# Stranger Than Fiction

The roots of imaginative literature about AIDS lie in the rage and despair of the crisis years. But as these four new flowerings show, writers are looking at illness and loss with an increasingly subtle, ironic eye—and finding meaning in surprising places.

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**Botánica Tales**
*by Ernesto Quiñonez*

Wicked things have tremendous staying power and tragedy is always real. It seems to never leave, walking beside you, silent as books, but reminding you it's near. A year had passed since his only son's death, and Pastor Miguel Vasquez still felt that presence of something gone horribly wrong. It was an unexpected death, a sucker punch, that didn't allow him or his wife to make adjustments or prepare themselves for, like people with terminally ill children can.

The Pastor's wife seemed to always carry the sadness. Unlike her husband, who could switch gears, go to work, talk with other people, get lost in running a congregation, his wife couldn't. The grief over their dead son not only lingered, but festered. The Pastor had asked a church member who managed a restaurant by 105th and Lexington to offer his wife work. The church member agreed to the favor, but the Pastor's wife rejected the offer, preferring to spend her days looking out the window. Winter or summer, she would dream of seeing her son walking down the street.

"Mickey, isn't it true that after you have had children who have grown up," she'd say in Spanish, "you no longer think about your own childhood, but of theirs? No es verdad?"

"Yes, that's true, Mildred." When talking to her, he tended to avoid looking directly at his wife. It was those eyes of hers. The Pastor had only seen eyes that sad in slaughterhouses, where animals know they are going to die.

"Come to bed, Mildred," the Pastor, half asleep, would call out. "'Ta tarde." But she'd sit in her chair facing the window as if she was waiting for a train, not knowing when it would come, not sure that it would come at all.

"Wait, I just want to see the sanitation trucks pick up the garbage," she'd answer.

"Why?"

“I don’t know, I like the sound,” she’d say, more to herself than to her husband, and continue to gaze out the window.

The Pastor’s wife no longer stared out the window for gossip, but rather for memories. In the mornings, if any of her son’s friends walked by, she would holler hello and ask how they were and say how she misses them not dropping by. But even when her son was alive, they rarely visited, because she had always been mean to them. In her mind, Absalom was too good for those he called his friends. If any one of them visited, she would be very spiteful and mistrustful, as if they were there to steal from her house.

Brothers and sisters from her faith would take turns visiting her each week. They’d bring her orange juice, grapes, apples and other fruits as if she was sick and could only eat organic foods.

“You know, Absalom had a bad heart,” the Pastor’s wife would tell her visitors.

“Ever since he was a little kid he was short of breath.”

“Heart attacks can happen to anybody,” a sister would say, “young or old.”

“Amen.”

“I had an aunt who got a heart attack from happiness,” a sister would add.

“Amen,” they would all agree.

“So, how are you, Hermana Vasquez? We brought this plant for you.”

And so they would comfort her and distract her. Until they left her house—and then all the unspoken words would be let loose. Those names of things and the disease that only happens to the wicked who didn’t heed God’s words.

“Heart attack? I love la hermana Vasquez, but I got to bear witness, Amen to the truth,” they would say to each other.

“Amen. What about that needle the police found stuck to her son’s arm? That’s all I’m saying. I’m not talking against my Pastor. I’m just talking like a Christian.”

“They say Absalom got that needle at that botánica, San Lazaro y las Siete Vueltas. Not only was her son a junkie, but also a pagan—”

“Oh, and a homosexual, too. Amen. That man who runs that botánica gives away needles, that’s how her son got SIDA. Her son was going to die anyway, better in an overdose. Amen.”

“Now, let’s be careful how we talk about la hermana Vasquez. El Señor hasn’t taken any of our

children, yet. So let's be careful so He doesn't strike our houses."

"Amen, may He not strike my house."

"Amen to that."

"I'm not bochinchando or saying anything bad about my Pastor," a brother would defend his thoughts. "All I'm saying is, if a man can't rule over his house, how is he suppose to rule over the church?" And they would all bow their heads in agreement.

"Pastor Miguel Vasquez's sermons were fiery, like the Lord was with him," yet another brother would say, "but since his son's death, the fire has gone out. He now puts me to sleep. No es verdad?"

"Oh, yes, pillow talk now. Maybe the gift of God has left him?"

"Maybe. I'm not saying he should no longer be head of the church. All I'm saying is how can Pastor Vasquez continue to lead."

"Amen."

"Amen."

"Amen."

The Pastor carried his own sadness. It had been his wish that his only son would take up the church after him. He had never spoken to Absalom about it, but he always felt that his son was gifted and would have made a far better Pastor than he. But Absalom had expressed ideas about being a painter, an artist. Something about painting being his first love and how, unlike many first loves, painting had loved him back. He was good at it, so good that the Pastor would have sounded absurd if he'd ever tried to change his son's mind. There was certainly a future in it—if not artistically, there was always commercial advertising and design. Absalom had even been accepted to Cooper Union, where he was supposed to have started his studies the fall before he died.

For months after Absalom's death, Pastor Miguel Vasquez had developed a habit on every Sunday of sitting in his son's room. He'd look around at his son's belongings which hadn't been disturbed since the tragedy. He would stare at his son's disheveled room, the smell of oil tubes and turpentine enveloping the air, as if he was staring at his own demise. Spray cans all over the place, some full, some empty, charcoals, pastels, a half-finished canvas, a poster of a baseball player, the bed with wrinkled sheets, a black-and-white 12-inch TV, a bible with the name Absalom engraved on its leather cover, large art books, small art books, comic books, religious books, and some other books that the Pastor did not dare touch, afraid they would provide clues toward his son's decline. Sitting there, staring at his son's belongings, it was only a matter of time before the

Pastor would be plagued by Absalom's secrets.

The Pastor did not believe in ghosts. But he did believe in demons. They were the fallen angels that Genesis speaks about. The angels who shook hands with the darkness when they left God's heaven and came down to earth to marry women. Later, after the Great Flood, they were not let back inside the fraternity of God. Instead, they were cast down to earth, where they played havoc on mankind. To the Pastor, these demons were as real as the invisible companions that lonely children play with. He wondered whether one of them had misled his son. For he believed they could get inside people and urge them to do evil. It was for this fear, fear of wicked angels, that Pastor Miguel Vasquez and his followers did not visit botánicas.

Because there are many who believe that if you go inside those places, something dark will follow you home. It'll curl up in a corner and wait until you are sleeping. Then it will uncoil itself and roam your house. Maybe open the refrigerator, take the phone off the hook or leave the faucet dripping. This thing will hover over your dreaming body, hissing and murmuring unintelligible sounds. It will lurk in your home and you'll feel its cold presence increase each day, until it is part of your dark family and you'll have to accept it or it will torment you until it kills you.

But San Lazaro y las Siete Vueltas was nothing like that. The place sparkled with glorious light. Even the tortured cast saints looked alive, like plants that instinctively sway toward the sun. A botánica so clean and saintly, you felt you had to whisper once inside. It was a wonderful place for understanding a feared religion. Later, it would simply become a house for understanding. A place where rumors and misconceptions came to die. An outreach and harm-reduction house for those who entered guilty and hopeless but exited feeling hopeful and alive.

Papelito Santana, who ran the harm- reduction program from this botánica, had always been frail, delicate, as if the wind could sweep him away. Even at 60 he remained as flamboyant and graceful as he had been in his twenties. You might have seen him on the street one August day, walking in his sandals, wrapped in a white sheet dress with a bright red sash tied around his waist. He would stroll down Park Avenue from 116th where La Marqueta begins to 110th where it ends; he would look and smile and greet but rarely buy anything. Walk by drug dealers, junkies, hookers, burnt buildings and projects, blessing them all. You would see him and maybe laugh, shake your head or say hello to him. Because if Spanish Harlem is a ghetto where rats bite sleeping infants and things are always falling apart, it is also a place that's extraordinarily tolerant of eccentricity. This is a neighborhood where men dress in radioactively colored shirts, where kids make a fire hydrant their day at the beach, and where women wear more clothes to bed than they do going to the bodega. Where people play, talk, drink, dance and live more on the sidewalks than they do at home.

Despite his personal excess, Papelito was an intelligent, self-taught man. He believed books had power and was always recommending titles to his friends so they could become powerful as well. "If people have time and money for spirits and potions, they should have time and money for books, too." He was also a very sensitive man and mostly understood things by how he felt, though he could rarely put these feelings into words. He was a nature worshipper—plants filled his

home and two huge trees stood guard at the entrance of his botánica. His religion held that God was too vast an idea for humans to understand and therefore God had left little pieces of himself in all living things. The Orishas, the Black Gods, represented these living things.

It was these living things that divided life into two parts: forces that build up and forces that tear down. There was no concept of ultimate good or evil. To Papelito, Santeria was a religion of limitless possibilities—with the help of God and the Orishas we could weather, change and counterchange every situation, every tragedy, every epidemic. These were the principles of his religion, what Papelito later wanted Pastor Miguel Vasquez to understand. The Pastor's son was dealing with a force that tore down, and the Pastor was not to blame. Papelito believed it was really up to all of us to sway those forces in the direction of good, especially when those that tore down were running rampant, engulfing the entire imagination of the neighborhood. The Pastor's only son's death had done just that.

Death is not a rare occurrence in the streets of Spanish Harlem. But not since a taxi lost control and jumped the curb, striking that poor Mexican woman's stroller, had the neighborhood felt such sadness. The Pastor's only son was one of those deaths that took hold of people, like a pit bull that never lets go. Many saw themselves, their son, daughter, uncle or brother on that rooftop where he was found. They also felt one of their best had been taken because, just like families, neighborhoods have their idiots, their black sheep, their clowns. Neighborhoods also have their little stars. Bright hopes who become personalities everyone knows and cares about. Individuals so full of promise and life that when they are cut down in the midst of their glory or before that glory can be given a chance to spread, they leave us all feeling hopeless and cheated.

The Pastor's only son possessed a talent that seemed to come from some divine source. Never had anyone in Spanish Harlem painted walls like he had, and so young! You could only imagine what he could have done if he'd had a chance to grow up. A true muralist, even the police left him alone. He'd show up with his spray cans, newspapers, ladder, and pick out a blank wall on the side of the building and begin to make the neighborhood a better-looking place. He'd talk with anybody and always had friends. That is why when he was found dead, and later when all his secrets began to unravel, the people were heartbroken.

Residents who knew the Pastor and his wife felt hurt by the tragedy. At times, people the Pastor did not know shook hands with him to offer their condolences. Some embraced him and spoke of his son and how they remembered him, telling him meaningless anecdotes. One day two women dressed in black and sweating like mules in the hot sun solemnly approached the Pastor and asked him, "Can someone in pain only find comfort in those of his church?" With a mask of grief the Pastor answered, "No, of course not," knowing full well that his religion forbade it, but not wanting to offend them. "There is a santero, his name is Papelito, he has helped many."

"Yes, I know," the Pastor said and went about his sad existence, finding distractions in his work and church, while at the same time trying to make sense of what had occurred. Every day the Pastor waited for some sort of revelation to take place. For some light to shine on his tragedy. For something good to show itself from all this darkness. But nothing ever transpired, and his wife

began to talk of leaving for Puerto Rico, because it was this city that had killed her son.

None of it seemed real. Wasn't God's Kingdom supposed to be at hand? And didn't he shelter his only son from the streets by shielding him with God? This disease that had taken his kid, wasn't it a white gay men's problem? Pastor Miguel Vasquez felt he had to believe in something or he might as well die, either cling to his beliefs more than ever or completely let them go and begin anew. What he would never consider was to seek the help of a santero, Papelito or any other.

And that is why, after waiting a year for Pastor Miguel Vasquez to walk into his botánica (for Papelito did not want to impose and wanted to give time for the Pastor to grieve), Papelito decided it was time to ask the Orishas for guidance. On the exact day of the equinox, when the sun crosses the equator and day and night are of equal length everywhere, a perfect balance in nature, Papelito entered the lobby of 1829 Lexington Avenue, carrying a paper bag full of fruits and candles.

He spilled florida water into all the corners of the lobby and then took the elevator up to the last floor. Once there, Papelito recounted to himself what had happened. How Pastor Miguel Vasquez's only son had been found dead on the roof. How he had taken the elevator to the 14th floor and climbed the stairs up to the roof door, knowing that the alarm was always broken. How the Pastor's son got as high as the New York skyline, which on a clear night is a city seen in all its glory. The white lights seem angelic. The breeze blows saintly and you can almost hear Spanish Harlem sing. But up there, you are no longer part of the neighborhood. Up there, you are a little closer to God. And Papelito knew it must have been God or something divine that Pastor Miguel Vasquez's only son saw or felt in that quick, shooting meteoric flash of heaven, right before his heart went supernova.

Up there, standing on the same spot where the Pastor's son had died, Papelito set up an altar. He lay the fruits, coconuts, mangos, oranges and sugar cane on the ground and he lit candles next to it. He begged the Orishas to speak to him. To not leave him like tracks in the Central Park snow that lead to nowhere. He prayed to the Orishas to show him the threads that might bind him to the Pastor, so that the Pastor might begin anew and say to his followers what needed to be said, that sometimes it takes the death of someone famous, someone loved, for others to begin a process of change.

Up on that rooftop, where the breeze whispers silence, Papelito prayed for hours until he felt in his heart that the Orishas had given him their blessings. With that he left his offering to them and kissed the air. He walked toward the roof door, took the elevator down, and went to meet up with Sonia. Their harm-reduction program would have to be taken into the churches.

*—a chapter from a novel-in-progress*

**Petit Mal**
*by Anne-christine d'Adesky*

September. Naughty Boy has been calling more lately. Quick, clipped greetings that always begin and end the same way. Heeeeey… what's up? It's Bad Boy. Call me back. A brief communication I try to decipher for its emotional content. It's in the lilt of the word, whether he stretches out the Call me back, leaves it on a happy high note. If he doesn't, if it's very short, I know he's upset. And these days, he's upset, deep-down.

Naughty Boy is the kind of reserved, outwardly cynical man who's secretly a young boy you want to tickle so hard he screams like a girl to stop. He's a Type-A, button-down, live-by-the-books Gap-boy who's an admitted control queen. Of his own universe, especially, though he tries to control his friends as well—but gently. Like me, he's hardest on himself.

We talked on the phone last night. He was in a good but grim mood, giving me an update on his health. He enjoys dry wit. He is a boy who sniggers, and giggles, putting his hand up before his face to guffaw. As if when he laughs, he threatens to reveal too much of himself. A core of mirth that must be kept down, like his feelings. These tend to be expressed indirectly, passed through a sieve of light sarcasm, but I'm never fooled.

So far, he's been doing well on his HIV cocktail with one exception: His hair is falling out or, more accurately, it's thinning. It comes out in clumps, leaving his calves patchy. Not just on his legs and arms and head either, but around his balls. My friends tell me I should shave, he jokes, but tonight there's no chuckle. He feels exposed, vulnerable and a bit afraid, uncertain if this is a side effect important enough to warrant a doctor's attention.

Of course it is, I reassure him. You're not being a hypochondriac. Losing your hair isn't OK, not just because we're all vain. I'd feel the same way. It's a sign that something is wrong and it makes you feel like you're not in control. I can see how it's affecting how you feel about yourself, making you depressed. That counts as a quality-of-life issue. Health is about feeling good, remember? Just because you have HIV doesn't mean you have to look sick, especially since you're healthy. Don't forget, you're in charge, even if you don't feel that way. You can change your regimen. You have options, remember?

My little speech lifts him up. On the phone I promise to swing into action, call my contacts, get on the Internet, find out everything that's published on unusual hair loss and his anti-HIV drugs. A week later, I'm nearly empty-handed. I've found two citations. It's not listed as a common side effect of the drugs he's taking. The researchers-cum-doctors I talk to are doubtful about his story. Perhaps it's stress, one suggests. Perhaps baldness runs in his family. (It does.)

Listening to these experts, I hear echoes of the lousy advice I've gotten from doctors in the past. The answer they give when they don't have anything to offer and can't accept that they don't know. That there might be a problem they didn't anticipate. I feel myself getting angry on Naughty Boy's behalf in a way I rarely get angry about my own health problems. (Did you hear that, reader-therapist? A classic example of feminine conditioning, I'll own it.)

I avoid calling Naughty Boy until I have more information, but I know he's getting more anxious

every day. His messages stack up on my telephone machine. Any news? I feel the fear in my stomach. Like an iron bar, solid and cool. A tight feeling stretching across my ribs that I have to mentally dissolve, melt with the power of the sun, with my mind's power to relax, to trust the universe.

When I finally do call, I tell him first about my own health problems, about the frustration of not being able to get a diagnosis for my recurring joint pain, the low-level migraine that settles above my eyes, the spontaneous fevers and itchy skin, the lousy bowels. I've got every symptom in the book, I say, but no idea what it is. Sound familiar? I tell him to keep close track of his alopecia, the fancy term for losing your hair, and to give me some time to get more information. I tell him I'll talk to his doctor. And the whole time, inside, I'm crying. For him, for me, for all of us. At the reminder that he could die, still, or suffer, and so could I, of course, but my own prognosis is much more obscure.

The reports I've read are skimpy. The researchers continue to annoy me with their calm, assured skepticism of Naughty Boy's story. From what I can gather, I tell him, his hair loss is likely to be a transient problem, one that may resolve itself naturally, but could get worse if he stays on his current regimen. It's not life-threatening, it seems, but it shouldn't be ignored, no matter what his doctor says. For the first time, I side against the experts and give him my studied personal opinion. Bugger the data, I say, it's the protease drug. This started when you added it. Switch that drug, I suggest, and you may get an answer. Try a process of elimination. Or don't. Stay on the drugs and accept your temporary baldness.

Naughty Boy is torn. He's terrified of HIV, of letting it run its course. In recent weeks, under his microscopic scrutiny, his hair appears to be growing back, or maybe he's imagining it. He's afraid of switching to a regimen that won't work, afraid of doing something his doctor won't approve of. What if it backfires, he asks. Then what? Searching himself, he admits, it's freaking him out. He doesn't want to go the gym, reveal his hairless legs. He's stopped wearing shorts. It's disgusting, he says suddenly, angrily, finally, speaking his own truth. I feel like a freak, he whispers, near to tears. An ugly freak.

Maybe I should wait, to see if it gets worse, he suggests, doubt in his voice. How much worse? I ask him gently. How bad does it need to get? Your biggest obstacle right now is fear of change, fear of the unknown. You may have to take a risk, a calculated risk.

But he can't. Like my constant mysteriously inflamed hands, his hairless legs have shaken his confidence. All is not right in the world and all may not be right.

I am becoming a Buddhist. Surrender. I say this to myself a dozen times a day. Surrender to that which you do not control. Turn it over, accept the mystery, consider the lessons, and do what you can to overcome your fear. Act to change what ails you, but, in this moment, surrender. You are not in control. This advice I keep to myself, giving Naughty Boy a more positive, abridged version: Relax. You're doing fine. Life is always throwing you curveballs—this is one. You've done your homework. Now stop analyzing and follow your heart. If your heart tells you it's not OK, listen to it.

You'll feel some relief when you do.

Two weeks later, he calls again. It hasn't gotten better, he reports. So I've made a decision. He pauses dramatically. I'm going to kill myself. Just kidding, he sniggers, his Naughty Boy spirit back. I'm going to switch the damn meds. At least I'll be able to have a cocktail before I start again.

*—an excerpt from a novel-in-progress*

A Thunderbolt out of the Blue  by Jaime Manrique

My friend Manolo was very excited, which can be cause for alarm because he has the energy of a hurricane. We were going to NYU to hear Ramón Ariza give a talk. He was a famous Cuban author who had escaped from the island and who was now making his first public appearance in New York. Because he was one of the few openly gay Latin- American writers, and because he had suffered persecution and incarceration for his beliefs, he was one of our heroes.

The weather had suddenly turned chilly, reminding us that winter was around the corner. Ramón was lecturing in a small auditorium in the Spanish department. Though he was well-known in Latin America, and two of his novels had been translated into English while he was still jailed on the island, he was far from a household name in New York. Yet, ardent fans that we were, we'd arrived early to get front-row seats, and Manolo had brought his camera and tape recorder to document the event.

By 7 o'clock the auditorium was packed with an audience of mostly older, academic-looking women, and several men, though few seemed openly gay. Ramón arrived accompanied by the department chair. Up until that point, I just knew the crushable photo of him on the editions of his books published in Spanish. He was older now, but he was still handsome, though borderline thin. He had prominent cheekbones, intense black eyes and nut-brown hair. He had a stocky, strong peasant build, yet there was something coquettish and queenie about his manner as he stood there being introduced.

Manolo took photos like any vulgar paparazzo and I found myself unable to take my eyes off Ramón. I loved his two novels about life in rural Cuba just before and right after the revolution, and I thought he was one of the greatest poets in the Spanish language. Even if he hadn't been jailed, tortured, his manuscripts destroyed, I would have been a big fan of his work. But of course the story of his incarcerations, and his confrontations with Fidel, added a whole other mystique. In Latin-American artistic circles, which were traditionally left-wing and pro-Castro, Ramón was considered a pariah. I, too, considered myself a socialist and yet I couldn't forgive Castro for his treatment of homosexuals. His track record spoke for itself. So I often had found myself arguing with my Latin friends who were pro-gay but also pro-Fidel and who therefore dismissed and ridiculed Ramón.

Ramón was a magnetic speaker. As he began to talk, an inner light made him glow like a true star. He was charming, deadly serious, irreverent, subversive as he talked about his life and the evolution of his work under Communism. He had as many bad things to say about the Cuban communists on the island as about the Cuban exiles in Miami, whom he called materialistic, racist, homophobic. I was astonished by his courage and his determination not to simplify his talk into black and white. Ramón was telling us about how one of his novels had been confiscated by Fidel's police when suddenly a male voice in the audience cried, "Liar! It's all lies!"

All the heads in the auditorium turned in the direction of the voice. Four men stood in the back, against the wall, looking defiantly at Ramón and at the rest of us. "You are a liar paid by the CIA," one of the men said. "Tell us how much they pay you to lie about the revolution."

Intense whispering erupted in the auditorium. "Faggot," one man called. "Faggot. You should all die of AIDS."

"Malparido hijo de puta," Ramón screamed, losing all control, blanching, shaking. "If you were a man you wouldn't scream from up there. You'd come down here and say it to my face."

The men stampeded down the stairs in Ramón's direction. Pandemonium broke out. The academic ladies started screaming, Manolo began to snap pictures and, before I knew it, the four men started beating Ramón, who fought all of them with incredible fury. Two of the men had pinned Ramón against the wall and were hitting him. I decided to help Ramón and started throwing blows. Then Manolo joined in. Suddenly, I realized some of the screaming ladies had entered the tussle and were hitting the attackers with their umbrellas and pocketbooks. One of the men bolted out of the room and his companions followed.

Ramón was on the floor bleeding; I knelt to assist him. "Careful," he said. "Don't touch the blood. I have AIDS."

I froze. It was the first time our eyes met. He seemed surprised, hardly believing that a total stranger had come to his help. We were surrounded by a chorus of women: "Ramón, estás bien? Ay Dios mio! Somebody call an ambulance. Ay pobrecito!"

Ramón had bunched a hand against his nose to stop the profuse bleeding.

"He has to go to the hospital," one of the ladies said.

"My car is parked right outside," another one offered.

Ramón placed a hand on my shoulder to help himself up. “Who are you?” he asked, paranoia flashing in his eyes. Did he think I was a Cuban agent? Later I would learn that he behaved in the States as if he were still in Cuba—he had escaped the island but had brought the police- state mentality with him.

“I’m a fan,” I said. “I love your books. I’m a writer from Colombia. And this is my friend Manolo, another fan,” I said, nodding in Manolo’s direction.

Ramón took my arm. We helped him get up and into the elevator. I told Manolo I’d call him later. Accompanied by the driver and another woman, we headed for Saint Vincent’s Hospital in the Village. The women were academics who knew Ramón and had written papers about his work. I was the only stranger in the car. They talked among themselves with great animation, without paying attention to me.

The waiting room was a madhouse, and I helped Ramón fill out the forms because he was still bleeding. It turned out he had no health insurance. Sara, one of the women with us, pulled out her American Express card, gave it to the attendant and said, “Here’s my card. You can charge everything to me.”

Finally, a nurse came out pushing a wheelchair and whisked Ramón away.

The women and I chatted for awhile about Ramón, whom they worshipped, about themselves, the places where they taught, and about me. They were Cuban refugees who had been in the States for decades, though they still talked about Cuba as if they had left it yesterday.

Finally, I suggested that they should leave; that I would wait for Ramón and take him home. The women talked to the nurses, and when they were satisfied that Ramón’s cuts were minor, we exchanged kisses and they left.

A couple of hours later a dazed Ramón appeared, accompanied by a nurse. I walked up to him. He looked surprised to see me there. “I told Sara and Sonia they could leave; that I would make sure you got home.”

Instead of thanking me, he said, “Why are you doing this? You don’t know me.”

“I told you earlier, I am a fan.” I became apprehensive that I sounded like a groupie and added, “I’m a poet. I’m writing a novel.”

“Who’s your favorite poet?” he asked aggressively. The way he put the question it sounded as

though if I said the wrong name all communication between us would be over. The people-pleaser in me wanted to guess who his favorite poet was. I did not want to alienate him, but I did not want to lie. Martí sounded like a safe bet, since all Cubans are nuts about Martí, but I did not care for his poetry, though I certainly liked “Guantanamera.” “You mean, of all the poets in the world?” I asked, trying to gain time.

“Who comes to mind right now?” he asked, point-blank.

“Cernuda,” I blurted. “Luis Cernuda.”

“I love Cernuda too,” he said and tried to smile. Ramón looked awful: his face swollen, his nose wrapped in a bloody bandage. His shirt was liberally covered with dry blood. He had a black eye, so inflamed that it was shut. There was also blood splotched on his hair. He took a step in my direction and  wobbled, as if he were dizzy. I offered him my arm. I could smell the blood all over him.

When Ramón gave his address to the taxi driver, I felt déjà vu. The address he gave, 690 Eighth Avenue, was just next door to O’Donnell’s bar, where I had lived for over a decade. I told him about this. “This is a good omen, don’t you think?” he said. Was he flirting with me? We were silent riding the taxi uptown. Ramón acted morose, and he was drowsy from the sedatives and painkillers they had given him. The taxi stopped one door over from my former abode. When I saw how weak he was, I offered to help him to his apartment. He accepted my offer without protesting. We climbed and climbed, all the way to the sixth floor. Several times we had to stop so that Ramón could catch his breath. “Now that you’re here,” he said, when we reached his door, “you must come in for a cup of coffee.”

We entered the apartment, which had half a dozen locks, and Ramón secured it from the inside, sliding all kinds of chains and bolts across the door. Later, I understood that he still felt as if any minute the Cuban Secret Police would break down the door of his apartment. We walked into the living room, which had a window looking in the direction of the Hudson. The lighted silhouette of some tall buildings met my eyes.

Despite the fact that a couple of Ramón’s books had been translated into many languages, and that he had received some important cash awards, the apartment was shabby. A primitive oil landscape depicting the Cuban countryside, hung in the living room, was the only decoration. Ramón indicated that I sit in a sunken couch. He said he could offer me a Cuba Libre or a cup of coffee.

“Whatever you’re having it’s fine,” I said.

“Oh you’re so accommodating,” he said coquettishly. “Coffee it will be. I’m going to write after you leave. I need a shot of caffeine to keep me awake. I feel so groggy from the damn sedatives.”

I wanted to say, “Forget about writing tonight. What you need is to rest.” What was it in him that awoke my need to want to play Florence Nightingale? Was it that he had AIDS? I could hear my friend Dallas screaming in my ear, “Keep the focus on yourself!”

Ramón served two mugs of strong black coffee and sat on the couch, at the opposite end. There was no light on in the living room, but the lights of the buildings and billboard outside provided sufficient illumination. We sat there bathed in a muted neon glow, a hodgepodge of colors, so that the place seemed unreal, like a disco. It looked like neither night nor day, as though time had ceased to exist at that moment and we were in a room in another galaxy where neither the sun nor the moon were the main sources of light.

It turned out that we had the same literary agent, and that Ramón had moved into this apartment shortly before I moved away.

“I wonder if I ever cruised you,” he said.

“Are you flirting with me?” I asked.

He blushed, but he looked at me even more intently. “It’s cultural, you know.”

“I was hoping it wouldn’t be.”

His face got even redder and mine got very warm. “Tell me the story of your life. I want to know everything,” he said.

I talked about the terror of those sweltering afternoons in Barranquilla, when the world seemed to come to a standstill. Many of the people in the city went to the soccer stadium and, if I didn’t have a plan—for example, to go to the movies with Wilbrajan—the afternoon seemed endless and I felt a loneliness that was unbearably painful because I thought it would never end. As much as I hated school, where the boys tormented me for being an intellectual sissy, I preferred it to being at home when my mother and sister had gone out to visit friends and I sat by the window reading a novel. I talked about Tarzan, the only known homosexual in Barranquilla, an outcast who was supposed to prey on the boys. How I was both drawn to him and repelled by him. How I sat by my window pretending to read and study when he went by the house strutting like a peacock in his tight jeans and close-fitting t-shirts over his muscular body. Here Ramón interjected that in Holguín where he grew up, the only known homosexual was also an outcast, and that he dreaded he’d become one.

It was dawn when we stopped exchanging anecdotes. The lights on the buildings and billboards were out and the sky was a satiny, ivory tent above Manhattan. I was so tired I was barely able to get up from the sofa.

Ramón leaned over and took my hand. “Look,” he said. “I like you. I am attracted to you, Santiago.”
I squeezed his hand. With his red bruised face and bandages he looked terrible. I closed my eyes so that I could see him the way he had appeared before the men had attacked him in the auditorium.

“But I understand if you don’t want to get involved with someone with AIDS.”

With my eyes still closed, I put a finger to his lips. “Hush,” I murmured. “I like you too,” I added, to my own surprise. Until that moment I hadn’t thought the potential was there for a romance. I opened my eyes. Now he looked handsome to me. “I don’t care about the HIV.”

“I don’t just have HIV,” he insisted. “I have full-blown AIDS. Last year I almost died of pneumonia. It’s a miracle I’ve recovered this much. One thing I can tell you is that I never want to be that sick again. Once was enough. I know what’s down the road so I don’t want to lie to you.”

I reached over, took his face gently in my hands, and kissed his lips. “I don’t care,” I said, unsure I meant it.

He took my face in his hands. “Then let’s be lovers. I’m not into games and I don’t have time for a long courtship.”

What could I say? I didn’t want to reject Ramón because he was sick. But I’d be a hypocrite if I didn’t admit that I was terrified.

As soon as I got back to my apartment, I called Dallas and another friend, Laurette. “Santiago,” Dallas said, “it’s not the length of a relationship that matters, but the quality of the time you have together.” “When you’re an old man, Santiago,” Laurette said, “you’re not going to regret the affairs you had, but the ones you didn’t have.” More than anything else I would hear in the next few weeks, this made up my mind that I would not reject Ramón just because he carried the virus.

But I understood that I was getting involved in a threesome: that HIV was the third partner in the equation—a noisy, insistent monster who would always come between us.

—a condensed chapter from Señoritas in Love, a novel-in-progress

Childhood by Philip Huang

M y name is Spider and I lived on Earth once, on a beach. Now I live on the moon.

For all practical purposes, it looks like Earth, all the rules still apply: Flush the toilet when you're done, put stamps on the bills before you mail them. You just have to recall these things, with a bit of effort, like a language you took in high school. Was this what I used to do?

Crazy talk. You're crazy.

I understand that I am not crazy. Ed has told me so: not just that I'm not crazy, but that I understand I'm not. Crazy is too simple. What I am is self-indulgent.

"Besides," Ed says, "it's so obvious. Everyone feels that way. Everyone says it's like going to the moon. That they've gone to the moon, but flowers are blooming on their skin. Mixing their metaphors."

I know he is trying to decide what to make of me, how to feel about me, now that—

"Do the quilt!" Ed says.

Tom has gone and—

"You do the fucking quilt," I tell Ed.

Now that Tom has gone and died.

"So what did you study in school?" a skinny white guy in a black cap is asking me. He's sitting on the bed with a mirror in his lap. I'm still standing in the doorway, in my coat.

You can tell the sort of life a person leads by his bedroom: either a life lived too hard, or one lived not enough, with too much ordinary toil. It's always one or the other. It seems to me that this man's room could really be either. Or both. It's possible to be both.

I think of my senior thesis: "Fish Food: Vaginal Poets and the Aesthetics of Hunger."

"English. I studied English."

“Oh!” he says brightly, “I used to teach ESL!”

He unfolds an origami heart over the mirror in his lap. The crystals trickle onto the glass and make a landscape there, pyramids in an aerial photograph. With a credit card, he begins to grind.

“I hate Popsicles,” he says as he works. “When I had cancer, the doctors made me suck on Popsicles during chemo. Apparently it kept my mouth cool. So, you know, the poison wouldn’t go toward my brain.”

I wait for him to say more, but there isn’t more. He adjusts his cap, a Raiders cap from when they were still in LA. I once watched a porno called Raiders of the Lost F**k. Spelled like that, with stars. Somewhere in the apartment below, a woman coughs.

While the powder drips down my throat, he wants to know if I like jazz.

“OK.”

“Or I have some house music if you like.”

“OK.”

Then he is naked. Except for the baseball cap, he is naked.

OK.

On the bed I wait for pleasure. I wait for compliment. There may not always be pleasure, but there is always compliment.

Fork.

People in chemo wear baseball caps. The women wrap their heads in pretty scarves and write in their journals about the pain, the pain, the awful pain. Sometimes the cancer slips away from you, like a cat from your lap. Sometimes the cancer has to be humiliated, held against a wall and bullied with poison until it shrinks and disappears. That’s how it must’ve been, some time ago, perhaps a long time ago, for this man. A story you tell someone you’re about to sleep with, something personal but not really.

Folk.

He is on top of me. He tells me to put my arms around him, and his ribcage gathers in my elbows. I position his head under my chin so I can look up at the ceiling, the field of tiles, all illuminated by my own skin.

Fuck.

I wonder when I can ask to use the bathroom.

Now.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

In the bathroom, I pick up a drinking glass and smash it against the porcelain until it breaks. I sit on the rim of the bathtub and turn the faucet, but there’s no water. Someone didn’t pay the bill. Someone, not me.

It wasn’t me who had fallen in love first with Tom three years ago. It was Ed.

“You think it’s true what they say about black men?” he’d ask, flustered.

“He’s not black. I think he’s Puerto Rican.”

“Do you think it’s true what they say about deaf men?”

“He’s not deaf. OK, no, he is deaf, but—”

With Tom, you had to believe everything they said about black, deaf or Puerto Rican men. You had to believe that they were all melon-assed, thick-waisted, big-dicked, and kind and brave and a little bit sad.

We invited him along for a weekend to Guerneville.

Guerneville is set deep in wine country, nestled in a bend of the Russian River, so the drive up takes you through rolling vineyards edged with new-growth redwoods. Every mile or so, an impatient Lexus or Mercedes overtook Ed’s car on the narrow road.

“Faggot!” I yelled at one.

“What did you just yell?” Tom asked.

“I told them to slow down,” I said. “The speed limit clearly says—”

The town was seeing its better days now that queers had discovered it as a resort: Rainbow flags waved over yogurt stands and country-western bars and mom-and-mom, pop-and-pop five-and-dimes. Lesbians pushed strollers teeming with rosy babies down the main avenue.

A leather daddy working the register in the grocery store in town told us he makes a mean Egg Foo Young. “I could bring some up to the house if you like,” he offered. “Where you folks staying at?”

“Who’s Ed Foo Young?” Tom asked. (His pronunciation was excellent. Just a little slur on the edge, a syllable held too long, like someone eating caramel.)

That was Tom’s response to the world: always just slightly off, a half-beat behind, perhaps because of his deafness, more likely because of his genuine faith that the world was not evil, or even mean. Standing there in the store, clutching a bottle of rum, I understood that this was a man I could love, a man who might even love me back. I thought I could give him the world, leaf by leaf, as he believed it to be, through some generous translation on my part.

The house we rented was a little blue affair set high on stilts—because of the seasonal flooding—like a bird dozing on long legs, a few miles upriver from town. A back veranda overlooked the cove of rocky beach that extends 50 yards or so to the water, where boaters passed by and raised their beers at the men in bikinis sunbathing on stones as hot and flat as pancakes. Ed and I were too young to see Fire Island in its heyday, but it might’ve been a little like this if it weren’t for the children splashing and tattooed mothers hollering about not throwing rocks into the river you might hit someone.

The owner has moved back to the city and rents out the house during the summers, Ed explained. In the bottom drawer of a bureau in the side bedroom we found a picture of the man, younger and bronzed, seated on the white chaise still on the veranda, bending his tanned half-erection toward the camera.

“Oh my God,” Ed said. “What a beautiful chaise!”

Ed draped himself hopefully on the arm of that white chaise off and on all weekend, touching his throat whenever he laughed, trying to catch Tom’s eye. I spent the weekend casually aside: reading a book on the porch, cleaning dishes at the sink and putting away bagels or oranges while Ed beseeched Tom to teach him simple phrases in sign language at the kitchen table. Soon

enough, predictably, Tom would be at my side, climbing the steps up the veranda (while Ed frolicked—frolic! frolic!—loudly down by the water), or slinging a dishtowel over his shoulder and taking a post with me at the sink (while Ed sliced a lime hopefully at the table).

“I think he likes you,” Ed said the second night, drunk.

“I think so, too,” I said, too quickly. “What does that mean? Does that mean you’re mad at me?”

“I might be. I don’t know yet.”

“Will you tell me when you know? Will you be happy for me?”

“Yes,” he said, picking up his glass and looking into it. “I’ll tell you when I know.”

And each morning it was Tom who woke first and stood on the porch with his inevitable coffee, his head leaning against a white post, the water beyond him like the lovely blue dream the rest of us were still dreaming.

Spider? Spider, are you still in there? Did you fall in the toilet? Ha ha.

Spider, I’m coming in, can I come in? I’m coming in—

Oh my god, oh my shit, oh my jesus shit—

And I am being lifted from the tub, a rag doll, a bundle of hay, a light, flippant laugh sailing across a room dense with murmurs.

A close call.

A close call means that two fingers on your right hand can’t be controlled because you damaged a nerve buried deep in the wrist. For as long as you live, they’ll tick against your palm, tapping out messages no one can understand let alone answer.

“You want to tell me why?” Ed says. We are sitting in his office, where there are posters of sexy people with hepatitis playing frisbee. Ed is a treatment advocate. He is dating my case manager.

“Let’s hear why.”

“I forget,” I shrug. “What did I say the last time?”

“You know,” Ed sighs, flipping through his Rolodex. “Sometimes when I talk to you I feel like I’m in a big house with a lot of rooms and a lot of corridors. But we just sit in the parlor all the time, this little parlor off to the side of the house. Does that make sense?”

Every day is summer for Ed. The harvest never ends.

I lean back in my seat. “The parlor is a good room. I’m happy in the parlor.”

He looks at me a second and then smacks his lips. “I’m going to give you the number of someone you should call,” he says, pulling out a card. “His name is Jonas, Jonas Chow. Harvard. Private practice. He has a pretty big caseload, but I convinced him to take your case. He’s expecting you to come. I suggest you do.”

Expecting you to come. That’s what therapy is. You talk and talk and the therapist strokes you along until you cum.

I look at the card like an acorn that’s fallen off a tree and bounced off my head.

My case. I’m a case.

“Will you call him?”

I nod.

“Will you really?”

What comes after acceptance? Another room. Furniture you’re not sure you can sit on.

On my way out, I pass by Ed’s three-o-clock, a little man reading a big glossy magazine too closely. “Ed’s feeling needy today,” I say, and the man lowers his magazine. He’s wearing a patch over one eye, which he lifts to wink at me, the lid closing over a trembling eye. I steady my fingers to write my number on the back of Jonas Chow’s business card.

“Here’s my number,” I say. “Ed gave me the basics of your case. He wants you to call me. My home number’s on the back. Will you call me? Will you really?”

“I’m Hector,” he says.

My doctor is a tall Nordic blond in her fifties who had her right breast removed on a recent trip to the moon. The fabric of her white robe is smooth and flat over her left chest, where a pin asks in loud letters: “what the tit are you looking at?”

“I got your numbers back,” she tells me. “They look OK but not as good as they could be.” She’s very good about getting to the point, very Nordic that way.

Before she continues I tell her meds will disfigure me. They will bloat and starve and finally disfigure me.

“Listen,” she says abruptly. “Times were different then. We’re not talking AZT here. There are more options now. Better ones.”

Women are lucky that way: They have the kind of hairline that makes crew cuts look well maintained. A crew cut takes a lot of maintenance.

“What,” I say, opening my paper gown, “could be better than this?”

“Is dysfunction spelled with a y or an i?”

“Which one is that? Oh no, wait, I see it—”

We’re on the phone, doing identical crossword puzzles from yesterday’s newspaper. Earlier we recited the comics, each doing a character. Lucy had a German accent. Linus sounded like a breathless starlet.

For a man going blind, Hector reads a lot of newsprint.

“What are you going to be for Halloween?” he asks.

“I’m going to be a junkie,” I say. “No wait. I’m going to be a trashy. I already have the costume.”

“I’m going to be a pirate,” he says. “I already have the eye patch.” He pauses. “The eye patch is the whole costume.”

“I have this gold leotard,” I say. “I could wear the leotard and put brown grease paint on my face.

Your buried treasure. Wouldn't that be clever?"

"Whatever's clever, didn't people used to say that?" Hector says dreamily.

"God, imagine the kind of people who used to say that."

"It's funny," he says. There's a long pause.

"What's funny?"

He stops to think. "I don't know," he says thoughtfully. "I don't know."

"Hector," I say. "Did you talk to your landlord like I told you to?"

"Yes," he says.

"Thirty days?"

"Yes."

"Good. If there's one thing I learned at Harvard, it's this: Stick to the plan."

"The plan," he repeats.

I remind him. The plan is that you give up pretending, fighting, this lust-for-life business; you give up this foolishness of going on as if there's somewhere to be gone to. The plan is that you lay down and die.

My child. The way God intended.

"Lie," Hector says. "You lie down and die."

Morning, afternoon, night. If I stay in bed long enough, it becomes something else, then something else again.

Oh, bedroom. It's just you and me.

I don’t recall that Tom and I ever made a clear decision about me moving in. We were in love. We were in love and I had a bad lease. Not necessarily in that order.

The phone, which is still hooked up to Tom’s keyboard, rings.

“I know it’s you,” Ed says.

“Mom?” I try.

“Hector told me this morning that Jonas Chow’s been trying to help him ‘prepare for the end’: donate his clothes, give away his cat, put in notice to his landlord. I just called Jonas. He has no idea who Hector is.”

“Well, I have no idea who Jonas is.”

“Don’t,” Ed says tiredly. “Look. Hector’s been through a lot. His doctor can’t do any more about the CMV in his eyes.” He sighs. “I’m going to call and tell him everything.”

I am prepared to be flirtatious, hurt, defensive.

“You have no right—”

“Spider. He’s going blind, not deaf.”

“Shut up,” I say.

“I knew it.”

“You weren’t there.”

(Ed wasn’t there. No one was there. Not when Tom’s neck arched back to receive the cascade of pills, confetti of red and white. A parade. Someone’s beautiful parade.)

“Yes, I was. There. I was there,” Ed says.

“You were there when I wanted you there.”

(The pill bottles in a neat row on the nightstand, the tumbler of gin.)

“You don’t believe that. You don’t know what you believe.”

“And why is that, Ed?”

“Because you’re a fake.”

Now I’m interested. “Lay it on me,” I say.

“You’re a coward.”

“What else?”

“Your tragedy is boring. It’s obvious and it’s boring. You’re a bore.”

“Don’t stop now.”

“You probably fed Tom the pills yourself so you can play widow.”

I had not prepared for this.

And Ed isn’t finished. “I won’t be your audience anymore,” he says. “This is our last conversation.”

Last night when I asked Hector what it was like, he said: “Oh, sometimes it’s lovely. The world in spots, like leopards. Is it leopards with spots? Maybe it’s bobcats.” He stopped.

“I’m going blind. What do you think that’s like?”

Then I told him what I’m telling Ed now. “I have to go.”

Where are we going?

We’re going to the hospital, sweetheart. Ed’s here. We’re both here and we’re taking you to the hospital.

Ed?

Yes?

Tell Spider I don’t want to go.

Shh. Hush—

Spider? Tell Ed to stop the car.

Ed. Stop the car.

Are you crazy?

Ed. Stop this fucking car. Now.

We’re here.

What?

We’re here.

Somebody help us. Oh god somebody help us oh Tom Tom stay awake stay awake stay—

Stay.

“I don’t think anyone knows what I’m supposed to be,” I say. “I’m the tard in the leotard. I’m Leo. Leo the Tard. That’s what people will say.”

“Who cares? I don’t care. Arr!”

I’m leading my pirate through the crowd, our hands clasped. I describe the costumes I see. Blue wigs, pompadours, blond pageboys and bullet bras, a flourish of beaded miniskirts and nun’s habits. A lot of Chers. A season of Cher-ing.

“My God, I think that’s a real Bob Mackie headpiece,” I say.

“There, there,” Hector says, patting my hand. “Sometimes the blind can comfort those who see.”

“Next year you can be Helen Keller. I can be the miracle worker. We can walk around with my fist in your mouth.”

Suddenly a flock of bearded cheerleaders rushes between us, pompoms and tight sweaters, and my hand returns empty.

More cheerleaders. A whole squad, a squad of squads. I turn and turn but all I see are strange faces, overdrawn lips, glittery eyeshadow, smearing past me like lights on a black freeway, a warp-speed journey, and I have been lost, just like that, I am lost, my damaged fingers returning to me like antennae sniffing for food, a crumb, a pond of syrup.

The crowd parts, the sounds all ebb and the love of my life is alive again or I am dead again, either way, somehow, nevertheless—

What I knew and Ed didn’t that weekend at the beach house three summers ago was that beautiful men are often indifferent to attention. They have the languorous boredom of the well fed: How can they bear to look at one more dish let alone eat?

And then there are beautiful men like Tom, who never understand why they’ve been put on the top shelf, some noteworthy thing that people look up at to admire or curse before leaving the room altogether.

Not indifferent to attention but perhaps suspicious of it. Drawn to a loneliness they think is like theirs.

Ed could not know this because Ed has never been beautiful himself.

A year ago when we returned to the beach house, it was just Tom and I. Ed drove down and joined us for a night. We ate dinner on the porch, then sat and drank from a 12-pack. When Tom turned in early, Ed and I stayed up, straddling chairs in the kitchen, getting stoned.

“Nothing’s working,” I said. “Why does nothing work?”

“Stop that. It’s going to be OK,” Ed said.

“How?” I asked, really expecting an answer. “How is it going to be OK?”

Ed said he knew someone, this researcher working on a new drug trial. “He can get Tom an in-take as soon as we get back to the city. Really, it’s really promising.”

The very day we got back to the city, the doctor told us that Tom's stomach lining was eroding, that it was, in fact, shedding. "Like a cat?" I asked stupidly. A bobcat. A lion. A big paw swiping through the bars of an already opened cage. Who left the cage open?

"So, no more eating," the doctor said.

"No more what?" I asked. No more snorting or smoking I could understand, but no more eating? "That's what you're telling us?"

We're supposed to go to a Chinese restaurant after this, I thought.

"I mean, he'll have an IV," the doctor explained, but it was too late. I already realized that we would never live on earth again.

Ed did get us an in-take interview, but because Tom had failed two previous treatment courses, the researchers decided he wasn't the kind of candidate they wanted to pursue. I argued. I screamed and yelled. I was stopped only by Tom's coughing. His retching. His incontinence. The fear that gripped me in a fist so tight I couldn't hope to imagine the rest of the monster: gone numb.

But fear won't stay with me; it will hop away and become someone else's reliable pet. And I'll have to put on a pot of coffee and sit by the door and wait for the monster to come and devour me nerve by nerve.

One day, Tom asked to me to go and see a movie by myself, get some fresh air. What's that one movie you've been wanting to see? It'll be good to have an afternoon off, won't it?

If I can admit it, and I can, often I think I can, I knew why I was being asked to leave the house in the middle of the afternoon when Tom's nausea was at its worst. Anyone could've figured it out. Anyone could've figured out why he was stockpiling his hydrocodones, for weeks insisting that whatever pain he was having was fine oh just fine I don't need a pill really I'm fine.

He'd had enough.

I'd had enough. I wanted it over as much as he did.

I wanted to sit in a matinee and let enough time pass for the hydrocodone to metabolize and cause a chain reaction of internal failures (think of windows going dark, one by one, across a little house) that would take his brain last in a burst of lucidity:

Where are we going?

I don’t want to go.

Spider. Tell Ed to stop the car.

I wanted it, and that’s why it happened. Ed’s right. I could have fed him the pills myself.

But all of this still awaited us, like a stack of dirty dishes, while we had our weekend at the river. We would get around to it sooner or later. It was early enough in the season so that we had the beach to ourselves for the most part in the mornings. I carried plastic bags down to the water with us, along with our sunblock, water and weed, all that we needed to keep at arm’s length whatever mild harm might come our way that weekend: a sunburn, a light thirst, a retching spell that might or might not pass.

I’m here. I’m here for you.

But where is here?

And it’s all so obvious, like Ed says. So many stories begin and end on the beach. The memories of it like shards of sunlight driving through a tree and into your eye. Drops of dew on an otherwise invisible web.

That is the only here.

It takes Hector a few seconds to notice I am gone. Through the wigs, between the pompoms, I watch his face go still, I watch each of his palms begin to circle, like dust cloths, feeling for me. He’s blind. He’s truly blind.

It’s only been a second. If I push through the crowd now and take his hand, he might not know the difference—

He begins to call for me.

“Jonas?” He is calling louder.

If I answer now, he still might not suspect what I’ve done—

“Jonas?”

That’s not my name.

“Doctor?”

Let go. I had let go of his hand, shook it free, pretending to have let it slip out, slip past.

Tonight, once he gets home, he will find a message from Ed—surely Ed has already called—but he might still forgive, it is not impossible.

If I walk away from Hector now, I’d still be able call back, “That’s not my name!” and manage to turn this into a joke and no harm would be done. Or if harm were already done, it would surely be repaired: not erased but coated with skin, like a scab that might or might not scar—most likely it won’t—this time. Or if it does, it might not be bad: He’ll pull up a pant leg to show everyone or else forget about it, more or less, the way you do with a scar from childhood, when we are so careless with ourselves.

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