleeding and I need to lie down or I'm going to collapse.”

I really felt very woozy standing there telling him about my cycle a week after moving into his maniacal house set above the wildest land I’d ever known. The dog sniffed my crotch.

“Thank you, I need to go to my room,” I said. I think I crawled up the steps. It pissed rain that night anyway, and Anselmo had to cancel the party at the last minute.

It was cozy in the heat of my half-made room where I could try to count the drops of rain lashing. One moment between moments. Enter, some contemplative journey between sounds, all the way to somewhere behind my eyes. Behind your eyes. It was like a sanctuary a hundred miles north of the siren screeching city. I liked the city, and I knew that even buildings were natural, but I was proud to admit my new bias for the pine trees outside my window.

I had a headache, and I could have taken some water, but I remained happily immobile. I was relieved to be myself in the blankets with myself with the wet blind heat making me pulse and force my cheeks to smile. I had about 10,000 dollars in savings that would last me a year if I was smart, and the state would give me more if I was really smart. The car was old but durable and I felt myself flicking through the pictures in my phone when I couldn’t take the pressure inside.
It was okay to be nostalgic to balance the newness with old pictures. And then it was exclusively indulgent. I put down my phone and the rain splats from my warm bed were friends. I counted my friends. It was so nice to be nostalgic from here. The wind can’t hurt me. This house is crazy. Houses are crazy. I’m crazy. I’ll make friends. I’ll make friends and friends will make me. And I’ll never love again like I love her. Maybe you’ll love more. It’s okay, we’ve been through that before. But it’s different, too. A house is a funny thing. It has all this stuff. It has all these places for all this stuff, and you can do whatever you want in it. Then there are rooms, and some of the rooms have locks. I want friends and lovers and I hope for the future for people. But they’re ugly and they made things ugly everywhere, so why should I bother hoping? Hope to outlast time, that’s my neurosis. Who am I? I trust something, I think. It brought me here, didn’t it? Who’s listening? In the cozy room with my friends, pit and pat. Pit and Pat and their families, drop and let. All are welcome.

And then the rain sounded deeper. I wondered if I could feel as cozy as a worm in the dirt, or warm like how I imagined a rodent might nestle in the hollow of a tree. The rain sounded deeper and I wondered if they were listening to it too, Maurice and Anselmo, or how it sounded to the ants underground or the cats who lived under the deck. Maybe they were cozy inside listening too. I wondered what shape we made, what we would look like if you connected us as individual points, if you could look through the trees and the dirt and the siding. Listening together in our separate quarters. But the trees and dirt and things were living too, in their own way. The whole world was like that. I imagined like that and I lay still, and I listened. Then I felt we were travelling through the end of a vortex like spit in a vuvuzela, or touching the distance travelled by the sound of a shofar. Then I think I fell asleep.
VI. As time passed, big time in life, I found it more and more challenging to remember how much concentration it once took to do things I can now do without much effort. It took me seven years to tell a person I love that I loved her, and it probably took another set to learn to hear those words as they came out my mouth. There are all kinds of things I forget I wasn’t born with. And I still forget that I am not the measure of the other. I guess that’s a bit why I really thought I was dreaming when I heard a voice outside my room say, “Peony? Peony? Would you be so kind as to spare a moment or two?”

I shuffled around in my sheets, forgiving myself for the mounds of cocaine and molly I’d snorted in my late teens. The door cracked open.

“Pardon me—are you decent?”

It was Maurice come to take me away, or eat me, or maybe offer a massage.

“Are you going to rape me?” I asked. I thought he deserved to grovel for a little.

“Oh, heavens, no! It wasn’t my intention to startle you, please, forgive me,” he said and set to stop peeking through my cracked door.

His voice enraged me.

I stopped him and told him to come in. I was curious. I wanted to know what made him make his voice like mink silk. It made me furious inside but I was lucky because I knew that was my own problem and he was just a lost daisy. I gave him my smile.

The room was filled with boxes. There was no chair for him to sit on and I was excited and scared that I had attracted him. I didn’t really think he would hurt me but I still had to refuse to let the thought make my mood. Then I felt a little sick. “Would you bring me a glass of water?” I asked him. He stood in the doorway. “I’m menstruating.”

He brought me water and I thanked him. He lingered in the doorway.

“Pardon me,” he said.
He held his hand over his mouth as he spoke. "I was unaware that it was that time of the month for you. I was concerned. Here, we agricultural folk like to take care of our own. Anselmo said you weren't feeling so good, so I took it on myself to offer whatever meager services I have to lend a hand."

"Cheers," I said, and raised the glass. He raised an invisible glass and curtsied. I wanted to pretend I was still in the warm and slippery land between fatigue and dreams. I tried to count the rain lashing as I spoke.

"How long have you been living here, anyway," I asked.

He counted in the air. "This will be my fourth season."

"How was the party?"

He checked to make sure no one was eavesdropping.

"This is my fourth season and Anselmo's never thrown a party for me. He doesn't even let me have my friends come over. To be frank," he said and covered his mouth, "I wanted to come here to ask you a little favor."

He seemed to want my permission to continue talking, so I nodded.

"What about if you asked Anselmo if I could be the singer at the next party, if we reschedule? I could get a little crew together—it would be so amazing; we've been working on some songs for a few months now. I'm the choir master. We sing multi-ethnic indigenous field songs of the underprivileged and repressed. I look up the translations myself, on my day off. It does take a really long time, but it's one of the main things I like to do, other than read history. I don't have much time for dating, the way things are."

I was counting rain drops. It felt like I'd collapse if I stopped.
“It would be an honor,” I said. “But, you know, I don’t really like parties right now, and I told Anselmo not to set this one up. I think he wanted to do it for some other reason. You really think he’d listen to me instead of you?”

Then he was whispering to me on his knees on the bare floor beside my bed with his crazy hands covering his crazy mouth. The good feeling I had hearing myself talk, trying to bring sense to the rain, dissolved.

“I’m the farm manager around here. I wouldn’t dare compromise any professional boundaries; this is our livelihood. It would ruin our working relationship. You’ll understand. For now, suffice to say that the important thing is you tell him you heard my choir sing and you’d like to have us perform next time. That should work.”

I was silent. He was too close to me. I wondered about his destiny. He seemed as liable to end up stuck in quicksand as he was to be elected local comptroller, maybe even mayor. That silky voice.

“Take your time,” he said.

I nodded.
VII. At breakfast the next morning, the dog, Tucker, an enormous gangly rescue, lay beside my chair with his paws stretched out in front of his muzzle, his eyes flicking up to me as I ate. The clouds had broken overnight and it was clear and crisp and fresh feeling. I had phone calls to make, along with my room, and plans to explore the vegetable valley below. I felt less foggy than the night before but Maurice’s plans and my period and the newness of everything around me made the nourishment make me sleepy. I let Tucker lick my plate. The way his tongue curled all around the bowl like a giant octopus around a fish. I wondered if that was suffering or joy. He finished the plate so quickly and looked at me panting with such expectant joy I figured he couldn’t really have enjoyed it. It was gone before he knew what happened, and then he wanted more. It was like discovering sex the first time you had the chance to be free. It was wonderful until you both discovered limits of your own and the other’s creativity, and then something risked exhaustion.

A swatch of drool from the side of Tucker’s lips threatened to separate from its source. The sound of a truck backing up the driveway thudded through the window Peony watched and Tucker’s dangling spittle tore across his face barking an alarming, bare, even staccato, his front paws tearing at the windows, snout steam fogging the glass.

It was not clear if he could hear the words Peony chose to soothe him. The glass pane shattered and between the 12-foot drop and the truck backing up was only a dusty, torn screen. Then he yelped all of a sudden and quietened.

Maurice through the basement door burst with a sear of curses. He pointed a little remote at Tucker.

“I got you, you mangy mongrel mutt. How you like that, then, uhh?”

Tucker whimpered on the couch, curled and merged into its angular interior, his long front legs covering his front, his paws pressed against his snout.
“You get down now, you hear,” he said, his voice like hollow tin, “What you looking at me for, uhly?” he demanded of Peony speechless and dark set still against the morning light. The floral greens in the light on the table, the clean plates trembled, and Tucker whimpering.

“You don’t know it yet here, you little ragoon, he don’t answer to no one but the bell—isn’t that right, Tucker?”

The truck was quiet now, and only the sound of the dog whimpering snuck through the silence of the dining room. “Come here. Sit. Lick.” The dog Tucker obeyed and smiled and licked the proffered hand. And then the truck gate slammed shut and Tucker like a pickerel curled barking again through the first and the second and the third zap zap zap and Peony yapping and the delivery man staring, watching, dropped his load and left, Maurice zap zap zapping the morning incongruence.

When the truck was gone Tucker laid on the couch. The broken glass looked like scattered jewels in the sunlight.

“Damn thing’s never charged,” said Maurice.

Peony sat there.

“It’s how it goes,” said Maurice.

“How’d you like that choked around your neck?”

“What do you know about my neck?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Wouldn’t you like the know.”

“What are you talking about?” repeated Peony.

Maurice held his grin slant, the edges of his eyes blazing acutely, as though in cahoots with some universal secret no price would pry from his guard. “I know how to behave,” he said.

“Cruelty.”
“It’s necessary.”

“I used to work with dogs; it’s not his fault he does that.”

“Really? I don’t have time to talk about this crap.”

Maurice connected the remote to its charger. Then he announced, to no one in particular, “Someone’s got to do some work around here.” He left Peony stretched out on the couch beside Tucker.

At the landing where the packages stood Maurice mumbled to himself incoherently. The Mexicans under the shade of the terrace waited for his word to resume work. The buzz of the crickets coiled round the center zone of Maurice, sidled up his throat like a cat curling to sleep and simply be. Tucker and Peony could burn, he was busy. He set aside the notions jangling through his mind, the mutt on a spit, and addressed them in formal Spanish.
VIII. That day Peony left the farm, not for good, but long enough to mark themself absent. Over the hills on the other side of the mountain there was a Buddhist shrine they wanted to see. It had been converted from a bed and breakfast, and devoted caretakers stayed there.

It's important because that's where and when Peony's lover was found, another freak flung from another displaced place, another system of tangled dreams dreaming dreams to escape, to tarry, to fly, to stay—to excel anywhere but here. It was like an invisible wildfire when they met, Ester and Peony. They spoke in the parking lot outside the temple, in full view of the others who were glad for something to watch. Ester Margarite Clemens III, born to a fortune too extravagant for greed, shared with Peony a love for those mountains and streams, running from the city, the quiet morning walks between trees. She lived like a bourgeois nun, then, in the shrine. And she wanted, she found, a body to please, a commensurate ear, and all the ancillaries accompanied by the cozy frantic glow of a lover's eye.

When it was time to leave her, surely, they would return. Peony did make the room clean. In three weeks, the boxes were trashed, sting lights were set, a carpet dusted and swept, donations from Ester curtained the room, and the feud between themself and Maurice forgotten. There was no other way to place it. Maurice simply nodded, avoided, like a swarm of refuse washed on a crystal beach in Ecuador. He simply ignored it. Tucker continued to bark sweetly, and Anselmo, impervious to anything that held his hand in obligation excessive to his appetite, bored, spoke sweetly as the dog, secretly cruel and supremely indifferent to cause and consequence, and said, "What you think, Maurice? We might use another hand this week—see what she's made of? You can use her?"

Maurice mumbled between a gobble of some thick congealed mealy thing, dripped off his spoon like hot wax. He wiped his hand with the makeshift bib stuffed down his collar, removed
from either ear with either hand the headphones blazing American controversy and blames, and fixed his eyes indirectly as he spoke.

"In this country any man, woman, or, person, is entitled, allegedly, to work, as long as they go without complaining about their employer, without defending the right to a fair wage, without demanding compensation for the levees foisted on the worker by the man."

"Quit it, Maury. You know what I mean. What you think?"

Maury slurped porridge. "Whatever you say, chief."

Anselmo hated that name, but he wanted the idea condoned, wanted his liability dropped, and the decision made with Maury's blessing. Then he could drop blame in case. He wanted to see what would happen to them both, together in the fields in the sun where he could care less what happened to the crop rot destined for dirt, without the need for more thought. That's what bankruptcy was for.

"You're my man, Maury. You give the word," he said.

"You work with plants, with dirt before?" Maury asked Peony.

"A little."

"I'm serious. I don't want to waste my breath on another yuppie made out to quit after a couple broken nails. We work round the clock. If you got to stop, you stop, but if you keep stopping, you quit, and I can't rely on you. You got it?"

Peony nodded. Maurice nodded. Anselmo nodded and counted money. He handed it to Maurice. Maurice calculated in the air with his spoon. The dog smiled and stared and panted beneath him. It was 7am.

Half an hour later Peony was following the tractor out into the field, down the broken gravel road under the minute forest. It disappeared, suddenly engorged by tracks and tracks of open swamp land stretched out to the edge of the forest, rising into the line merging with sky, gazing,
gazing, and if not for the mad incessant buzz of insects in droves, the air would be light enough to let them join that composite space where the forest strove to the sky. Then it was Peony passing the bifurcate limbs under which they hid to shoot rabbits. The Mexicans followed. A trail of bile smoked out the tractor spout. They considered Peony, walked staidly, agreed to each other a lady man walks here and snickered without expression. Maurice halted the tractor. He stumbled off and began to speak. They, the Mexicans, then suddenly awed at the momentary equality placed between themselves and Peony, the first white person they’d known who could feel what they felt, could communicate nothingness in the narrow space between Maurice’s words, something fragile and delicate like the immersion of mist in a rainbow their gruffness would often only hide, make more beautiful by contrast, complimentary in Peony’s fat wet eyes the instant between some directive to send them away to field number 4. They carried away buckets and two knives. Peony waited in the sun. Waiting didn’t matter. Maurice spoke.

“Well, well, well, well, well. Here we are, just you and me. Tell me, what’s the real reason you’re here?”

I knew he would go there, they thought. I knew why. I wouldn’t tell him I wanted to feel. I wouldn’t say how I wished with my every fiber to distribute through my ventricle nerves a taste of something earthy and pure, replace what was lacking in me from the accident of my birth when they tore me from my mother to that last crazy stint in the hospital where they’d washed me with pills I learned to pretend to take. I wanted what I knew was stereotypical, I wanted what I knew he would mock, and I wanted a purpose, a way, a something very physical and warm and sultry without mercy that answered as sarcastically as possible the voice in me oily for money. I wanted ruthlessly to serve his measure of devotion. I wanted to be beside Maurice, to either help him or discover the way I would fail him.

“What the heck’s the reason any one of us is here?” I asked.
"You want my job?"

It came as a simple obvious truth to me, and I forgave myself the idiocy of having overlooked it.

"Your job? I couldn’t do what you do," I said.

"Is that what you think?"

"Of course—I need some rent money, it’s convenient, and I want to be on the land. If it’s not going to work out, I’ll find something else, I’m sorry."

"You need to want it. You need to want to put real food in people’s mouths. Convenience won’t cut it. You might as well quit now."

"No, I understand, that makes sense, it’s not only convenient, but that makes it better too."

"That’s right. You speak to Anselmo yet?"

"What?"

"About the choir."

I didn’t remember what the hell he was talking about. I thought of Ester, and wealth, and cozy warm blankets, and incense burning over hardwood floors where the corners of walls were well dusted and clear. Maurice was here sniveling questions. I remembered.

"No, not yet, but I will, I promise, I’m waiting for the right time."

"You are, are you? You’re trying to take my job?"

"I couldn’t do your job, I can’t."

"I know what you’re doing to Anselmo. I know your type."

"Then why did you let me come out here? What do you want?"

"What do you want? What do you want?" he imitated me. "Do you know who I am?"

I was almost having fun. I swore to myself to remember to thank heaven for his existence before I went to sleep that night. "Who are you?" I asked.
“I’m the farm manager here. I’m the one who sweats to make this place work. I’m the one who got this god forsaken place off the ground. I’m the one Anselmo asks about crop placement. I’m the one Manuel and Felix answer to. I’m the one who gives up weekends, every summer weekend, to sell these goddamn crops so little old ladies at the market can have some fresh produce and charm in their lives. I’m the one you answer to. I’m the one who tells you what to do. Pick up those buckets.”

I picked up the buckets. The handle felt wonderful to grasp. I made my body do what he told me to do, and inside I listened to a choir of curses pour out my limbs, sidle down my legs into the soil as I followed him, carrying two buckets himself, down the overgrown path between rotting cabbage, nutsedge points squeezing out the tops of their blades like comets. Constellations of water spots rippled where little peepers dove into the ditches to hide from his thudding boots. The green skim duckweed, overgrowth everywhere, an ecstasy of nature’s emphatic victory. I wanted to be gentle.

“Are we going to get the cantaloupe before it rains?”

“We’re going to the cantaloupe kingdom, where rot takes extra tax on your sweat.”

He started to sing in a language I couldn’t place. I was feeling ballsy.

“What are you singing? What language is that? It’s so beautiful.”

He continued to sing. I should have known better than to interrupt him, but the sudden responsiveness had emboldened me and I forgot what I was really following him there for.
IX. The next day I saw Ester and told her what he showed me at the beaver dam.

“It sounds awful,” said Ester.

“But something special too,” I said.

“I like to hear about Tucker.”

“You’ll come soon, when things are settled, won’t you?”

“I’ll come when you want.”

“Don’t only play, won’t you?”

“I promise to.”

“What if I don’t ever get it ready?”

“I’ll help you.”

“What if bringing you harms you?”

“I would suffer it.”

“Because you like suffering.”

“That’s what they say.”

“I’m scared sometimes.”

“I know, it’s fearsome.”

“Maurice means well and I don’t know how to help him.”

“You’ll know.”

“I hate men.”

“Then don’t bring them here.”

“I don’t really hate men.”

“I know.”

“I don’t, and I do.”

“So Anselmo just sits around?” asked Ester.
“I don’t know what he does, he sort of just makes sure things are happening.”

“I don’t like him.”

“He’s a strange one. I think he goes off gambling and betting. He borrows money.”

“Poor Maury. But you shouldn’t do that to yourself. It’s not right.”

“He needs help, I can’t help it.”

“Yes, you can. You have to save some for me.”

“You’re lovely. Don’t be selfish.”

“You’re lovely. Be more selfish.”

“Don’t make me gag.”

“I’ll leave that to Maury.”

Peony ignored her. “I don’t like that name for him.”

“Anselmo calls him that?”

“Yeah, it’s like manipulation. He answers to Anselmo, but he despises him too.”

“I know you’re following something different from me, but I still wish you’d just bail and come here. Or something closer and quieter.”

“That’s the special thing I felt from you, that you wanted things but you let them be how they are but you still want it anyway.”

“Maybe I’m too cowardly to make a difference.”

“Not when you know it’s important, and that’s when it really matters.”

“When I talk to you, I feel like I’m talking to myself.”

“I think that’s how it’s supposed to be.”

“Supposed to.”

“Supposed to.”
Ester ignored Peony and said, “But if I talk to myself when I talk to you, wouldn’t I still keep out the parts I hide from myself?”

“That would be sneaky. I guess it’s up to you. But maybe not. It depends. Sometimes you don’t get to see the choice. Maybe that’s what’s fearsome.”

They tangled more into each other.

“Maybe that’s why you love Maurice.”

“Because he brings things out of me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Right.”

“Correct.”

“Tip top.”

“Jolly good.”

“Right-O.”

“Okay, partner.”

“I’m not your partner.”

“Then who are you?”

“I’m the assistant to the manager of black creek farm.”

“And I’m HR. You should tell me everything. Did he touch you?”

“No, not yet. HR touched me.”

“Oh, did she?”

“Yes, she did.”

“Where did she touch you?”

“Can I show you?”
“Show me.”

“Here.”

Peony pointed at their neck. “And here.” Peony pointed at their ear. “And here.” They pointed at their belly.

“Where else did she touch you?”

Here. And here. And here. And here.

Afterwards, Peony fell asleep. Ester lay awake restless with energy. She could only watch Peony for so long. There was that crazy book Peony swore by on the ground beside the bed. Jemima Wilkinson, the first non-binary person to make a stand in America, for as much as they knew. But it was a little funny she had turned herself into a cult leader. Ester flipped through the pages. The author titled the book an autobiography. But it wasn’t written by Jemima. It was full of scathing commentary.

Ester put the book on the floor. Whoever Peony was, she was glad to have found and been found by her, of them, of whoever Peony was. She wrapped her arms around Peony and kissed the back of her neck and tried to lay still but every time she tried to concentrate on being fleshy restful another part of her mind made everything spasmodic and uncomfortable until the rearranging motions brought Peony to wake, slightly, softly, bemusedly, half aware in dreams of tall grasses brushing her legs, wind on her cheeks and neck, the softness of a body at the asymptote of exhaustion dipping, swaying, sinking into the mud by the banks of the beaver damn he said they must destroy for the beaver’s sake, otherwise Anselmo would set the trappers there, otherwise they would flood the ditches over the crops he hardly cared for. The earnestness of Maurice’s voice she’d never heard, the way something even softer whispered in her ears, the way a mother’s hand caresses a forehead, a fever. Their arms, legs, like a pair of crazy coupling snakes, the warmth between them perfect.
X. Anselmo, slumped against the tub with the cool tile flush to his nakedness. The house was empty. Tucker was chained to the shed outside, serving as a watch when the sound of someone arrived. The men were in the fields. It was 3 o clock.

It was like wearing a wound so long you forgot it was there. In the drawer of his bedroom the pills waited in the nest of his socks, a store of little blue pebbles he placed on the dresser and shaved down and crushed to snort or dissolve and heat to inject. Without end in sight, like a vicious circle, the perception of a sphere, sudden vicious laughter emblematic of distress, his quiet voice tangled like a dry cough caught on itself before sounding. Anselmo on the bathroom floor with a needle stuck in his arm, spew in a wastepaper bucket beside him. He expected a call from a friend who owed him who offered to take him to The Blue Moon, a strip club a few miles down. It didn’t work with the little pebbly pills, but it would by then, and then who would care.

It was seven years since he’d inherited the farm, from his grandfather who had disowned his own son for speaking too often his mind. Anselmo loitered on the fortunate side of the schism while his mother worried and watched the revocation dispatch she and her husband—Anselmo loitered, unschooled, obedient to power and his grandfather’s diction, the first act of loyalty to what he called a man.

Before that they’d set onions on the road in a half mile line from the house, an excuse to gather the neighbors to gossip. He remembered the black dirt specked face of his father up the hill from the fields, the pungency that drifted from immoderate distances, seemed to stick like oil or butter after working hours, his silence, and the way he was served by his mother. Anselmo remembered the Sunday morning laughter of his grandfather, the easy leaning men and the women in dresses who’d take onions or stop for a barrel of soil or for some private word with the owner. An exchange. His grandfather, red from the sun and drinking, wrinkled as though he’d been on the sea like his father, before they shipped to New York. Anselmo’s grandfather took him in with the
easy forbearance of immigrant silence, livered apathy, and a hatred of his own son who would have
sold poisoned produce as a compromise for the labor. Anselmo laid against the tub with plans to
slip money to a stripper and remembered how he’d come to take the place for his own after the old
old man died, in that very same room he’d stripped of the wallpaper, and how he had managed the
house and the farm alone for a season, how he had learned to curse the sun and the sweat and the
incongruity of his efforts and their results, world without end, a perfect sphere, rotund like her
breasts, a vicious circle he would bite.

He stumbled out the bathroom and onto the stairs. The staircase wallpaper he hadn’t
stripped was variety velvet, shaped like wrought iron, white and red. It felt like her in his hands, on
his fingers. He gasped, the landing dropped, the banister beyond his flailing arms down fourteen
carpeted steps angular thud thud thuds creaked each staggered barrel roll down the steps, his
massive hips hurled, the knot of limbs like twigs off a fallen tree stump. In the mimicry of
momentary respite he caressed the wallpaper, the perception of pain arrested the soft velvet
wallpaper nostalgically. The dog licked his face on the landing.

Peony found sheets to cover his nakedness. His pulse was slow and seemed to be controlled.
There was the quiver of a smile. Peony wept a quiet tear drop on the dead phone. Tucker laid down
beside them. It wasn’t sadness, but confusion overwhelming the course of possible logics, to tilt his
crooked neck or leave it set, to dislodge the needle or let it stay affixed, if Maurice would disturb
their vigil, the beauty of the creeping twilight through the glass panes, if a remedy was needed then
or waiting would be enough, how the concomitant legality of an ambulance could determine his fate.
Peony went into their room beside the landing and stuck the charger cord into the phone, returned
to Anselmo, and waited. It was quiet in the house except for the heavy breathing. There was a tone
like silver where they waited for nothing to happen. Peony left again to pour a glass of water, and
trickled it down Anselmo’s forehead. Tucker leapt up. Maurice entered singing, carrying a wicker basket full of beets.

The only solemnity missing were candles, a grotesque pieta, the blanket covering everything but his feet and face. The stillness Maurice abhorred. “What in God’s name is going on here,” he said.

“Maurice, I think he fell,” said Peony.

“What have you got him swaddled in blankets for? Is he dead?”

“He must have slipped down the stairs after taking a shower.”

“Oh, God, he’s bleeding. What are you doing?”

“I don’t know!”

Maurice thumped through the hallway to them. Peony blocked him. Maurice pushed Peony aside.

“Maurice, don’t!”

Peony pulled at Maurice’s shirt collar. “You can paralyze him if you move him now.”

Maurice stopped. He grunted. “We need action. Did you call an ambulance?”

“My phone’s dead, now it’s charging. I couldn’t decide what to do.”

“Got to do everything around here. Need it done, a real man.”

“You’re so good, Maurice.”

He reached to his pocket for his phone, glanced the dog’s tail wagging, brushing Anselmo’s head. He kicked Tucker away. Peony was watching him. There’s no pressure like another person’s watching that confounds the mind’s ability to speak, something in him said, a bitch’s doubt I need like a horsefly bites my ass. He was already in the other room.

For all Peony knew if they came with the ambulance and saw the needle they might press charges, if Maurice found out he would wear it in his eyes against Anselmo forever, and things
would get worse. Peony uncovered the sheets and pulled the syringe. Anselmo gasped, his face like a squirrel in heat. He curled his naked legs and shoved against the banister, craned his neck. Tucker was barking, Anselmo was moaning, and Peony slipped the syringe under the bedroom door.

"The ambulance is coming," said Maurice. "Sweet Jesus."

"Auuooo," Anselmo spoke from the ground beneath the sheets, gently rubbing his scalp.

"Hellfire, you're living," said Maurice.

"Dunoo," said Anselmo.

"Anselmo," said Peony.

Anselmo ignored Peony. He spoke to Maurice, "Ouu, say, am boo?"

"What?"

"Am boo"

"Rest a second, chief,"

"Anselmo," said Peony. He looked at Peony, some happy cruelty in his eyes, like a dancer backstage after the first night's performance. Peony poured water between his lips. He spoke.

"Ambulance?"

"It's coming," said Maurice.

"You got insurance."

"What?"

"I don't have insurance. I can't pay."

"They're coming whether you like it or not," said Maurice.

"You're feeling better?" said Peony. Anselmo looked at Peony again, communicated something somehow that staunched Peony's throat, gently, filled the back of her neck so the way to speech felt uncomfortable, like staying in bed.

"You got insurance," he said to Maurice.
When the ambulance arrived, Maurice was laying on the couch with a bag of ice on his head. The paramedics at the door Tucker greeted furiously, his hind legs scratching at the glass door. Anselmo peeked through a window, instructed Peony to greet them, tell them it was fine.

Peony took the trouble, with the falsified sigh of a tolerant wife, to lead Tucker down the steps locked in the basement and out of sight. Maurice complied, filed out the paperwork, thanked them in his sweetly voice, a little miscue, no concussion, thank God, his loquaciousness evident of nothing to be done. Peony was having fun, offered the paramedics a drink. They left, and Maurice returned to the Mexicans, to drive them home from work.

That night, before Anselmo left for the Blue Moon, he said to Peony he wouldn’t take rent from her for the month.

“Because I’m a good guy,” he said.

“My friend died from an overdose,” Peony said.

“I don’t need a therapist.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Sure.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Why’d you wait to wake up?”

“What do you mean?”

“You were awake the whole time, weren’t you?”

“I was resting.”

“Maurice doesn’t know, does he?”

“He wouldn’t know that you blinded him.”

“It’s crazy over here.”
“It’s how it is.”

“I won’t tell anyone.”

“I’d make it not matter if you did. But don’t.”

“Don’t drive tonight.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not.”

“Can you do me one favor?”

He looked at her the way he shut her up before. Peony spoke anyway.

“Can you be nicer to Maurice?”

“Like I can make rain.” Peony waited. “He’s a clown,” Anselmo said. “I don’t make him do shit.” He paused. “I’ll try.”

“It’ll make my life better,” said Peony.

“You’ll see what happens when I try.”

“Can you let his choir sing if you have a party?”

“Maybe.”

They shut up about it then like beaks cauterized. They split either way, Anselmo to the Blue Moon, picked up by a friend, Peony to the room without raindrops to befriend.

The night closed on them, katydids and crickets singing, the sound of kitchen pans clanking downstairs, Maurice tied to the sound of his earplugs raging.

Peony sat still on the floor of the room and wondered, without siding to conviction, what it was there that needed them there. The crickets and katydids spoke like water droplets each moment more clearly Peony felt feeling descend from them into some secret core, almost clarified by Maurice’s clanging kitchen pots, like water rushing, falling into a slim, rocky space. And then something happened inside, and Peony decided to leave, as though the world of the room and the house and the farm, the buckets and shovels, the chicken coop, the garage, the bushes and trees
rubbing against there, the forests, the fields all exceeding aggregates of some common form, as
much myself as a dead rock and the wind who brushes it. Peony left, and followed the terrible night
where the whole farmland and terraces of trees below the ridge turned, turned and spun with terrible
clarity, an exile spinning round the pole—the dancer’s hips pivoted, rhythmic, close enough to
receive the folded bills Anselmo placed between herself and her lingerie.
On the farm after the fall slipped in and plunged the weeds in the fields mute and bare
Maurice without any buckets or tools went on his own time singing to the creek, where he might
rest a bare moment himself, where he could hear the water trickling through the little dam, where
Anselmo was too unwieldy to approach, where Peony knew to leave him be, where the newly
arrived bastard couldn’t see him, couldn’t pretend to care, wouldn’t waste his time, his precious,
precocious, limited time.

The geese to the city overhead he hardly overheard. They permeated the sky. Maurice almost
tear. The thought of subservience and the attitude from him it issued, the way he beckoned, was
beckoned to, like one of Pavlov’s stinking dogs drooling—his own immoderate appetite, like a levee
against the thoughts that had drifted him there. Hunger. Rations, hunger, means, work, slavery,
slaves, housed. Clock hands spinning. It was no different, in a way, uniterant though he be—yet he
was owned, spayed between his pay and the partly owned desire to play, with nothing soothing ever
left to his pockets. He walked beside the late primrose, the purple loosestrife, the ditches sinking, the
water high. Yellow petals sifted through his hand in the pale glow of the afternoon sun.

He crossed the makeshift bridge, a few grimy boards over the irrigation ditch, to the little
island where the creek joined the beaver’s stream.

You could follow it, if you were on a small raft, or if you were a little mouse on driftwood,
up through the property when the water was high. You could sail the slight waterway until you
crossed the black creek, and spewed out into the Hudson. All the way north—or south, down past
New York through the Sound, or past the Jersey Shore, the Atlantic, the Carolinas, south where the
sun oppressed you all year. He had loved it, once, on the docked boat in the Keys, where 200 dollars
lasted a month. He had quit drinking since then.

He sat on the edge of the island where the ditch waters met the creek. There was junk
strewn about on the water’s edge, against the shrubs and bracket, driftwood, old nails, the makings
of what had once been a bridge, large and tight enough to support tractors, horses, and machines. There was a chain, stuck to a slender pole planted into the mud. There was the water flowing, slowly, through the dam the beavers were making. The water rippled and tossed, the driftwood had caught branches and leaves, and a fish, the tail of a big fish dipping through the water. The sleek wet coat of a beaver. Maurice stood, his foot launched into the water, sucked into the mud, pulled out. The chain pulled and the otter hissed, bore at Maurice his scaly teeth, submerged and remerged, twisted, turned, and spun through the trickling water, the chain linked clamp to its foot like ragged, rusty jaws.

“Hey there, hey, now,” said Maurice. “Hey there, fella, I got you,” he said, and pulled the chain through the water to him. The otter swiveled and hissed. The water slid over him. He swiveled and hissed. “Whoa now, hey there, hey.” Water reached through his socks. The otter spun and hissed. He pulled the chain, the otter dragged through the water. The trap had cut into its webbed feet. Maurice bent down; the trap would take two hands to disengage. The otter sliced into his hand with his teeth. Water was rushing over them. Maurice pressed on his hand with the other. The sound of the chain links pulling away, and the otter slipped, still chained, back into the water. Maurice turned and ran.

Through the fields back to the house he ran and tripped through the damp dirt. His boots made little sucking sounds and his feet were cold and clammy. The birds in the shrubs and in the weeds flew out their nests as he ran, out of breath, up the hill to the house, past Manuel and Felix shucking rotten cabbage leaves in a bin.

In the basement there were tools, gloves, pliers, a crowbar and a clamp, if it came to that. The tools were set on shelves without discernable order like some musty still life watching you gasp at its own immortality, waiting for you to terminate. You’ll outlast me like hell, he thought, as he
found the crowbar and clamp. Then he found Anselmo watching him, planted between himself and the basement door.

"What are you getting into?" Anselmo asked.

"I'm looking for pliers. I can't find pliers," said Maurice.

"What do you need them for?"

Maurice pulled out from the tin box a hammer. "Someone trapped an otter."

"Who could have done that?"

"I need to find some pliers."

"You're bleeding."

"It's fine."

"I don't want you going postal on me."

"I'll clean it when I have time."

"You need a hand?"

Maurice stopped. "It's chained up at the dam."

"I've got pliers."

Time passes slowly between clouds when you want rain and it stops to burst for no one waiting watching, like some crazy law they change on you to disregard a habit. I watched them walk together out the house, Maurice almost dancing.

Beside the creek Anselmo pulled at the chain. He'd made it over the boards without issue or complaint. The otter's foot was banded. "You want to hold him? He won't stay."

"With what?" asked Maurice.

"Maybe your jacket?"

Anselmo pulled the chain, the otter dragged and hissed. Maurice gave Anselmo his jacket. He flung it over the otter. It squirmed underneath.
“That’s it, that’s good, hold it.”

Anselmo bent to hold the otter. It slid through the jacket into the stream, the chain taut. He pulled it back to land and dropped over it the jacket. “Need its legs,” he said.

“Don’t step, don’t step on it,” Maurice said.

The otter disappeared into the water again.

“Who’s trapping out here anyway?” Maurice said.

“Looks like cousin Terrance’s traps,” Anselmo said.

“You knew about it?”

“Wasn’t sure he’d go after otter hide.”

“He won’t stay put.”

“Go get rope. We’ll make a noose and tie him back. Then I’ll hold and you can get his legs.”

Maurice ran, returned to the house, found the rope. Halfway back, stopped. They met in the fields. Maurice held the limp cord, Anselmo held the otter from its feet.

“Drowned,” he said, and walked back to the house.
XII. Under the tin roof attached to the house where the men boxed produce Hector watched Anselmo cut and gut the otter. He said he’d never seen this before. Anselmo pulled out the otters’ insides. “You want to try?”

There was Hector with blood on his hands and Anselmo, gruff and nodding, and Maurice walked up the hill to the house. The Mexicans pretended not to watch. The pain in Maurice’s hand was pounding.

I was watching from my window, not quite convulsing, but feeling like how I felt Cassandra must have, and I didn’t want her fate, and I forgot about it. I met Maurice at the basement sink.

Peony held the hydrogen peroxide over Maurice’s hands. He rinsed them over the sink and spat. They didn’t speak. Hector came inside.

“Are you alright?” said Hector.

“Dandy,” Maurice said.

“You have a lot of experience skinning, Anselmo said.”

Peony behind Maurice gestured to shut up.

“I can skin anything,” said Maurice.

“I’ve never before. It’s not so easy,” said Hector.

“I can skin anything.”

Peony shook the hydrogen peroxide and poured it over Maurice’s hands.

“Anselmo said you’re a hell of a shot. I’d like that too, to be a hell of a shot.”

“There are bandages in the bathroom,” said Peony. “If you’re going to be stubborn about the hospital, at least let me put some alcohol and bandages on it too.”

"Anselmo told me it’s a good one to start with, size wise. Gives me an idea of what to expect."

Maurice rubbed his hand. Peony returned with the alcohol and bandages.

"It’s too bad it drowned," said Hector.

Peony left.

"What else do you know about otters?" said Maurice.

"I don’t know, but Anselmo said they have a very desirable pelt."

"I’ll take you out if you want to go shooting, later on. If you’ve still got the energy."

"That’d be great. You could show me?"

"I think Anselmo’s looking for you."

"Sure I can’t get you anything?"

Maurice rubbed his hands.

The smell of carrots and onions chopped with garlic, a heap of butter sizzling on the wok that night, the exhaust fan was turned on high and Maurice wore an apron, scampering between the stove, the cutting board, and the sink. When he was finished, he took his bowl to the last chair, stuck in headphones, and watched a soap opera, something in Mandarin or Korean. They left him alone that night.
XIII. They called it the Pang Yang for Penn Yan, since they couldn't pronounce it otherwise. It meant Pennsylvania Yankee, connoting the borderline where Jemima was, who went by then by the name of The Public Universal Friend. They, she, that was, she, who would go by they, they, who she was before they called them that, was solemn and silent, fraught with a bipolar warmth no contrivance save funding could corrode. It was the same, some centuries later, for Father Divine, who set up shop on the same stretch of land, for the same ubiquity of purpose passed through generations of sand. They took in round women in shawls and anyone black or brown or displaced or hungry or tired or weary or disposed to inflections unpopular then, they took in men who liked men without stating it, toned or deaf, decrepit and destitute, and ones who did not know who they are. Somehow that land spread a host of latent efforts genealogically, maybe even through those first pilgrim settlers to the Irishman crooning at the Mexicans their tasks. They called it the pang yang, dialect for Penn Yan, where the lawless stole apples and burned huts.
XIV. It was hard to feel the world was dying if you looked out the windows toward the ridge, a day after it rained, the leaves were orange and red and green and yellow and the wind had covered the paths with them so the forest floor felt like some kind of sea and the atmosphere helped you pretend on land you could be a sea creature. In Washington, D.C. they were lying and cheating and gambling and trying. In NYC they had overfilled the morgues, and in the pockets between and expanded out there were people scared and angry and filled with rage, directed at difference, like a séance tells you where to invest and drink. In the summer there was madness and rage from either side, and they collected in thousands, and the cops did what they were told to do, and the special cops were glad for some exercise, and everyone thought they could remember, and the swarm of headlines, scandals and deaths, spilled over everyone’s head. It was hard to remember the world was dying, a foot between yourself and mud, cutting kale stems, trying them and tossing them in a crate, the last of the spring peepers leaping into a ditch, the sun still rising, glowing, absolute indifference of the country.

“You want to plant your legs wide apart, like a V,” said Maurice. “You bend at the hips, like so.”

“I don’t like that,” said Peony.

“That’s because your muscles aren’t trained. You’ll get used to it.”

“It doesn’t feel good.”

“Put the rubber bands around your wrist, too, then your hands will be free.”

“It’s too tight.”

“You get used to it.”

Peony did what he said.

“See, you’ll get the hang of it.”

Peony knelt on the soil and unbanded the rubber bands.
“I can’t. It’s too tight.”

“You can, try it more, see how many I can get?”

It was nice to kneel on the wet mud so it seeped into their jeans, and picking kale as though they wanted to be eaten, wanted to transmute some foreign motivation in the mouths of Maurice’s customers. It was a fancy thought.

“Fine,” he said. “But keep your crate separate, so Anselmo knows who’s slacking.”

Manuel and Felix were picking beside them. They listened when Peony spoke. In some gesticular language between Spanish and English they communicated to Peony about the way they ignored Maurice by instinct, give him what he wanted, saved their insides for themselves, and continued. Peony dumped their kale in their crates and watched them return up the hill to wash and box them.

“Where’d you learn to speak Spanish?” they asked Maurice.

Maurice ignored Peony. They were tired. They repeated.

“Where they taught me to pick kale like a man,” said Maurice.

Peony did what he said to do. They were waiting. They could almost predict the time, by now, the breaths it would take before he caved, before the claustrophobic thing in him slipped capacity. He wrapped the rubber bands round the kale stems.

“I took it in high school, but my first girlfriend was from Peru.”

“It’s good you can speak to the guys. I think they appreciate you.”

“Of course they do. Usually they get the typical American brats.”

“Typical American brats, I like that.”

Maurice tore a rubber band from his wrist and tied the kale. He grunted. I was starting to feel rare and loopy inside. I’d not slept much and it was beautiful outside. It seemed like a chance to get something through to him, even if I was irrational.
“What was your girlfriend’s name?” I asked.

“Esmeralda.”

“What a beautiful.”

“I’m kidding.”

He picked up a bucket and followed the stripped green limbs down the fields. The kale stalks were like little walking sticks protruding from the earth. He kept to their side and his boots lightly brushed them. He tapped at some with his foot.

“That’s it,” he said. “The rest is merde.”

I was still on my knees in the mud, I was almost falling into myself from a kind of exhaustion.

“Don’t stop moving,” he said.

Across a ditch there was a tractor going, another farmer, Claude, someone ancient I’d only heard stories of, was preparing a field for a final planting. Maurice waved.

“Do I make you uncomfortable, Maurice?” I said.

“He let out a miniature, stifled howl, like a little boy waiting for his chaperone to bring him to practice. He tossed a crate on top of the other, heaved them over his head, and stared beyond Peony.

“We’re done here.”

“Is it because I never asked you to sing for me? I think you have a lovely voice.”

Maurice put down the crates.

“You’re a petulant waif, I know your type.”

“That’s what it is, that’s right, you hated me from the moment you saw me. Is it because of what you think I am?”

“What are you?”
“I’m trying to be nice.”

“What are you?”

I stopped. He was pudgy and handsome, mostly due to his quality of seeming to sprout directly out the ground from where he stood. That’s why the stalks seemed like walking sticks. And because he could forget he was pretending when he said he knew me. He could believe his eyes could measure the world’s insinuations deliberately. He was perpetually falling into the earth to play a game of balance with erectness.

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Well, know,” he said.

“I just want you to know I want to be your friend.”

“I take a long time before I let people in. Especially confused people.”

“I knew it.”

“Obviously, are you stupid?”

“It’s not just the work, I knew it.”

“It’s strange.”

Peony stood up and felt whole again. Maurice kicked at dirt. “We’ve got to get going back now,” he said.

“Don’t you know about Tiresias?”

“That’s a myth.”

“I felt you the moment we met. I know you.”

“You don’t know shit. I don’t have to take this shit.”

“Admit it. You’re scared you’re attracted to me.”

“I won’t say shit you tell me to say.”

“Because you’re a little sad boy.”
“It’s called my right to speech.”

They were yelling now. Peony could smell the bacon on his breath. He had his hands behind his back and he suddenly pointed them in their face. The remarkable stained-glass quality of eyes meeting eyes black and solid and aligned. The tractor sound was dead, their voiced echoed through the fields, the sparrows overhead silent and still. He took a step forward towards Peony and she realized the part that had mad it an excess. Their voice died, who had it been, yelling, screaming, whose voice torn and ruffled and sobbing now quiet, muffled, like found violence, and Maurice pushed back, and they leapt and fell onto the row of stripped kale, Maurice’s face pressed into the mud, Peony’s knees on his neck for a duration to hear another voice, clear like steel, unsemantic and crisp. Peony heard and Maurice looked up and Peony looked down and Maurice heaved and tumbled over Peony. “Finish,” he said, bacon in their face. Claude pulled him by the collar off them and tossed Maurice like a sack of grain from the scruff of his neck aside. Peony and Maurice were panting. Claude stood over them both, like an oak tree in plaid. He was holding a rifle, and, true to tales, Peony caught a rectangular indent in his breast pockets, like a pack of cigarettes with a slender forked ribbon dangling out the front.

“Don’t you move, now,” he said. “You stay right there.”

He’d be equally at ease in a western or little Italy. Peony and Maurice were panting. The little kale sticks poked at Maurice’s back. Claude removed the gospel from his breast pocket. He pointed to the stripped corn fields swaying beige and thin and said, “You know what that means? Do you?” They looked at him like a dead acorn. “Unless a grain of wheat perisheth it shall not rise. You know what that means?” They waited. He sucked his dentures. There was black mud stained on the knees of his blue jeans, like theirs. “That’s figuration. Figuration. You know what that means?” They waited. “You don’t have to kill each other. Make up. What’s it here? I know you,” he said to Maurice. “You’re made of more sense than that. What you playing for?”
“Nothing.”

“Liar. I heard you from a field away.”

“We were just talking,” said Peony.

Claude eyed her. Claude eyed things like it was the last time he’d see them, or the first time in a long time. He was tall and thin and worn and it seemed the sun stopped moving behind his head. His head blocked the sunlight from Peony’s face.

“It’s a new morning. Quit it,” he said.

Maurice wanted to die, then. Inside a voice exposit frailty and venom, as though listening to it might summon a speckled snake right there, then, and end them each. Fie, on them, blast, ruin, and rancorous tripe, bowdlerized anguish, foibles and spite—to foist indiscretion on the meagerly day upended by what pretends love and stank memories, from the ground between dead daisies and stripped stalks. He pulled at a kale stalk and got to his feet.

“We were just playing around,” he said. “Won’t you forget about it, please?” His nematoid voice like silk grease. “We were just playing.”

When Claude left they picked up the dropped kale and rightened the buckets. It was like Anselmo said. Everything was the same. It didn’t matter. Maurice was humming. Peony thudded back through the fields to the house.
I considered giving up. I felt I was trying too hard. I was thinking too much. Who am I to confabulate the origins of distress? I tried, but because I was trying I couldn't ever quit, since if I quit, I'd have never started to try. I forgot I was supposed to be doing it for myself. Supposed to. My body felt like corroded tin, or like someone had shaved away the nerve endings and replaced them with jagged ink. I was confused without being confused. I wasn't really there, and I wanted to be, and no one but me was stopping me. I wondered who I thought I was, who had the arrogance to play trapeze on a thread. I wanted to talk to Ester again, and I knew it was selfish and irresponsible and all kinds of psychological things. I wanted to anyway, but I wouldn't. I felt porous, and secretly vindicative, and never at all vulnerable enough even as I especially as I poked and prodded like a lab coat a cow. I was more than me, and nothing, and the fancy invitations to commiserate with myself appeared like American gravy or revving an engine because it's fun, and I could go there immediately, I was there, that was who I was and what I was doing, it was sick almost, I could feel the threads of my limbs and joints like tendrils reaching out, poking, prodding, asking and receiving the startling instigation from somewhere something not me, not the people but the things, the space, the air around me, the atmosphere pressing not pressing like phantasmic limbs, an orchestra, as much a blip as the breeze, a leaf rustling, the leaves that clung to their wilderness I insisted to personify, leaves trembling on a branch, the petalless stalks of primrose like a trillion drunk worshipers of lord god sun as I walked through the fields to the dam by myself in the white day thrashed in our October.

I felt porous and secretly vindictive, and scared. I was scared of my attraction to Hector, scared of my sense of devotion, scared of the indifference of my ambling foot launched off the grass, hopped off, how I walked and stepped. The fields would freeze, soon, if it ever got cold again. There weren't any peepers leaping anymore. I tried to listen to the crunch of my feet through the thimble and leaves.
The beaver dam was across the ditch. The water was high, and they must have continued their construction. I looked across the fields where Maurice was picking. He was near where we had met Claude the other day. You could see him walking to the tractor parked out at the edge of the field, the last point of solid ground before it got too muddy for it to ride over without risking submersion. And anyway, the paths were too narrow to let it drive over without crushing all the vegetables. I couldn’t tell what he was harvesting. Manuel and Felix saw me and I could tell they stopped for me, briefly, and followed him. I wondered what they thought. They were cousins. I’d heard they’d crossed over two or three years ago. Felix wore a black eye every other month. They had to stay absolutely still and silent for seven hours straight, I’d heard. They didn’t talk to me about it, I hadn’t asked them, I felt I was too interested.

Manuel told me, I think, because I didn’t understand his Spanish perfectly well, that he was building a house in Ecuador. He said his mother was still there, and that they only talked on the phone or video sometimes. He said once he was talking to her he watched her have a heart attack. He said he was lucky to be there because he called the neighbors and they ran over and she was fine in the end. I wanted to know about how he had the neighbor’s number handy, but I think it got lost in translation. I don’t know why they called them the Mexicans if he was Ecuadorian. I think they lived there together, but everything gets lost sometimes. I don’t think they really cared.

I was thinking too much, so I decided to walk again. I was trying to follow where my feet led me. I didn’t really know what I wanted. But when I got to the dam, alone and hidden from the others, and I could see our house on the hill, and the sky all white, all the red leaves and yellow leather ground shone like a rub of polish on tarnished brass. Water almost still trickled through the dam and I sat quietly the way I pretended I understood how the Mexicans must have. Tangles of brush and shrub limbs gazed on the water, a sparrow I’d not noticed struck off a bough and onto the surface and away, I watched the ripples. I laughed.
The sound of it came across like something else. I didn’t recognize it. And I didn’t know why I was laughing. I felt like something was coming out me, strange, beautiful, and horrible all at the same time. And then I started to cry. There was the sound of me sobbing, and the water, and the bird, and the leaves, the way they rustled and crunched. I wanted to drown myself, or simply die, and I didn’t want that at all. What would it be to get my wish, I thought, and my mouth felt like a muzzle and I saw my wish and its crass assumptivity and I realized if I told the truth, no matter what in every circumstance, I’d have them, I’d have the advantage to get by on my own truthfulness. And I saw my hunger to be that way and that it was what I wanted because I wanted to be better than them, I wanted always to have a reason to suspend myself from them, from anyone else, between myself and the thing I was witnessing.

I was sobbing. Maurice was there, with a pitchfork and a hoe. I was a crumble.

"I’ve got to work this here," he said.

I looked at him. I didn’t care that I wanted him to see my tears. It was a joke, anyway.

Then he knelt down next to me. We were close. I thought I had him and I didn’t care because something happened and I realized I wanted to hug him too and I did and he said something and I might have said something but couldn’t remember words and we were there and my feet were a bit clammy and he stunk like acridity and we didn’t understand at all and I didn’t care because I was there, anyway, whatever was happening I was there and I could wear it like a friend, or an enemy, it was the same silence no worse than hearing my own laughter.

"We’re alive," Peony said.

He nodded and they separated. Peony left through the bramble and back to the house. Maurice lifted the hoe and swing it onto the mud on the dam and started a narrow rift for the water to trickle through, a throughway for the water to pass, the water would expel and the ditches sink and the beavers would have work, and Anselmo would be pleased.
After Peony left Maurice made the rift in the dam. He loved them, the beavers. A light came through the clouds, so cinematic and brilliant he almost didn’t believe it. Someone was speaking to him again, in the midst of his exhaustion. Someone was telling him his work was good, and that he would rest. He laid back on the muddy bank.

A beaver leapt out the water and slapped back down onto the water.
Peony knelt on the grass where the butterfly landed. Maybe they would speak together. They were perfectly still, even as their wings unfolded. Peony couldn’t tell how to observe what was happening. Then the tractor sounded like a motif. Failure, the convenience of absorbing the pain of another at cost to yourself, negligence. It was enough. Whether for better or worse they would leave the miracle to miraculousness.

Ester called it bodhisattva. Christians said Christ. But what about oneself?

Inside the house was cold. The heat was off. Anselmo wanted to save money. I wanted to give up. What would it be like to give up? It would be grand, wonderful, expedient, death. To hell with commitment. One way or the other—it was a means, a means of relation to myself, with myself. I was not confused, I was uproariously forgetful. Almost every time. Like clockwork or the intricacy of a pattern of feathers of a swan he walked in there, smiling, appalling at me with his heavy arms, a look of sheer madness on his face, my shining star.

“I understand now,” he said.

“Understand what?” I asked.

“I understand the Friend.”

“Oh, do you?”

“And now I understand you.”

“What’s to understand?”

“I get it. I get what you were saying.”

“When? Just now?”

“No. I get it about what you said about me. I am like you.”

“To some extent.”

“I just wanted to say I truly appreciate your point of view.”

“What’s that.”
"It's not compelled speech, it's about respect, and protection. I'm the same way."

I was startled and he sounded normal, or unoil. It was like a miracle.

"I've often felt here, he said, "And before, that I'm breaking up into a million little pieces, or that I am a million little pieces of glass or roots dislodged, like dead drying root threads we poke through for our own purposes. Something like that. I never thought about it from the right perspective until now. It's like I have a back but no spine, or a spine and someone else's arms. It doesn't matter if they really died and came back or just faked it, because they did what they had to do. You just have to do what you have to do, and sometimes it's for one piece of glass and sometimes it's for another root. But if you just do one then the other one withers and dies, and then you die. Or something dies. And that's the part that she let die, the bad roots, the ones who wouldn't let the good ones grow. The ones that didn't tolerate the parts she loved most, they loved most. I guess that's the story of power and transcendence. I don't know if this is making sense to you but it does to me."

He was startling and tamed at the same time. He was fingering a pipe.

"Where'd you get that?" I asked.

"I was at the town historian talking to Gertrude, she said it was owned by old Sherwood, who farmed this land too. It's a funny lineage you can step into, how we're stepping on descendants of descendants without knowing it...that reminds me what I wanted to tell you, ask you. Do you believe in ghosts?"

"I guess it depends what you mean by ghosts."

"It doesn't matter—they're real. I met one after you left."

It was bright out, the living room looked welcoming and pretty, the curtains were drawn open, it was almost as though it was inappropriate to be speaking of such things in sheer daylight. Peony was on the couch. Maurice continued.
“He was real. I saw him clear as you. I thought he was real. He was real, but I thought he was alive. I was working on the dam and I saw him crouching behind the grape vines on the other side of the dam. He was bare chested, and I thought he was an escaped convict at first. There was the dam between us, but I was thinking about everything already and I saw him there I didn’t know what to say.

“He looked at me from there and when he saw me see him he stood up and walked across the dam to me. I couldn’t move.”

“This is sacred land,” he said.

“I can feel it,” I said.

“We watch you,” he said.

“Who are you?”

He shook his head, and told me, “Save this land. Something happened here before. You can save this land.” Then he was gone.

“He just vanished?” asked Peony.

“I don’t know. I turned my head and he was gone.”

“And that made you realize what the Friend was talking about?”

“He said something else.”

“What”

“You need to swear not to tell anyone.”

“Okay I swear.”

“Swear.”

“I swear.”

“He said Anselmo is a bad man. He said he was cursed. He said I would take over the farm.”
Appendix: Passages for Integration

They had thrown everything they had at him and he continued to deny everything. He held his line. Ester was proud, and tired, and confused, and herself stiff with denying. The master through whom they’d found the courage to try they’d betrayed. It was over. And yet, fecund. Ester read the letters again and again, from the ones who were closest to him to the ones who’d spent the night. As though to say I still love you, I still wish you would pretend you cared, she said, and placed down his picture. She felt sick. She curled on the couch in the common room anyway, scrolled through her phone inches from her face. The room was empty, someone was clanking pots in the kitchen, the heat was hissing. Someone had cleaned the couches and armchairs earlier, and cookies and fruits and dried meats were offered on the counter. There was Peony, a text from her, from them, it was from Peony. Ester read.

He’d slept with everyone. He’d made it a harem. Didn’t they choose? Why not her? If he had asked, she would have acquiesced. Of course. She thought. Why? For what purpose? For him? For the lack of vagrancy? Could not permit the negation. She could imagine, how close to his door she had been, how that one time he had laid eyes on her, in the hall before his door, but to look at him would have disturbed her task, and despite the pride she tied the string of the wastepaper basket, left her form to communicate itself, who knows, then, very much then, she could be moving in tandem with him. His door had closed, but she had known, and not declined, or stated yes, but resolutely between, despite the pride, she stepped out the middle room with the garbage bag into the hallway where she heard the guards whisper deliberately so she walked more slowly, like a dignified donkey.

Melinda carried a garbage bag herself out the kitchen. The phone screen illuminated Ester’s face. “So what do you think, Ester? You want to throw a party?”

Ester gasped.

“I’m ready to implode.”
“Well, do it already then.”

Ester showed her the phone.

Melinda held the garbage bag behind her back, a hand to her hip. “My eyes don’t need help hurting, thanks.”

“How are you keeping up through this?”

“What do you mean, keeping up? How do I ever keep up, you mean?”

Ester pocketed her phone.

“You’re right,” she said. “But I can’t help it.”

“Yes, you can.”

Only her lips moved when she talked. Ester wanted to turn into a puddle. Melinda continued. “What do you think, is now a good time for a party?”

“Who would come?”

“You, me, everyone.”

“Aren’t you tired of making up parties?”

“No.”

“What about peoples’ messes?”

“What about them?”

“You’re intolerable.”

“How special.”

“Stop talking like that.”

“Like what?”

“Melinda, what’s going on?”

“This.”

“What’s worse than intolerable?”
“Being able to tolerate what’s intolerable?”

“Did you sleep with him too?”

“No.”

“But did he invite you?”

“I’ll leave that to myself for now.”

“No, tell me.”

“Another time. Maybe if you help me.”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe.”

“You’re trying to be sly.”

“Looking for something between bargaining and bribes.”

“You’re not supposed to bribe.”

“Or follow rules.”

“Melinda?”

She put down the garbage bag. They hugged.

“I’m in fear,” said Ester.

Melinda rubbed Ester’s neck. Then she picked up the garbage and nodded. “I need to throw this away,” she said, and pointed to the garbage in her hand.

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When Melinda returned Ester had fallen asleep. The message from Peony was clear. If Peony wouldn’t do those things Ester might as well return to China, to Timbuctoo, or Sienna.

Outside the lodge they’d hallowed for themselves another man in a gray shirt revved the engine, an antenea like a trapeze bop. Ester wanted to wake up, alive like the dying world outside. She was very tired. But what would that indicate to a thinking person, immaculate as long as their
situation felt closed, as long as their finances remained intact? Salubrious oil, everyone wanted Ester dead. A heavy lidded banquet composed of the finest tea wouldn’t settle the disputes either. With him, the master, or they were to come, either. She thought about Peony. Peony always by contrast, Peony always by sense of the cursory curiosity installed between their hearts the nights together, but what did they need?

It was 9pm. Melinda quit before it was a yearl fact for the meal. Records and recipes signing on to find only him, in composition I, the hardly ever speak. She got so tired, a little way into it, he’d recognized the, add itself. She was tired so she saw bubbles where she wrote. Her every finger conjured more suds. She wondered if there, across the fragile little mountain she could hear her doubt, if she actually, if she did, it would not be their fault, not the non commitalness but the non comittalness. I don’t care Why like that I don’t mean it like that What do you mean Ester was tearing, but they were invisible with Melinda having left the temptation to incite riot there fell too perfectly plop.

“He’s just interesting, I just meant I’m glad it’s someone interesting, someone nice.”

“You’re lying, aren’t you?”

“Don’t please, don’t”

“Would you want that? Who would trust you? I can’t, I’m not able, I can’t. Please, don’t.”

“Baby.”

But Ester wanted more. Ester could care less for the words who came to determine her life, it was their unselectiveness that she swore to without knowing, they who betrayed her.

“Why do you start to see things when you’re still and very tired and you force yourself awake?”

Peony considered. “Maybe if you don’t remember it doesn’t count.”

“You’re smart, I don’t want you to leave.”
“I’m here, I’m staying, if you’re asking nicely.”

“I want you to stay.”

“And I want you to avoid that kind of travesty a little future. It doesn’t matter the appeal.”

“Am I being too sassy?”

Peony said yes.

“Do you think we can get to a place where it’s okay?”

“Maybe if we pray.”

“What’s that?”

“Making the earth alive without making it disturbed.”

“Do I disturb you?”

“No.”

“Do you think I’m disturbed?”

“I won’t be intimidated in the end.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Peony held the pen in hand, jammed it down on the paper cover.

“I’m so glad they never disposed the gift, that collage of newspaper.”

“I’m glad you told me about that.”

“It doesn’t even make me feel vulnerable anymore.”

“I don’t care what you say.”

“Trusting one another is all we have.”

“I don’t know if that’s for better or for worse.”

“Do you think it’s rough to have been born this time?”

“No, but it wants something we’re not giving.”

“Do you think you could fall asleep from exhaustion walking, or talking?”
“Yes.”

“How was the lesson falling?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Pinchy. I’m feeling excited.”

“Why?”

“Because the obvious esoteric reasons.”

“Why did it all break apart?”

“Because you’re giving it to everyone.”

“That’s how I am.”

“No. That’s how you wish you wanted to be. You’re just lazy.”

Peony kept still in the room without rain droplets saying things to the phone they didn’t hear, thinking about the warm lovelessness dispatched like a fire hydrant stream because he was so sexual and strong and alive with courage to be looked at, to be noticed, to be seen, to be looked at, and then, to see.

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That night before they were laying on the couch with Marshall and listening the vapor escape out the floorboards. A raccoon the size of Mississippi was perched on the deck looking in. Maurice threw a show through the window, shattered glass. Peony laughed. Night time hell approaching, an incision. Maggots in a bin, a confined space you can’t find the source of the smell, something moving but never making space. Lilt. Liquids poured through a sieve, a glass bowl containing two eye sockets. Not there, not in the significance, when the pleasantness of neglect fails you the first time, like a wave battering you through the surf or under the current tossed like a bent nail, bent backed and rootless eaten in the sordid earth like a crank. No, yes, no, he thought a jungle formicated centuries between himself and the magnificent discrimination on which his life was set,
he set his life. As frivolous as a gamble. Someone else wanted him then, to be him, he wanted to be someone else, who it was he wanted to be less the castigation, fast a breath past that castigation, like the relief of a hot shower until by aptitude or exact measure the cold cut him back, it wasn’t who he was, it wasn’t that in quiet desperation he would hear the softness of a whisper tangential as rain drops she had made by hearing them unphilosophically, acutely loving, like nostalgia or the smell of an old book, or the feeling after having san, after having led their harmony efficiently, how they loved me, how they each felt secretly red inside to think of me because genuinely and when not instead because effectively, because they needed me, because I was needed, because I am needed, because they need me, because they love me.

Peony was by the lights. Marshall was curled at the foot of his armchair. The dish hung at the edge of the armchair’s armrest. They imagined to take it for him and let him alone. Split by the spine the book they’d lent, the one about the Friend. Peony shut the lights.

Anselmo smoked a pipe. He say on the tractor spitting smoke out his pipe and it spat out the engine.

“What you do to it?”

“I didn’t do it.”

“Damnit.”

“It was fine when I last used it.”

“Do you realize how much this is? I got to take it out your pay.”

“I didn’t mess it up.”

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“Then why’d I find your grubby little paw marks on the wheel then?”

“They were there before, it was fine then.”
There were a couple cats on the farm too, a little gray tabby and one black, constantly meowing, watching them argue from under the eaves of the shed. She watched them yell and meowed, she watched Maurice shove Anselmo and Anselmo stumbled back against the tractor, gripped the seat and his hand slid, hit the lever, snapped it, and the tractor spat smoke and burst forward to the garage and smashed into the gate.

Maurice was a slanted tear, winnowed and clay like, immobile. Anselmo was convulsing. To hell with him if not for honor, or the fact he might tell. Maurice ran for a wood spoon, placed it between Anselmo’s teeth.

“I don’t care what happens to you,” he said.

Anselmo’s eyes rolled. A beaten horse gelded extra, his eyes and tongue purple and mutant. Maurice slapped him. He could take the place, take every acre, every field, and yield from it without the idiot’s help ten times what he now produced. He would reshape the irrigation ditches first and nest out the dam so the fauna and his own purposes could cohabitate. He would segregate the fields that he knew about, the ones that were best suited to profit from the ones questionable and unaccommodating, and those he would give to friends, people he could call friends, people who deserved the help. They would like him. It would be like a rare gift without recompense. He visualized there and spoke to himself, the crazy exact plans he’d institute when Anselmo had gone. They would regard his ideas and what he would give and from the women he would take the loveliest one, naturally, organically because she would comprehend his vision and he through it. They would wed on a stage he would build, there, on the land he had labored for. But Anselmo was recovered, some spit slipped down his mouth.

****

“You got to jiggle it. Jiggle it, make it go.”

“Okay.”
The Mexicans followed him to the fields down the hill.

The party was like a false masquerade, everyone half-perturbed by the isolated eyes, expressionless faces in which the potential to sicken couched dormant or alive. There were fire pits set down the path leading up to a stage, string lights and streamers, cauldrons over wood stoves and Anselmo behind one, with a ladle, pouring cider into steaming mugs.

Maurice was singing on stage with his troupe.

Every day was a burden without respite or promise of succor. He adjusted the pictures he’d set to attract women, without success, In the evening he ate. There was the old promise of another life with the old man on Broadway, but he wouldn’t give in to disappoint more.

It was the end of October, before Samhain and the election that would decide the world. Everyone was getting sick again, and there was snow. I was feeling better than I had when I’d arrived, but as I got better I felt more and more irritated with the people around me. And I was irritated with myself. It was like my father said, “can’t you try to be normal?”

It was fun to try to be normal. It was like pretending your face was a mask, hollowness inside. Once you got the hang of normalcy you could be or do anything. Being normal meant observing convention accurately enough in public to stay under the radar. You could do anything with a mask. I wanted to be normal, so when Ester invited me to the witches ceremony I wanted to conform to my civic and family duty. We were going to practice magic.

It was the first time we’d met in a couple weeks, since drunk dialing and half hating each other. I showed up to the lodge covered in black shawls, like the rest of them. They were already gathering at the edge of the forest.
I counted seventeen, apart from me. I was excited. Ester said to stay close to her, and I did.

We walked in silence in a file through the woods. It was a brief twilight and cold and the wind shook free the dry earlobe leaves. We stopped at a fire pit.

Someone set fire and undressed. She took off her mask and began to dance around the fire, bare footed, her hair brown curly swinging across her face, her limbs flying everywhere. She began slowly rocking and as the fire caught increased the tempo. Another one flung off her black shawl and she was nude beneath and she joined the other. They were dancing around the fire and in and around each other, their breasts almost touching, without sexuality, and they bent down and swung their hips around and leapt around the snapping embers and crackling wood. The moon was almost full.

More and more of the women took off their clothes and began to dance, and to sing, their words incomprehensible. I looked at Ester and she pulled me to her against a tree trunk. She held her hands around me over the shawl, kissed my neck and rubbed my breasts. Then I felt her hand on my thigh, on my ass, her fingers against my lips, my hair bristles like little antanea, wet, and she was in me and kissed me and I fell back into her, I heard me make a tiny moan and she whispered into my ear, “Don’t let it take over you. Don’t forget,” and I felt waves of pleasure and I relaxed and let go the pleasure and Ester and my shawl was off and I was naked and dancing and warm...

***

...naked and dancing and warm as though filled by liquid embers threaded between my limbs, connecting them, and it was more important to make them stay alive than it was to care how I looked or who I looked at or why I was dancing wildly round a fire with other beautiful women.

Ester followed me and I ignored her. I could feel she wanted me secretly, to be together and attached together despite the instruction. I needed her and wanted her, and I felt it and I ignored
her. I was liquid fire thread and a swatch of mideval ice or snake venom or spiders web dancing and dancing.

That night in Ester's bed I dreamt myself back in a cab in New York City. My father was in the driver's seat, happier than I'd ever seen him before. I was hiding, I was dressed up, and my voice was different so he wouldn't know who it was he'd picked up. I wore a mask. But it was funny, because after a while we talked about family, about his death, about his dreams, his fears, and the one he made with mother before me who died of complications. It was funny. I revealed myself at the end, when I got out after I paid, and he said he didn't know who I was. He said it was nice to talk but, he'd had no children. He smiled. He smiled like I'd only seen him drunk, when he was alive. When my father was a live. It would be the election soon, and everything was a wave, and he winked at me and I couldn't for my life say what it was I felt it was I left that cab to do. I woke in Ester's arms, uncomfortable and tight chested, love. And I couldn't tell if I should cry or move or breathe or kill myself like he had. I wrote down what I remembered. Ester was fine to be moved. I left the room and went downstairs to the common room where there were shelves of buddhist books. They had nice names like "The Wisdom of No Escape" and "The Myth of Freedom". You had to be pretty depressed to pick one of those up. I tried to read but the words wouldn't stick in my mind, and I gave up. I picked up a book with pictures, Tibetans dancing. It was supposed to be sacred, but I didn't undersand any of it and it made me confused, because I didn't feel liquid and hot anymore. I felt like Maurice had said, disjointed and separate, as though my limbs belonged to someone other than my head. I shut off the lights and curled on the couch to cry, and Ester was there and instead of talking or listening or waiting we touched and it made me cry more, and we stopped. I thought she was swell and fun, but I left. I drove back to the farm in the half dark under the pink pulsing moon.

****
In the morning Maurice found Peony on the couch with the dog. The sun was already rising. They’d gained the idiot’s hour, an Anselmo would rush his bones a bit finer.

“Peony’s asleep,” he said to Anselmo.

“I could give a shit. Got work to do. You do the squash today, and the garlic.”

“We did the squash yesterday.”

“Get them all.”

Maurice said nothing. There were spatula marks across Anselmo’s fat cheeks. He said nothing, imagining. He wept.

“What’s wrong with your eyes?”

“Dust bunnies.”

“You smoke a pipe now?”

Maurice fingered the pipe and began to pack it.

Everything was work. A complaint. Joyful complaint, maybe the chance to improve the limp world. They weren’t words in his head anymore, they were tunnels, open spaces which glared like a maw enveloping the quaint possibility of communication. Now Hector wanted to work, so Maurice brought him to the fields and tended to his insecurities. They took the squash. He was okay.

Another lifeless sac with a talk hole and compulsions. Immoderate smiling.

It was difficult to work with the fuzzy muffle around his eyes. Lock lipped, ruthless, tearing deer skin, lifting crates, in the weekend morning out to the city where old women at market complimented his growing hair, the pretense of bashfulness, coy letters slipped between wads of cash, an incidental hand, one of them might take me up, he’d be told of himself, grunt brute, against capitol, impossible emotionlessness. Sonic impedance.

The truck wouldn’t start, that morning it froze. Anselmo came out to start it and cursed him, a jiggle. On 87 south Maurice dozed off and the median scraped the driver door, the insurance
would cover it if there was insurance, he lowered a window, the cold air blasting his face, an image of vegetables splayed over the highway road, Maurice plied to suffer sobriety and health and Anselmo’s lashings, so the farm would go under, the work he’d suffered for nothing, the Mexicans sent away, and he, relegated to a stand outside the farm, Anselmo’s grand father had done it, so he could do it too, collecting nothing in an unceremonious bib forced smiles and vaunts with the local losers.

***

New York City, specks of light from the Tapan Zee, out the mountains he drove south drawn tight to the steering wheel, his hands grip like rigor mortis, off the Triboro the gaudy glass buildings light, the surface of the water, everything stolen and white, the result of some miserable dutch settlers for whom appealed enterprise. New York City, the result of the blood sweat and tears of refugees, migrants, immigrants, force fed fake food and learned to like it, the result of a destitution willing to sacrifice itself for a gilded promise, for their children’s lives, so that they, too, could enter and serve the system on its own terms, learn to love cheap tawdry plastic things, learn to forget how to taste, smell, breathe, exchange their skin for an office, heritage for a check, until even the sound of their mother tongue was lost to obscurity. Enterprise. A means to an end, the collateral that falls in between.

She waited for him after the market that day. She wore a mink coat and violet lipstick, and when he closed he let her count the money while he arranged the unsold produce in the van. The hare krishna drummers were still drumming, inexhaustible as the death clock looming overhead. The muffled buzz of everyone talking, the honking, screeching, cursing, laughing, like mayhem of a compost pile in summer, overlooked by a billion screens.

He packed the crates against the side of the van to leave a space in the center for them. Then he laid the mats down, and the blankets, and helped her in.
Her name was Madam Christine and he made love to her every other Sunday night in Anselmo’s van, surrounded by the buildings of Union Square. He wanted to take her somewhere else, but she preferred to watch him in the van. She kept the mink coat on and he licked her and thought about Anselmo, about how he would be late, and how much sweeter she tasted because of that. And he was like a project to her, softening, made more gentle by contrast to the first time his false sweetness indicated to her the degree of his isolation. When they were finished, she gave him money. He had rejected it at first, but she insisted. He opened the back door for her, offered her his hand. It was fun to pursue idolatry.

*****

He was like a man possessed, some green twilight demon through the Bronx on the Major Deegan, the road lights flashing the rain lashing his windshield the skimmed drags all the compiled schemes of all his young adult life, drained, flashing aback not this, not this.

Darkness, wind, the van swaying on the tapan zee, his eyes mad with an excessive glee.

The deer crept from the bushes on the road before the turn, its skull bashed against the white hood. He kept driving.

You could sustain a feeling pretending immortality if you could endure the pensive return to obscurity for some unrecognizable, indeterminate duration. You could sustain it, like a junkie or a bananafish, and you would hear the minor ring like possession overtake you, your lostness, ambiguity, leave without a trace the vestige of your tenure here on planet earth. Planet earth. How did it find you? How did it begin? How did you begin? Who spoke? Who uttered those words? The garish recognition of myself, oneself, and the immoderate consequences you might entail, be entailed by, touch. He pulled over, the cop lights flashing. Through the window he flashed a grin. He looked like coked up madness, though he’d been too scared to ever try.

Where you coming from?
New York City

Where you heading?

Anselmo's

You been drinking?

No sir.

Did I ask you to call me sir?

Then he was scared and explained, "Oh, no, excuse me, what?"

Step out of the vehicle.

Oh, no, officer, I was being respectful, respect.

Step out of the vehicle.

Sir, officer, please.

The cop opened the door and pulled him out. The van was still running. The crickets and the katydids, why were they still singing? Why couldn't one of them switch places with him? Not them, me, I am me, but why me? Why am I me and not they? Not they. Not him, Maurice thought, and the officer stood him so his arms were held elongated. And the hands loitered around his armpits as the voice ran softer and said, you have a nice time today? The hands slid down maurice's sides, and he thought he spoke, a voice pleading, he didn't know, there were was money and vegetables, they were organic, you could have them anything but that, since when it was doing what he was, the officer wasn't him and why the katydids on the dark street so near home sang so sweetly anyway unresipledly, then not him, he why then, the officer squeezed him and laughed, he cried, crying, why's your face so stiff, he asked, why then need—

Peony was playing chess with Hector by the windows. Tucker was at their feet. They were waiting for Maurice, for when he returned, maybe to help him bring the crates from the truck to the cooler.
When he pulled up there was blood smeared across his face. Peony leapt to him, stopped and they faced each other, the two faces facing in the dark. He turned away and walked down the gravel path into the dark fields.

*****

Absolute dejection plays a funny tune north of a brick heart. Tight lipped desperation encompassed the mass of his body like a chain of halos. 3am, the dog was barking. The light in Anselmo's room sparked, and they met on the staircase where before he knew it Maurice's right eye brused black, and he tumbled down the steps.

Fire can cleanse too, he thought. Anselmo's rough and silent figure.

Maurice stayed on the floor. The dog licked his cheekbones.

*****

Obsessive of the first word, the beginning, purported, of the to come. What escape a writing can be, in the expressiveness, the force of that drainage as the words come out. Then what is my state?

How now? As a recorder, what is the orientation of the state and my body?

In what way must my effort be corresponding? The force of myself, the listenative, not quite cognitative but some hierarchy of cognition, its availability, subversive to the effort of a maintenance of this inner sense of poise, of sitting here, letting that inside myself be spoken, be given word, be sounded...even in text.

*****

Hector followed Peony down through the fields, following Maurice.

"Peony," he shouted.

They were ahead of him. They had waited there, slightly stunned, mere waiting, until Maurice had merged out of sight down the hill into the fields. Maybe it was the paintbrush scratch down the
side of the car they had examined, been gazing upon, or again that strange impossible force of a barrier from his chest. Some angel or devil transfixed their gaze so the awkward pieces of the drama could contend with the difference of each player. Peony heard Hector’s voice like an echo.

“What,” I said to him. He stood there before me, at the foot of the hill. I couldn’t see where Maurice had gone to, and I was no longer certain anything I could do would be of any help at all. Hector was out of breath.

“What?” I repeated, as though a single word of certainty from his lips could cure my intolerable doubt.

“I don’t know,” he said. The wind was singing the trees. It was cold again, and we were wearing t-shirts. Hector was in pajamas. We stood there, saying nothing. Only the wind, and the sound of the coyotes laughing.

I don’t know what he did or where he slept that night; he never told me that part, and I didn’t press him. Me and Hector took the vegetables in. There wasn’t any point in searching for him. But the next morning, he was there, standing in front of Anselmo, thin slivers of spit whispered like darts berating him for the vehicle’s damage. Anselmo’s voice soft, searing, like propane.

***

“Give a man half an inch he’ll take a foot. What’ve you gotten into?” he hissed.

Maurice said nothing. I was watching them from the window, Tucker too.

“What you do to my vehicle? You know the thing ain’t insured. What you getting into?”

“It’s not insured?” said Maurice.

“Hell now. You know that.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Liar. You knew, I told you.”

“You don’t tell me anything.”
“Shut up,” Anselmo said. Then his voice went down even softer. “How’m I supposed to trust you to this business if you can’t even keep the vehicle straight? How you going to adopt all the acres if you can’t manage what I’ve already given you?”

“I can manage.”

“No, you can’t.”

“I can.”

“What’re you going to do about the van?”

Maurice said nothing. Anselmo stood over him, but he didn’t look stronger or more able or dominant. For the first time I saw something in him that depended on Maurice, that’d have trouble getting out of bed if he didn’t know he’d have Maurice to command, from whom he could receive curt nods and transmitted sweat. If Maurice was like a bull in the fields, squat, hunching, neckless, Anselmo was a vulture, perched on his back.

“What’re you gonna do about the van, Anselmo said.

“Why don’t you take your god forsaken van and drive it down into the mud where you dump everything else you’ve used up,” Maurice spat.

Then Maurice was on the ground, Anselmo’s right paw slap directly in the ear, crouched over him, and his hot breath whispering even softer into that same ear. Tucker was barking.

“How am I supposed to give you more, Maury? I’d give you everything, if you only let it happen. Your face smells like a woman.”

Then he looked up at the window and saw me watching.

“You like this place?” Anselmo shouted at me. “You like your little friend? Come clean him up, then.”

Maurice groaned and whispered, “I don’t need some confused under nourished waif to help me. Piss off, Anselmo.”
“That’s it, Maury,” he said, and I watched Maurice take Anselmo’s outstretched hand. It lifted him up and brushed some dirt off his arms. I think it was then I realized I had to find a way to leave the farm.

****

The problem was I was telling myself I don’t care anymore and I knew that meant I still cared a very great deal. People say you can do what you want, you should do what you want, but that means you know who you are, and what whoever you are wants, and then, what if there are a few people you are who want a few different things? And what about what’s best for everyone? Easy to do what you want if you know what that is and how to get it. And I still had Ester then, and her bodhichittadarmha drama, and all my mind fresh with spirally notions that if I didn’t face the lives that were facing me now, I’d have to do it sometime later, or someone would have to do it for me, and that would be worse yet, leaving it for someone else to pick up, and even worse than that, I’d be rejecting whoever was responsible for casting the dye this side of Pluto. I wasn’t even all torn up inside about everything yet, and if Anselmo had to think I’d slept with Maurice, it couldn’t be helped for the time.

Tucker licked my face. Then the doorbell rang and he twirled on the couch and shoved himself off me and launched toward the door, barking manically.

I still have trouble staying on this planet and accepting the cast die when I think about the way it’s bred people who can abuse animals, kick their chests or raise them to fight each other. Tucker was beaten as a pup. And then he stopped barking.

“It’s me, you lunatic!” said a voice behind the pane.

****

Maurice barged in with a crate of carrots on his shoulder. Tucker leaped to greet him. The door stayed ajar, and I watched him spring through the door behind Maurice, calling “No, no, hey,
down,” as Tucker barked and leaped into the open door of the delivery truck in front of the house.

The man was wailing, Tucker was swinging and tearing at his arms.

The next day the agency people arrived with a cage. The delivery man took worker’s compensation, he had a few stitches. We couldn’t get in the bathroom that day, Anselmo didn’t leave.

When he recovered from the binge he gave it to Maurice. Then Maurice gave it to me, and I was silent.

***

The geese on the flats.

At dusk that night a shot rang out over the fields, Tucker cowered under the table.

Maurice came in late, a few loyal feathers still stuck to the carcass he held by the neck. Tucker pranced over, his tail wagging violently against the table so I had to clasp my glass before the reverberation sent it spilling.

“Git, git,” he said, and raised the carcass over his head. Tucker was a pogo stick.

“Git,” he said again, and kicked at the dog. Specks of blood splattered off the carcass.

“You gonna help me or what?” he spat at me, didn’t wait for an answer, and plopped the goose into the sink, started singing in some ancient Caucus Mountain tongue. I returned to my phone. I’d been drafting an email to Ester, something about how I’d come to recognize something important. But it felt all wrong, as though it were a dirty thing to absorb her into my shenanigans. But I didn’t know if it was true to love to be absorbent, or be absorbed. She was a buddhist and I thought that meant she knew what she was doing, because they’re always talking about the void and nothingness and suffering, but it’s a bit funny because sometimes it just seems a convenient way to get together to be less lonely, and I think it was easy for some people to forget that’s really what was going on.
Sometimes I felt like poison and like if someone got too close to me they’d get it too, so I felt I had to play all kinds of games to dance away, for a little. But I wanted them too, and it became like a whole crazy recipe for how to split your heart through the middle, with a side of thorns and thank you, see you never. It even got so it felt like my very looking at someone I loved could infect them, was sending an image from the outside to something inside that got transmitted to god knows where—and the image provoked schemes and designs I didn’t even know, but I could feel, and they’d be up to no good, or they’d be wanting something, and even if it appeared like love beaming out my lantern eyes and it revealed a part of myself caring, it would make them either hide or surrender to me or change, and then they were useless for a period too, they’d have to leave, it was like their insides were temporarily rinsed and the feeling brought a very minor shock, few words, or enamored, and I was alone with the schemes I couldn’t put words to, wanting something and they were imagining I was something I was not, and I had to become cruel or they’d come close enough to touch the poison, and it’d be the end of that. So I wouldn’t look sometimes. I wouldn’t look, or when I did, id hope they’d see the thing that wanted something from them I couldn’t know or hide from myself. Smiling, something crying. It felt like walking up a stream slick with algae. Sometimes I wondered who was seeing what I was seeing, it felt like if I looked, someone else would see what I saw, and know I loved, and they’d take it away, make sure I wasn’t allowed to look or see or love in proximity anymore. They’d take it away. Then I’d still love, still have to, but they’d be safe from me, and my schemes I didn’t know and from my shenanigans.

But I could look at Maurice. I could watch him pluck the last few feathers over the kitchen sink, hear the water clogged drain, some haunting ancient melody out his mouth.

What you looking at?

I was staring and I’d forgotten

You hungry? he asked.
I said nothing.

“What I don’t get about vegans,” he said, “is how all the packing and production line, and all the retailers who think they’re so special and safe and protected from the cradle of this miserable civilization, how they think they’re better than me, better than meat eaters. They think they’re better than the animals too, because the animals go at each other, and they don’t make a mess of everything around them to do it, but the production line does, you bet the fuel it takes to make one of those vegan cashews, you know how much energy and waste is produced on a cashew farm? So they can feel all good inside while they chew their little nuts and pretend I’m a bad man because I took what was given for me to take. This is the waste I made and this is where it’s going.” He pointed to the sink and his belly. While he was talking, Tucker stood obediently at his feet. Maurice was wearing an apron, no shirt.

“I’ll try it,” I said.

He didn’t hear me because then Anselmo appeared out the basement door.

“Watch you dripping. What you looking at, dog?”

Tucker crept out the kitchen.

“Where you take that?” Anselmo asked.

“Over field seven,” said Maurice.

“Looks a fat one, but it got holes in its neck.”

“That’ll boil out.”

“You know what they say about that? They say if it got holes in its neck its because the man who got it talks too much. Indians say it. The bugs who got that goose got it so they could come to you. You got to eat the neck and give the meat back or you’ll keep talking air.”
I laughed and Maurice faced me saying, "I hear you chatting away at night, if you took down a goose you’d get one with emphysema."

"You’re dripping, Maury," Anselmo said. "Clean it up. I don’t want the dog licking this up. Might get him sick. Steal his bark."

Then the carcass was in the sink and there was blood diluted in water everywhere. Maurice wiped the floor.

***

Then I left the farm house and took myself out to dinner. I didn’t know where I’d go when I left, I just knew I had to go, I had to do something. And that’s how I found the shrine and Ester, though we didn’t talk the first time, we just passed, like a couple planets in orbit. I’d driven into the lot and she’d driven out and we saw each other. Then I sat in the car in the lot and waited to catch up with myself. It was almost sunset, so I decided to take a walk up the mountain.

It was ice all over and all the way up the mountain. I felt almost stupid, but I wanted the view, or something wanted it, and the restaurant wouldn’t open for another hour. I grabbed a stick and trekked up. It was a little mountain.

I’d brought my phone because I was still a little obsessed. I think I still remembered how close I’d come to dying again, and it made me feel I’d better record thing. And anyway, it’d be there to show others I loved when they came back and remembered how much they had loved me, because that’s how things go.

So I tapped my way up the mountain with my walking stick. I slipped as I went. The bare trees had something to say but I was too excited to listen and the sunlight was a clean flood splatter, red bark, as though I were standing on Mars, volcanic. I flashed pictures as I ran up, hundreds of pictures before I reached the rock overhang. I knew I was a bit of a maniac but it was fun to get my
blood flowing as the sky itself seemed open, tearing, bleeding. I knelt there as still as I could and let the light cover me.

In the snow falling you feel safe if you have a wood stove to go home tom and four wheel drive, and proper clothes. In the clear air at sunset in the winter upstate it’s both safe and exposed, not blanketed in glorious bleeding light, but secretly stolen, belonging, enslaved, borrowed—no amount of pictures perfectly captured could reassemble the longing for light no longer reaching. You could look at a picture of the day under the cover of night but you would be paying ransom to fear as the dark side of space dips us forward. I felt that as the light made crescendo and the valley below and mountain ranged dropped to less and less light. Then I got a phone call.
Forays

section from tucker’s perspective?

coyote

fox

The snow covered everything and all the plans were changed.

Holy teacher weather

Holy teacher snow

I like people who hurt.

I think it’s a book I’ll regret.

read through journal entries from January 22

take myself out to dinner

I Know Nothing

Holy Teacher Snow

On the Way to Penn Yan

When Mercury and Venus Went Retrograde

see self videos

the arguments with owen. also him mocking me to Anselmo for writing, imitating me in the voice about writing.

the arguments about the tent spot. selfish, doesn’t care about community. you, sneering, you, he would say. and the meat in the fridge. expressing and yelling complaints about me that were false, them turning out to be expressions of his discontent with Anselmo, who he couldn’t express his discontent to because he relied on him. and the goose he’d feathered dripping blood out a plastic bag with holes in it in the fridge.

his bad experience with martial arts?
snow, where the snow comes from, condensation from the poles, whose lungs it had been in before

making love to the universe, the universe making love to my breath

the chicks, chickens, slaughtering them

cats, birth, death, and the dragging kitten in the amniotic sac

annealment, the smith working on a tool

pelt pelt hide hide

canis major canis minor the fox and the dog Maurice and peony

people who feel excessive guilt and shame are not equipped to interact with people who live with an open, unburdened heart, because the underground feel of the contrast causes the start of a minor conscience rub, and what then flakes out their mouth is the detritus of that crust.
Period of Winter Freeze 2022

But that all happened some time ago. After Anselmo overdosed Beth burned the place down. But things didn’t work out, so she ran away with Maurice.

If you went there now, you’d see something the same, but a little different. There aren’t as many dingy poles of rust sticking out the earth, and the tractor found a more permanent home at the dump. The guy who bought the land was into permaculture, and if you walk down the drive, past the greenhouses to the house and the fields, it’s sunchoke and strawberries, echinacea and violets, fruits and shrubs and medicinals that whisper through the wind as the earth reaches up to hold you. In the night you can hear the train whistle across the river, if you stay still. The coyotes howl when they find prey. We look at each other under the moon. And the ridge meets the sky in a distance that remembers theophany.
Appendix: Further Research

From the Haviland-Heidgerd Historical Collection

“Pine Hole Bog,” Roland Bahret

royal fern

bog fern

tamarack

duck potato, sagittaria latifolia

cattails

speckled alder, Betulaceae

swamp rose

cinquefoil

hardhack

yellow spatterdock, nymphaeae

grass pink, calopogon pulchellus

red maple

swamp azalea

Ericaceae sheep laurel

leatherleaf, chamaedaphne caylcate

cranberry

buckbean

swamp milkweed

horned bladderwort?

garter snake

ribbon snake
bull frog green frog

green heron blue heron

damsel bug/ agrionidae

bog moth/ noctuidae, exyra rolandiana

cattail moth

praying mantis, nantidae

long horned meadow grasshopper

short horned grasshopper

cattail moth

cricket frog

solitary sandpiper

water scorpion/ nepidae**, ranatra

common bluet/ coenagrionidae, enallagna erbium

water snake

leech

muskrat

black duck wood duck

barn swallow tree swallow song swallow swamp sparrow

wood peewee, Tyrannidae, Contopus virens

cedar waxwing

flicker

red winged blackbird

gnatcatcher, sylviidae, polioptila coerulea coeruleae

gold finch
eastern kingbird
poison sumac
ericaceae rhododendron

Ericaceae highbush blueberry vaccinium corymbosum

"Poems from the Platt Binnewater," Warren George Sherwood

"The Shatakee":

"Where the basin of Black Creek/ Spreads out to its widest"

the creek flows on down through a wild lovely swamp past strange mossy logs and shy, flaming lobelia, over the reef of the Hog's Back (?) and along quiet reaches until at the stone boat under the old bridge the current increases and roars over the falls and splashes through eel-runs

cucumbers
copperheads
peatswamp
pinetrees
pneumonia
hootowl
hellity chizzel
paynters?
foretoenails

"When Pang Yang Ended"

Woman in Gray
“Collected Writings of and about Warren George Sherwood (1901-1947)”

born on the Lily Lake Farm in Highland, June 25, 1901

died May 28, 1947 (45 yrs old)

Warren Sherwood of his own work: “career is too flamboyant a term. I’m not even businesslike. I make enough living to keep my soul in my carcass and use my head for my interests and hobbies. Candidly, I’m a very shitless cuss.”

stories vis a vis romantic nostalgia

sassafras

old stone walls

“the paths you trod were dented in moss”

moss on the flag stones by the well

“Little rights”

overlapping surveilled land

went to the government

claim to settlers who held it for twenty years, without suit brought to dispute ownership

Publick universal friend travelled through Massachusetts and Connecticut gathering people.

in 1800 some Yankees set from Litchfield County, CT to follow Jemima to ‘New Jerusalem’

Crossed the river, heard of “Little Rights”
Select Bibliography


Sherwood, Warren G., et al. *Collected writings of and about Warren George Sherwood*. Haviland Heidgerd Historical Collection [Date of publication not identified].


Synopsis Draft

I. MAURICE MARRIAGE (27) lives and works on an organic farm owned by ANSELMO (39), in the PANG YANG, a historic misnomer in the HUDSON VALLEY. The BLACK CREEK runs through the farm and creates highly fertile soil, compromised by weeds, flooded irrigation ditches, beaver dams, and storms. MAURICE gives all his energy to maintaining the farm, despite its cost on his social life and ANSELMO's antagonistic dismissiveness.

PEONY (28) seeks sanctuary from life in NYC and arrives at the farm with the idea of working with organic vegetables. ANSELMO appreciates PONY, MAURICE stereotypes them. PEONY attempts conciliation. PEONY and MAURICE work together, ANSELMO plots ways to expose their disjunctions. PEONY treats MAURICE with compassionate reserve, which further instills MAURICE's dislike for them. ANSELMO conceives of a welcoming party for PEONY, MAURICE hides his jealousy. He asks PEONY if they would invite his choir to sing at the event. They plot a way to intercede to ANSELMO, who becomes suspicious of PEONY.

MAURICE's choir sings at the party. ANSELMO is drunk and disruptive. PEONY meets ESTER, and they begin to date. PEONY continues work on the farm and meets MANUEL and FELIX, workers on the farm. PEONY discovers sensitivity in MAURICE when he attempts to save a trapped otter. ANSELMO lies to MAURICE and kills the otter.

II. ESTER lives at a local meditation center and hosts PEONY when farm life becomes too intense. ANSELMO continues to bait MAURICE, who continues to bait PEONY, who continues to attempt compassionate reserve. MAURICE and PEONY harvest sweet potatoes and argue about compelled speech. THADDEUS, an ancient neighboring farmer, witnesses their argument turn to blows, and reprimands them both. Later, MAURICE imitates his inflections to PEONY and they laugh. PEONY shares a book with MAURICE about a former QUAKER named JEMIMA.
WILKINSON who renounced sex and gender and renamed herself the PUBLIC UNIVERSAL FRIEND.

MAURICE deals with emotional pain through choir practice and historical research. He studies the PUBLIC UNIVERSAL FRIEND and discovers the work of a local, deceased poet and historian, WARREN GEORGE SHERWOOD. MAURICE senses uncanny similarities between himself and the deceased. The same land he works, owned by ANSELMO, was worked by followers of the PUBLIC UNIVERSAL FRIEND, and MAURICE decides he has discovered an important lineage. MAURICE takes up smoking a pipe, like SHERWOOD, and begins to treat PEONY with civility.

III. ESTER convinces PEONY to quit work at the farm. ESTER introduces PEONY to friends. MAURICE spends more time alone on the farm and seems to encounter a ghost by the beaver dam. He is told he is the true owner of the land. He tells PEONY, who is dubious and concerned.

The farm floods through the spring. ANSELMO decides to explode the beaver dam, MAURICE defends the dam and PEONY attempts to conciliate. MAURICE and ANSELMO argue furiously.

POTENTIAL END: MAURICE seeks advice from the ghost after the fight and sinks into the swamp.