

Leap Year

a situationist comedy by Tanner McSwain

“Immature artists imitate. Mature artists steal.” –Lionel Trilling

Part 1: Leap-ish Year

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The Seasons Changed Fifty Times*

Part 2: Go Kerry

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Dramatis Personae

Connor Corrigan	<i>a writer, whose pen may not be mightier than the sword, but is undeniably mightier than most pencils</i>
K	<i>a weird little guy</i>
Stanley Major	<i>a surprisingly inspirational professor / sonofabitch</i>
Laurence Novak	<i>a soul-sucking Mephistopheles, also head of the Creative Writing department</i>
Shay Pireale	<i>Connor's college flame</i>
Lola B	<i>a mysterious, potentially sexy admirer</i>
Josephine	<i>a woman with the wings of an owl</i>
Voysey	<i>a Mormon cowboy</i>

The Glen Family

Glynis Glen	<i>a famous local author</i>
June "Junebug" Glen	<i>K's best friend, the world's only happy goth</i>
Marty Glen	<i>Glynis' husband</i>
Emily Glen	<i>The Baby</i>

A Chorus of Hipsters

Charlemagne	Moon Diana	Jordan
Haney	Little Freud	Arden
Lisa	Ralph	Willie
Larsy	Kennedy	Reed
Brit-an-ny	Flower	Julius Seizure

Part 1: Leap-ish Year

Love is Over

October, 2004

When I was six years old, my father gave my hamster mouth to mouth resuscitation, and that's why I can never love you.

Having written the first sentence, Connor Corrigan sat back in the desk chair and cracked his knuckles. He looked at the sentence, its shape, and scrunched his face to the right. He moved his hands to type again but stopped, let them hover over the keyboard. He scrunched his face to the left. He pressed Backspace and held it down.

The problem wasn't that it was a bad first sentence. It was in fact the perfect first sentence, a sentence so celestial that it had possessed his consciousness in the half decade since he first heard it, haunted and divined his creativity every day since. The problem was not with the first sentence but with everything that could conceivably come after. No story, no novel, no poem, prose, essay, academic dissertation, nothing however quirky, comic, sad and sincere, nothing in Connor Corrigan's infected imagination could live up to the majesty of that first sentence. He had written whole novels around it and trashed them in disappointment. He had changed the context, the placement within the narrative, the syntax, the language (*Quando tuve seis años, mia padre resucitado el hamstero...*), he had deconstructed it, changed its meaning, Jack-Nicholson-in-*The-Shining*ed it over and over for pages and pages. He had tried other first sentences -- *It was a dark and stormy night, and I had tuberculosis* -- but some synapse kept snapping him back to where he started. It had to be there, and it had to be first. He couldn't bypass it. He couldn't kill it.

But now that he was dirt poor, owed hundreds of thousands of dollars to Random House, and was in the pocket of the most unpleasant tool he had ever had the displeasure of working with, Connor was feeling weak and desperate. He double clicked into the darkest reaches of his hard drive and opened a folder titled *super secret stories*. Back in his original document he retyped his first sentence, and then kept going.

"You're an asshole," said Josephine, smoking behind him and sewing herself a new pair of wings. Connor ignored her and, like a vampire, began to devour his friends' souls.

Slacker

Months before

Tuesday, August 24, 2004

The heart of things began two months prior, with an envelope addressed to "Con-Man Corrigan," reeking of cigarettes, though Connor could not smell it due to the Worst Cold Anyone Has Ever Had. The envelope arrived at Robbie's house in Chapel Hill on August 20, 2004, four before classes began, three days before Connor moved in, and though it bore no return address, it was stamped with a postmark that was local and recent. It was handwritten in sharp, small print and it said the following:

My Connor Corrigan pumpkinpoetsugarface,

I just suffered a moment of heartbreak. The gut-wrenching was so intense (for a split-second) that I had to elude my packing frenzy yet again to write you a letter.

This is what happened: I was in Bull's Head buying (incidentally) Marilyn Nelson as well as a book that I loaned to a friend a couple of days ago, forgetting that I would probably need it for classes abroad, so I just bought another copy. It was Borges, besides, so worlds of worth it. Well, I was weaving through the bookshelves with a peculiarly familiar feeling of hope, when my thoughts became articulate, "Maybe I'll run into you." This twinkling inkling was, of course, immediately followed by the crushing reality that I would not run into you, not today, and not for months.

To speak more assuredly, I will say thank you for writing to me all summer. I, myself, began composing a hundred letters to you in my head yesterday at around that time when the sun smiles orange-red, as if pained. I could not, however, allow myself to adopt the desired tone to write to you anywhere in between the... wait... let me see...2,365... plus 1,296... equals 3,661 words of expository nonsense that I've exhaled onto electronic pages so far. But, it was nice to read your voice. And afterwards, I read myself to sleep with those Corrigan stories and it was almost as if you were close.

THIS is how we will do what is write: I will call you before I leave, at your request. Then I will write you while I am in Ecuador, florid letters and postcards, and I will drop them in the mail in a heap as soon as I can get away. Your course of action is, as I'm sure you could guess, your own to choose. An adventure it will be. I don't know what the postal service (be still my heart...) will be like in Quito, so I wanted you to have something, one last silly thing in case my next letter takes years and years. But... do I even have to say it?

*In Heartbreak and Home-sick,
Lola B*

PS- "Your secret and surprising question should be answered in person," are my thoughts.

It was nonsense, of course, words from a foreign pen intended for foreign eyes. His name was on the envelope and appeared in the body of the letter, but unless he were dealing with some clandestine code, the events described therein were unknown to him, not to mention the mysterious "Lola B." Maybe it was another Connor, misdirected. Maybe it was Dadaist fan mail. Marilyn Nelson? Connor sneezed on it and quickly wiped the spittle away, thanking the heavens that the ink hadn't smeared. The letter was probably nothing, but...

He called Katie at Random House first, and after she inquired about how terrible he sounded he was assured that no, they had not forwarded any fan mail recently, no, they had not publicized his new address because hadn't he only known the address for less than a week, unless of course there was something he wasn't telling them – again – and by the way he might get more of that fan mail if he fulfilled his contract and actually wrote that second novel. He was sick, Connor reminded her, and then politely hung up. He tried the Creative Writing office second, and reached a secretary.

"University of North Carolina Creative Writing Department, this is Ann, how may I help you?"

"Hey Ann," he croaked, "this is Connor Corrigan. I need to speak with the Morgan Writer In Residence liaison." Silence from the other end. "Professor Major."

"I'm sorry, Professor Major is with his mistress today."

"Pardon?"

"Is there a message I can pass on to him?"

"Umm, no no, that's all right. What about Novak? Is he in?"

"You want to talk to Professor Novak?"

"Is he there?"

More silence. "Are you sure you want to talk to him?"

"Is there a problem?"

"It's just... he's just... One moment, Mr. Corrigan."

On hold, Connor honked his nose into another tissue, examined the lumpy, baby food-ish goo recently expelled from his sinuses. Holding it a safe distance away, he blew on it. It jiggled, only a little.

"Novak." Connor winced and crumpled the tissue. Novak's voice was still unnervingly squeaky, even across the phone. He remembered a student from his undergrad days who wrote a caricature for the campus humor magazine of the head of the department, pointing out the similarities between Novak's Southern aristocracy inflection and that of the Boss in Cool Hand Luke. There had also been in the article a painfully apt physical description: George Bush, Sr. in an Andy Dick costume. Connor still got chills. But then he also remembered unholy retribution being rained upon that student in the

form of blocked recommendations and a nasty little "Hire With Caution" asterisk at the bottom of his undergrad degree ominously describing his general unreliability, penchant for plagiarism, and subversive puppy-kicking fetish. When Lawrence Novak spoke, Connor Corrigan giggled not.

"Hey, Professor Novak, do you happen to know if Major or someone within the department publicized my new address? I received a pretty strange letter today addressed to me, and Nick and Katie -- Random House, that is -- had led me to believe that my residency here would be private outside the university. Just so I don't get too distracted, you know. But then again, I suppose it could have come from within the department. Does anyone named Lola work for you?"

The longest silence yet. "Who is this?"

"Connor Corrigan."

"No."

"You don't have any idea about the letter?"

"No."

"O-kay, thanks, well I guess I'll just speak with Major the next time I see him. Classes start tomorrow, huh? Don't know about you, the seasoned veteran, but I'm a little... I don't know. You excited?"

"Yes."

Connor was unsure where to go from here.

"Mist' Cor'gan," said the older man slowly, "is there an'thin' else the Creative Writing Department can do for you this morning?"

"No, I think..."

"Can we call your mother for you? Check in on her e-motional well-being?"

"Well..."

"Praps your socks could use ironing. Shoes shining pretty."

"I really only wear..."

"You be certain to telephone here next time you use the privacy, Mist' Cor'gan, so I can drive to your residence and wipe your buttocks."

"Professor Novak?"

"I joke, of course. That is what we do among colleagues, joke."

"I see."

"But seriously. Don't ever call the office with such fri-volity again."

"Right. Thank you, Professor Novak."

"Goodbye, Mist' Cor'gan."

"Right. Sorry. Goodbye."

Novak did not hear anything after he said goodbye, depressing the switch hook immediately and handing the cowering secretary the receiver. He blinked at her, panoramically, with enormous eyes magnified absurdly out of proportion, and he skulked away. Novak was a champion skulker.

The day before classes start and the Greenlaw halls were conspicuously empty. The sad, unpatterned floor tiles and flimsy ceiling panels, usually grim reminders to the students that this was where their writing careers would likely die, swirling eternally in the beige abyss of liberal arts obscurity, were dark, untouched by the natural sunlight outside. Professor Stanley Major stormed through the narrow corridors, making for

Novak and the department office door, the artificial light frantically reflecting from his own glittering bald head. Major was an expert stormer.

"Were the Lifetime movie writers too busy? Is that what happened?" Major began shouting the moment Novak was in sight. Novak, for his part, pushed the elevator down button. "You couldn't get the women behind *Secret Abortion 2: The Clotheshanger Chronicles*, clearly, and I assume you already tried the guy who writes the puzzles on the back of the Cinnamon Toast Crunch box. I take it my seventh grade classmates who submitted their poems and a hundred dollars to be published in the national poetry collection all had respectable jobs now, because that's the only possible explanation for the voicemail I so unexpectedly received this morning, in which you informed me that Joan Didion has deemed her tragic memoir too tragic to write away from her home, and that her replacement for the Morgan residency is Connor 'The Best I Can Come Up With Is A Mormon Cowboy' Corrigan. Connor Corrigan. Say it with me, Connor Corrigan is going to be teaching on *my* campus for a year, spiritedly shitting on *my* students' tuition, and driving the final nail into the coffin of a once great creative writing department? And you didn't tell me until now? Stop me if this sounds unreasonable, Larry, but it seems that we are experiencing something of a drop-off in respectability from a former poet laureate and that J.D. Salinger phone-in lecture to five years ago's paperback flavor of the week. I have not worked my statuesque ass off for twenty years at this *public*" -- he puckered his face and scraped his tongue on his top teeth -- "institution to nurse the Morgan Writer In Residence program out of bouncing, boring infancy to barely stable toddlerhood just to have Connor Corrigan waltz in here and shake it out of my hands. My baby will not be shaken, Larry. I will not have it."

Novak goggled.

Major was sweating. "Are you going to say something?"

"Are you finished?"

"We're all finished, Larry, that's my point." He puffed. Novak blinked. "Yes, I'm finished."

"Professor Major, say what you will about Connor Cor'gan's character – I didn't know him, personally, when he was here, though I do recall his su-perb Advanced Fiction submission – but he has done one thing in his life that not one of us has. Not myself, not you, not Miss Glen, not Joan Didion or J.D. Salinger: he wrote a perfect debut novel at an *unthinkably* young age. I don't know how he did it, but you've read *In Bocca al Lupo*; it is page by page, word by word perfect. Do not open your mouth, I know what you are going to say. I realize that he has not published anything significant since—"

"Anything readable since."

"But the fact remains, Professor Major, that somewhere in that sloshy Irish brain of his is a genius. Perhaps he just needs the right environment and the right mo-mentum. You did it before."

"The problem with Connor Corrigan isn't that he can't write, it's that he isn't a writer. He's a storyteller, which is a fine thing to be, so long as you stick to directing public library day camps and making party guests want to leap to their deaths. He simply does not have the stamina, the density to perfect his craft, much less teach it. He's not nearly self-absorbed enough to survive on this faculty."

"I'm afraid I have given you the impression that Mr. Cor'gan's residency was up for debate. I have already informed Mr. Cor'gan how eager you are to be working once again with your greatest protege."

"You didn't."

"Congratulations on your promotion. You're the new liaison to your precious Writer In Residence program. Make him teach, e-ffectively and e-fficiently, keep him under control, and for God's sake, Major, make us some money off of this. You might want to go ahead and start planning preview readings for his as-yet-unfinished second novel, the one I have no doubt he will be heavily encouraged to complete, and soon. A perfect second novel composed while in residency at his pristine and in-spiring alma mater wouldn't hurt future CW department brochures, or your shot at tenure."

"Okay, Larry, you win. You want me to babysit the Enemy, fine, but he's still the Enemy." Major chucked the stairwell door wide and backed through. "And in case no one's reminded you lately, you talk like an eleven year old going through puberty." And Major was gone.

The stairwell spiraled down for three depressing stories before Major was back outside in the blazing sun and the land of civilization and cell phone reception. He had a voicemail from Glynis: "Emily and I are going to Connor's house at four to welcome him and see if he needs anything, and if you have a shred of humanity left in you, you'll be there too. I'm sorry I had to cancel today. Marty needed... it doesn't matter. I hope it went well with Larry. We'll reschedule. I'll see you there at four. Bye. I'm serious, be there at four." He deleted the message and removed his sunglasses from their slick casing, resting them gently on the bridge of his nose, and through the darkened lenses he spotted June,

that awful tattooed girl with her awful entourage of parents and prospectives. He halted, spun on his heel, and stormed in the other direction.

"Professor Major!" He ignored her call and kept walking, scattering pigeons. "Everybody, this is Professor Stanley Major. He teaches in the Creative Writing department and I'm sure he'd be happy to answer any questions you might have about that wonderful program or the English department at large. Prof Major? Do you mind?"

He stopped and sighed. "Right. Gothy. Prospective students. Parents of said prospective students. I will subject my infinitely precious time to exactly one minute – see me set the stopwatch I had custom made into my Rolex for specific annoyances such as this – one minute of questions. You may raise your hands starting... now." Half a dozen hands went up. "Non basketball related questions only." Hands down. "Right. Elvira, good luck." He stormed away, sidestepping the fountain into the K Lot, blipping his red coupe unlocked with an overhead flourish of his keychain.

"Thanks Professor Major," she shouted after him. "Mind if I give them your home phone number in case they need to know Raymond Felton's field goal percentage?" Storm, storm, doors closed, music up. "Mom says you better be there at four!" Storming into the horizon, vanishing in an unpleasant blur of power tie, red Mazda, and too-loud Tom Waits.

"Hey tour guide," said a young man from the group in freshly purchased Carolina blue, "what is Ray Ray's field goal percentage?"

"Forty five point five," she said without hesitation. She snorted decisively and pushed back her black lacy sleeves to her elbows, revealing a constellation of bright ink

beginning at her wrists and winding far past the fabric. The bare-breasted goat demon under the left forearm made at least one parent reconsider her opinion of the university.

"We call this part of campus Polk Place, after alumnus and eleventh President of the United States James K. Polk." She marched north up the grassy expanse, comprised of less than an acre of prime suntanning meadow and shade trees, centered around a towering flagpole and surrounded by an odd Georgian pantheon of academic structures: the chemistry building was a crumbling labyrinth of asbestos and dust, the classics building an erudite temple in white and grey, the journalism building a complex monolith with walls made out of television screens, the economics building hollowed out and bankrupt, the Romance language building made up of four floors that were almost identical, but different enough that you could never quite be sure which one you were on (the building was called Dey, pronounced "die"; as in, "Are you going to your Spanish class now?" "Yes, I'm going to Dey.") and at the south end of the quad endured the enormous, iconic Wilson Library, whose grand dome was featured on the cover of almost every UNC brochure, and it opened its wide doors, like a ballroom of literature, with space aplenty to study, to read, to write, to peruse first editions, to marvel, to fall in love, and no one ever went there. June marched north, and as was usual for the girl, her legion followed.

"This quad is another central location for classes and social life. On sunny days like today, you'll see many students lying out on the grass, reading, throwing frisbees. Some activist groups... yes, a question?"

"Will we see any basketball players out here?" volunteered a young lady in the back.

"I doubt it." A frisbee whizzed into the flagpole at their left and drifted to the ground. A tall boy with bed hair cheerfully shouted an expletive and retrieved it. A parent at the rear of the tour group smacked her son with the back of her hand.

"Moving north, we see South Building, which now contains the chancellor's office and was once the southern boundary of campus. Across Cameron Avenue you can see two more very old buildings called Old East and Old West. These are the oldest buildings on campus, making them the oldest dormitories at any public university in the United States. Does anyone remember what year the University of North Carolina was founded?"

"1931!"

"1789, actually."

"Dean Smith was born in 1931."

"Across the street we have the historic Old Well..."

"Dad, that's the thing on the poster I have in my room."

"Legend has it that if you drink out of the Old Well water fountain on the first day of classes you'll make straight A's..."

"I hear the basketball team pees in it the night before the first day of classes."

"Look, everybody, I want to say something." She started walking faster, toward the center of the upper quad. "Can I say something? I want to say it over here, everybody please follow me to this tree. Okay. Here. Look up. Do you see where we're standing?" It was a big tree, but not unusually so. All in all, unimpressive, save the small stone bench beneath its boughs. "This tree is the most important landmark on campus. That other stuff, the monuments and bell tower, the Old Well, even, God forgive me, even the basketball team, all of that... This tree was here when the university was created. William

Davie saw this tree in fields, a little smaller than it is now, and what he saw when he looked was knowledge, and truth, and education, and sincerity, people, something of importance! When William Davie saw this tree, this strong tree, he decided to build a bastion of learning upon that strength. So long as this tree stands, said Davie, so shall stand the university, so shall survive all it represents. A public school. 'Lux Libertas': light, liberty. Light and liberty not just for the elite, but for everyone!" Junebug climbed upon the stone bench, fire in her throat. "Charles Kuralt asked, 'What is it that binds us to this place as to no other? It is not the well or the bell or the stone walls, or... something, I can't remember exactly. No, our love for this place is based upon the fact that it is as it was meant to be the University of the People. We can read again the words on its seal – light and liberty – and say that the University of North Carolina has lived by those two short, noble words and say that in all of the American story there is no other place like this.'" She paused for dramatic effect, and touched the tree, lightly, almost sexually. "And three hundred seventy-five years later, this tree, Davie's poplar, still stands."

No one spoke in the midday heat, the tour group crowded into the shade beneath the monolith, sweating in silence.

"It's filled with cement," someone said.

"Goddamnit!" shouted Junebug, slapping the tree. "Yes! Yes, it is filled with cement. Yes, they took its seeds and planted two more Davie poplars. Yes, there are steel cables running from it to every stable structure within half a mile. That's not the point! It's beautiful and true and and..." She stopped herself, panting a little, composed and stepped down off the bench. "It's a great university. We're going to win the National Championship this year."

They erupted in applause, as she knew they would, passed back-slaps around, and dispersed, back to their SUVs or toward the Starbucks on Franklin Street. All that was left was Junebug, collapsed in an inky heap on the sharp bench, and where the congregation had stood was now a furry little fellow in a red tech vest, a Burt Reynolds mustache framing his sheepish grimace.

"Sorry," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"K..." Junebug exhaled quietly. She looked down at her lap and massaged her bicep, a habit. "I swear, sometimes..."

He waddled over to her, looked at her for a moment, and squeezed onto the undersized bench beside her. He gazed straight ahead, out over the quad and statues and afternoon traffic. She sighed, looked up at him. "How are you?"

"Better," he said, still not meeting her eyes. He didn't look better.

"I'm so sorry about Randy," she said, taking her focus off him and staring ahead as well. "You two will get a dog some day."

He grinned. "I know."

"This won't be as hard as you think. She'll be back before you know."

He stopped grinning. "I know."

"I'm here for you. Charlemagne, Moon Diana, Salon will help worlds, you know. We all understand. You can write about her – I'm sure Joan Didion will help you – and that will help. It won't be so hard."

"Thanks. Is Glynis coming tomorrow night?"

"I think mom needs a break from the adoration scene. I'll see what I can do. I'll be there though."

"Thank you. And sorry about the cement thing."

"It's okay. Did you pay your rent yet?"

"Well, shit," said K, like one word. "I have to go." He kissed her on the cheek and stood. "Thank you."

"See you in class." As fast as his stubby legs could carry him, K raced to the planetarium across the green and unchained his decaying bicycle from the rack, patted his pocket for the sealed envelope (\$200 cash, still there), toddled onto the seat and pedaled away.

K rode west toward Carrboro, the counterculture haven past the railroad tracks and the ultimate destination of his rent money, and he surveyed the bricked distance along the way with the disinterest of one who has seen a wonder too many times. Franklin Street, the northern boundary of the campus, was a slipstream of energy, especially today, filled with more than just the skate punks grinding around the post office and the hipsters accessory shopping and eating out. There was an army this afternoon, wide-eyed first year explorers and keen upperclass veterans, wallowing in their final freedom before classes began, marching four and five across the sidewalks, smelling of summer sunscreen and new textbooks, stopping to look into windows, crossing the street without looking. Franklin Street was the epicenter of this small college town, a world of utility crowded into a few glorious blocks: indie record stores, cafes on top of cafes, pungent coffee shops like bean-bitter hammers to one's senses, the sad stares of the homeless strayed away from the shelter on Rosemary, flower shops, Vietnamese bubble tea, generic Chinese food, generic Mexican food, triumphant, olive-spattered Mediterranean food, food, food, food, coffee, food. A barber shop, a black barber shop. A

brothel, called University Massage, into which none of the sweet-smelling smokers with whom K spent his days had ever had the stones to investigate. Bars: There was the Carolina Brewery, brimming with heady, unique stuff that leaves you lightheaded, and southern sweet tea brewed with cinnamon chai, there was Yeats, a stale Irish pub named after a much better Irish poet than the scuzzy tavern deserved, there were acerbic back alley liquor stores and intimate taverns, a string of classical wine bars playing Bach and Beethoven. There were blocks and blocks of vintage shops, wafting of the oil and dust of battered and beautiful clothing, absurd T shirts with alien logos, ratty Halloween gear, and hats, like feathers. There was the ongoing tragedy in K's life that was Chapel Hill Comics near Kenan Street, the shop that greeted him always with a colorful, action-packed smile, the one that had evaporated more than one envelope full of rent money on the way to the landlord's. There was even the secret fortune teller in the alley by the head shop, the leathery Cajun with whom K had rolled cigarettes on a few occasions. He had assured K that the small girl, the one who was away and who held K's heart in her back jean pocket, sometimes sat on it by accident, would return, whole, and there would be love, still. K distilled his strength and would therefore survive the four months. Salon would help.

A blonde blur leapt into K's biking path, and he braked frenetically, skidded off the two wheels, onto his side in front of the towering woman before him. He moaned from the sidewalk, clutching his right ankle and calf, scratched all to shit.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry," she yelped, sliding the bicycle off the tiny man. "I just didn't see you when I stepped out. I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"I'm all right."

"I'm sorry, can you speak up? I can't hear you. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, I said." He picked himself up and smiled at her. He wasn't mad. She was a solid foot taller than him, dim yellow hair falling past her exposed shoulders most of the way down her epic back, a nose stud, hemp bag, a smile, a bright soft thin bohemian gown wrapped tight from breasts to knees. She was very clearly not wearing a bra. "Did I hit you?" he asked her.

"Me, no, I'm okay. I was just coming out of the comic book store, and I didn't look. Sometimes I don't look. It's my fault."

K looked to his right, the cheerful yellow and red Chapel Hill Comics logo beaming at him from the awning. He gulped.

"I have to go," she said, unchaining her own bicycle from a parking meter, "but are you sure you're okay?" K nodded, righting his own bicycle and locking it to the newly abandoned parking meter. The bank was miles away. "Alright. I'm so sorry. I've got to go. I'm sorry." She crinkled her brow and made an awkward "eh" sound, for repentance, because she couldn't be sure what else to say. The woman pedaled between the parked gasoline guzzlers, onto Franklin, looking over her shoulder one last time at the boy, stepping into the comic book store, opening a fat envelope. She had seen that boy, hadn't she? At Weaver Street Market, maybe, or the Open Eye. No, perhaps it had been—

The SUV squealed to a halt and the odor of scorched rubber snapped into the woman's nostrils. She braked her bicycle with less ceremony and glared at the driver.

"Hippies! Fuck!" The driver, a bird-like woman red with rage, slammed her palms onto the horn. The driver side window was already down, and she leaned out to get a better look and more effective scream. "Get out of the road! Watch where you're going!"

"Share the road, lady!" hooted the cyclist. "There's no law that says you have to pump the atmosphere full of carbon monoxide to get from place to place."

With all the force of a kung fu master delivering a fatal quivering palm blow, Glynis Glen rammed the horn and leaned on it, as if more force would make it blare louder. The hippie flipped her middle finger and pedaled the rest of the way across the street, onto the sidewalk. "I'm going to go kill a whale!" shouted Glynis after her. "I'm going to kill a whale and support genocide in Africa!" The woman on the bicycle was gone. Glynis sat, her foot bearing down on the brake like it would warp under her pressure. She punched the horn one last time for good measure, shifted into first, and gave the CR-V extra gas, hoping to see a noxious black cloud belching from her tailpipe. She drove the final block to Graham Street and waited at the red light, tapping the wheel with all the patience she had left.

"Mommy?" said Emily from her booster seat in the back. "Why are we going to kill whales?"

"Because we live in a liberal democracy and we can, darling." The light turned green and she made a hard right down the narrow side street, past the taxi business, the Ethiopian grille, the crack house, and the crumbling shack, taking the turn into the 113 driveway too fast. She unbuckled and turned to smile at the raven-haired child. "Ready to meet one of mommy's friends?"

"It's not Mister Major, is it? I don't like Mister Major very much."

"No, baby. I highly doubt we'll be seeing Mr. Major today at all." Glynis checked her watch (4:00, on the dot), walked around the car and lifted the girl from her seat, grunting as she held her tight and bumped the door shut with her bottom. She took the

tupperware from the passenger seat and allowed Emily to clutch it while she checked herself in the tinted window. She smiled.

Up to the porch, with Emily and the brownies in one arm, she knocked at the door, which responded with a flimsy, hollow sound. From somewhere within the shack, horrible, witchy hacking reverberated through the door.

"Oo is id?"

"It's Glynis Glen. I brought brownies and a baby."

"O by Gob. Hode od." The sound of many locks unlocking and chains unchaining preceded the squeaky inward swing of the door. "Glydis!" Connor, his beard scraggly and unkempt, was still in pajamas, despite it being four in the afternoon, and his nose looked as if it could guide Santa's sleigh.

"Hi, pumpkin. You look terrible."

The Muse I

Upon reading the letter, Glynis at first posed no solution. She removed her reading glasses, folded the letter, and handed it back to Connor, who had continued to unpack and sniffle throughout the visit. Glynis shrugged. "This is just highly improbable."

Probability, Connor knew, was a funny thing. What is statistically probable often, logically, feels highly improbable. People are wired to think magically more than they are to think logically. If you are in a room with 20 strangers, the laws of probability state that there is an 80% chance that someone in that room has the same birthday as you. Improbable things happen every day. Some supernatural wellspring erupts around the

corner and improbability blankets your hometown in all kinds of bizarre, metaphysical shit: a dozen healthy people you know drop dead within days of one another, and all of their first names started with an M; the town millionaire wins the lottery; someone's chimney gets struck by lightning in the middle of the night and their fireplace explodes, sending brick shrapnel through the bedrooms and windows, but the youngest child had cut his toe earlier that evening and everyone happened to be with him at the hospital to hold his hand while he got stitches and no one was at home to get impaled; you develop synesthesia for an afternoon and everything black tastes like the theme from Pink Panther; someone opens all your mail; the person who rings you up at the pharmacy is someone different for the first time in your entire life; and all you can say is "What a weird week," because deep down you don't believe in probability, and deep down it seems like things should be that way, unnecessarily surprising, barbarically unpredictable. And what is startling, when you step back and look, is that probability pans out as often as it does: when you guess heads or tails, more than half the time you'll be right.

Connor Corrigan had experienced his share of the improbability of probability. While in college writing *In Bocca al Lupo*, he had been living in squalor with a slovenly stoner for a housemate, had been pining over Legendary Shay day and night, had daily suffered Professor Major's relentless berating, had often as he could basked in Glynis's overpowering motherly encouragement. He had been socially inept and uncomfortable and by his own doing had let himself be pressured from all sides to squeeze a marketable manuscript diamond from a peculiar coal. Connor had never wanted to be famous. He preferred the mystique of the tortured artist laboring in obscurity, only recognized as an

avant garde genius posthumously, when the world had caught up to his dizzying density. But *In Bocca al Lupo* had been just weird enough to work, and Random House had scooped up the confused boy before graduation, published his experiment, made him his millions, and told him he was a celebrity. He believed it, and for a while so did the rest of the world. He was on the bestseller list for six months. Nick and Katie in A&R paid Connor a more than generous advance for whatever classically absurd second novel he would compose, and he took the money to London, escaping his fame as best he could. Things had gone well for him after that. Too well, actually, and his utter vacuum of ambition had rewarded him with financial success, the career of his dreams, and general mental and physical stability. With head shrinking, he had managed to shrivel his cruel and abusive muse down to almost nothing, just a line, just a hamster in need. The more stable and comfortable his life had become the less material he had found to draw from it. He spent the advance traveling, doing adventurous, artist-y things like camping for a month on the ruins of Schliemann's Troy, or tracing General Sherman's bloody swathe through the American southeast, but it was no use and no inspiration. Everything since college had been improbable, shameless, serendipitous success, and he couldn't write that, not if he valued his reputation. He was a commercial artist now, which in Connor's book was no artist at all.

It was with that in mind that Connor Corrigan had accepted Professor Novak's listless invitation with gusto. He tracked down his college roommate Robbie, still in town, still high, still living at 113 Graham which he had apparently been renting since junior year, and Connor asked if he could move back in until May. He found Glynis, who had been much of his original inspiration, and she absolutely leapt at the chance to return

to his life for the role of surrogate mother and walking proof of the Oedipus complex, unconsumated of course. Major had been harder to track down, but Connor was fairly certain he heard some excitement underneath all the curmudgeonry. (Legendary Shay had been a grander problem altogether, and much of the aforementioned therapy had been spent separating Legendary Shay from Real Life Human Being Shay, and Connor had made the informed decision never to see her again. Before the move, when he sold most of his belongings in penance and preparation for the return to Chapel Hill, he donated the money to stopping genocide in Sudan, in Shay's memory, and that was as much as he cared to deal with her at this juncture.) He would start over. He re-imaged his hard drive and mailed his journals and notes and the manuscripts of all his failed second novels and stories to a nonexistent address in Siberia with a nonexistent return address in Delhi. "Letting the international postal system take care of my failures," he had explained to Glynis. She imagined that it must have cost a fortune. It had, but the sheer symbolism of it all had been worth it (he did dip a little into the "Shay've the Africans" fund, though, to finance said symbolism), and Connor Corrigan would not be robbed of his new beginning.

After it all, there was that letter, that perfect, stupid letter that constituted the perfect problem for him and stood to ruin everything: a mystery was exactly what Connor wanted, which was a dangerous thing. It was a prepackaged whodunit for him to investigate and obsess over, there waiting for him at the house the moment he moved in, mailed *before Connor himself knew he was going to be living there*; well, it was beyond improbable. It was magic. As a writer of fiction and a reader of high fantasy, Connor did not deal in magic. He dealt in lies. Specifically, lies that appeared to be truth. "Life is

never story-shaped,” Major had told him long ago. “Just because it happened to you doesn’t make it interesting.” Connor was therefore justified in being immediately distrustful of anything interesting that actually did happen to him.

Connor placed the folded letter into his pajama pocket, but kept his hand around it. “I still read *This Subtitled Life* and get chills.” He changed the subject weakly, his ailing voice an octave lower than usual. “After all these years, that’s still the book that makes me get up and write.”

“You’re sweet.”

“But you know it’s true. I was in love with your book before I fell in love with you.” Glynis rolled her eyes. “It’s what made me want to be a writer in the first place. You were my starting point. But then I left and somewhere along the way I lost my roots, forgot my drive. But you’re still here and I’m back, so... inspire me.”

Glynis pointed her finger. “Poof.”

In Robbie’s living room, baby Emily watched Looney Tunes and played in Connor’s mound of discarded Kleenex (throwing it in handfuls: “it’s snowing!”) while the adults downed steamy lemon tea and pored over the years. Glynis was the same, exactly the same. She was in her late 40s, or thereabouts, and whether she had retained the features of a 25 year old through plastic surgery or sheer force of will he had never had the nerve to ask her; but she looked, as far as Connor could tell, exactly like she looked on the jacket of his first edition of *This Subtitled Life*, the one she had published twenty years ago when Connor had been just starting elementary school, and the one she had autographed and given him when they had first met at a reading his sophomore year at UNC. It wasn’t that Glynis Glen was beautiful (she wasn’t, nor had she ever been: she

was too tall, too thin, too avian, with a Rostand hooked nose), but she seemed to be composed of a different sort of molecules than the rest of the world. He didn't know what to call it but "presence"; meeting her for the first time, watching her read and being blasted awake by her divine confidence, an extrasensory grace that was too much, too much to take in. When Plato was talking about ideal forms, he was talking about her.

He also remembered sitting at one such reading with June, Glynis' oldest child, who had at the time been gothic and misguided and, worst of all, poor thing, in high school. Connor remembered feeling incomparably sad for the dark girl, sitting in an auditorium full of boys in love with her mother. It could not have been easy for her, and he wondered how much of a catalyst her mother's fame had been for the daughter's glam and gloom lifestyle. He imagined that by now Junebug probably did all right.

"What I'm saying," said Connor, "is that's what I want to write. A book that will make a young version of me somewhere out there decide to be a writer. More than a Mormon cowboy riding off into the apocalypse." Connor blew his nose, and when he tossed the tissue onto the pile, there were flakes of paper caught in his mustache. "So do you think it's a fan letter?"

"No, pumpkin, I think it's a joke. I think someone who knows how neurotic you can be when you want to sent this to get into your head. Most likely Major."

"But it could be something bigger, right? This could be a love letter from a secret admirer, or someone I met long ago and have forgotten for one reason or another. This could be historic. This could be what I need."

"You're going to obsess over this, aren't you?"

"I might."

“Can I give you some advice?” He nodded. “Let the letter go. Throw it away and don’t give it another thought. Whatever the answer to your mystery is, it will never satisfy you like the mystery itself will, and on top of that you don’t need a mystery. I promise you that as soon as you have a classroom’s worth of short stories to read and workshop every week, you won’t have time for more enigmatic epistles.”

“More enigmatic epistles. *More* enigmatic epistles. Right? You think this Lola B character isn’t finished?”

“Oh, pumpkin,” she said with a hint of sadness. “This year is going to be hard on you.”

Ballad of a Thin Man

In the night, Connor dreamed of his character in haste. Voysey the cowboy was a shadow of a shadow, rail thin and eroded almost to nothing beneath his battered ten gallon and crossed bandoliers. He rode against the Old West into an amethyst sunset over the hinterlands, nothing but a man on a horse in the crevices between high red sandstone and valleys that sheered down with lethal steepness. In this dream, it was Voysey who had written Connor in his wake, left imprints of a fictional future in Glover the gray stallion’s hoofprints, fashioned the writer’s comically fuzzed face in the stale dust he filtered through the bandana wrapped across his mouth and nose, spat out Connor’s stale art with the tobacco juice. In this dream, the real man who rode off into the death of all things had perfected his craft too young, and that was his tragedy.

As Voysey rode into the mouth of the wolf, as one might say, he left behind images of something he did not understand, and as the cracked leather of his weathered

coat buffeted in the sandstorm, he did not look back because he knew the conjuration would be gone, and that he could never produce it again.

Bisder Gorrigad

Wednesday

Connor had to teach on Wednesday. By the time he had slithered out of his bed and dressed professionally, downed what was left of his Dayquil, driven to campus, and arranged the desks in Greenlaw 220 into a circle (better for workshopping, an old trick of Major's), it was ten minutes till eleven and Connor was too sick to teach his eleven o'clock class. With the fourteenth desk in place (he was to have fourteen students if the roster was right), Connor ran, flat-footed, to the toilet down the hall and retched up the Dayquil/tea mixture that had served as his breakfast. He coughed wetly and mopped his face with a damp paper towel, and he could feel his fever through its cooling roughness. He sighed, puddled some tap water between his hands, sipped it, and scuttled back to 220. Novak, who was composed today almost entirely out of eyeballs, was waiting at the door.

“Good morning, Mist' Cor'gan.”

“Bordig, Dobag.”

“My boy, you look like death sucking on a life saver.”

Connor grunted.

“Are you alive enough for taking on a class today?”

“I'll be fide.”

“I should hope so. Major is your contact, and I hope that you feel comfortable to use him. He has office hours until one. If you need help, you run get him. More than likely he’s sitting on his hind end just down the hall waiting for you to come knocking.”

“Thags, Brofessor Dobag. But I’ll be all ride.”

“I hope so. And best of luck to you.”

Novak left and Connor smiled at the students filing in as he wandered and sat behind his long pine desk. An elfish young man with an overly bushy mustache and a red tech vest was gaping at him with eyes so wide they rivaled Novak’s. He was standing beside a familiar-looking girl in black. “Hi,” said Connor. The girl, stifling a laugh, nodded hello and sat down. The boy stared in amazement, mouth dangling open slightly, wearing the expression of a toddler who has been stopped in his tiny tracks in the middle of Disney World by Mickey Mouse, all enormous and fuzzy, kneeling down with his arms open, just waiting to be hugged. Connor craned his neck and looked behind his back to make sure there were no anthropomorphic cartoon characters there. There weren’t. “Hi,” he said again. The boy sat down.

It was five minutes till eleven. The fever pounded in his temples. Connor lay his head down on his desk.

At 11:15, Major heard a knock at the door to his office. He paused his Gameboy. “What?” No answer. He unpaused and immediately there was another knock, a little quieter this time. He pressed pause. “What? What is it?” No answer. A tentative tap. “I am a very busy man. Open office hours do not mean I am crouched by the door waiting to

play name that tapping.” Another tap. He slammed the Gameboy down and stormed to the door, flinging it open. “What do you want?”

A nervous student in a backwards blue baseball cap stood with his hands in his pockets.

“Can you speak? Are you capable of vocalization? Would you like me to get you pen and paper?”

“I think,” said the boy, “that our teacher is dead.”

Connor opened his eyes a little. His cheek was pressed against the grain of his desk. He could see spots and blurry colors, some semblance of a sideways classroom. He could hear a voice. The voice was teaching his class.

“You. Yes you, Asian Elvis.”

“My name’s Jeremy.”

“That’s lovely, Francis, but you’re not my student – thank God for small favors – and even if you were my student, what you’re called is a whole hell of a lot less important than what you can do. So. Come up to the board and draw a horse.”

Connor heard hesitation. “Is that a euphamism for something?”

“It’s a euphamism for ‘Jesus Christ on a crutch, are you so dunderheaded that you can’t follow simple instructions and pick up a piece of chalk and draw a picture.’”

Connor heard a chair sliding, footsteps, the squeal of chalk on blackboard. “Thaaaaat’s my boy, Francis. Now sit down. Pincushion, you’re next.”

“Professor Major, you know my name.”

“Fine. June. Mistress June. Of His Satanic Majesty’s Infernal Order.”

Connor saw a blurry smile from the front row. “Among other things,” she said.

Connor opened his mouth to say something, but his tongue lolled against the surface of the desk instead. It was grubbily unpleasant. Connor closed his eyes.

Connor awoke. He was soaked. He sat up straight and looked around, patted his clammy face and damp hair. The classroom was empty except for the mustache kid, sitting in the front row and staring at him again. Connor felt bad, but he felt better. He was at least alive. Ish.

“I think my fever broke,” said Connor.

“Major poured a bottle of water on you,” said the boy. It was almost a whisper.

“What time is it?”

“Almost one.”

“You were waiting for me to wake up?”

The boy nodded.

“Why?”

“You’re Connor Corrigan.”

Connor toweled his face off a little with his shirt sleeve. “Barely,” he said.

“I thought Joan Didion was teaching this class.”

“She was. Something happened and I’m here now.”

“I didn’t mean to sound disrespectful. I’m excited it’s you. You have no idea. I saw you read in Hagerstown. You’re my favorite author. You’re kind of my hero.”

“You’re from Maryland?” said Connor, standing up. His notes were open on his desk, rifled through and wet.

“More or less,” said the boy. “Not originally. Close to West Virginia. Are you okay?”

“I’m really sorry,” said Connor. He hurriedly packed his soggy papers into his soggy messenger bag. “You can’t imagine how terrible I feel that I missed the first day of class. I’m excited to be here too, you understand. I’m just so very sick right now. Did Major sub for me okay?”

The boy bit his lip. “I took his intro class before. I think he scared some of the others though.”

Connor turned around and looked at the chalkboard. It was covered in horses. “He did the horse thing.” Connor smiled. “He used my lesson plan.” Some of the horses looked just alike, chalked in haste by hands who hadn’t had much experience drawing horses, hands who likely hadn’t expected this on the first day of an Intermediate Fiction course. Others were little portraits, with shading and eyes that looked like powdery glass. There were fat horses and skinny horses with curves drawn on their abdomens to indicate ribs. There was a severed horse head in bed beside a screaming Italian man. There were racing horses and armored horses, and a unicorn colored in white with chalk. There was, for some reason, a triangle with a question mark in the middle. In the bottom left corner, small because there hadn’t been much room left at the end, was a regular horse, poorly composed, facing the opposite direction of every other horse on the board. Three horizontal lines had been scratched behind it. It was Connor’s favorite.

“Supersonic speed,” said the boy. “The lines, I mean. They’re to indicate supersonic speed.”

“What did you say your name was?”

“K.”

“Just K?”

“Like the S in Harry S Truman. It doesn’t stand for anything.”

“Like from Kafka?”

“Yeah,” said the boy, smiling with less shyness. “From Kafka.”

The Muse 2 and 3

“It is very possible that I may die – death by overexposure to whining – I may die from being confined in such close quarters with one such as you for any length of time. This is so you understand that it is with great personal sacrifice that I am offering you this ride. But my conscience would never allow me to leave your carcass to rot in the upper stories of Greenlaw – not even you deserve that – or to allow you to drive in such a state and do more damage to this community than even your middling prose could. Therefore, *colleague*, I will make this offer once and only once. To drive you to the doctor. Right now.”

Connor smiled with great fever-y warmth. “Can I sit in the front seat?”

“No,” said Major. “The front seat is for people I respect.”

From the parking lot behind the dining hall, Major’s sporty red Mazda crawled along the river of students who were jaywalking between classes. It took the two teachers longer than it should have to navigate their way off campus, dropping down the bypass to reach Carrboro and avoid the frenzy of Franklin Street mid-afternoon.

“You missed me,” said Connor as they were stopped at a red light. He was beaming with contentment. “You don’t have to say anything. I know you’re glad I’m back and that we’re working together as equals. The old platoon. The Major and the Private, ascending the ranks with eagle-like speed and distinction. And now we’re colleagues. Major and... dare I say, Other Major? You’re excited. Don’t bother pretending that you’re not.”

“Oh Christ, no. Spare me. I am exactly as excited about you squatting on my campus as I am about the new season of *Survivor*.”

“That’s a great show.”

“That’s a balls-awful show.”

“You used to use harsher rhetoric. You’re about one pop culture reference away from giving me a hug.”

He peeled away from the traffic light the moment it turned green. “You actually believe that I tolerate your presence voluntarily, don’t you? Well, Penelope, as much as I’ve always reveled in your sparkling banter, I am now initiating a monk-like code of silence in this vehicle, in effect at all times from now until May when you leave Chapel Hill. Make that until July, just to be extra safe.”

“You really should give *Survivor* a chance. It’s come a long way since...”

“Ah-bup-bup-bup. I *will* pull over and leave you to expire in a gutter if you emit another sound. Do we understand one another?” Connor nodded.

“Atta girl. Now I will talk and you will listen. I am going to explain to you in very simple terms what this Creative Writing department is about, what is expected of you, and why your behavior today, whatever your excuse, is inexcusable.”

Connor's eyes and consciousness glazed over and he stared mournfully out the window. He had heard this speech before, in some capacity or another. Major would talk about his (and now Connor's) role as a writing teacher being less about personal mobility and inspiration, even less about teaching youngsters how to write fiction, almost entirely about spotting the rarities with potential on the first day and, over the course of the semester, destroying their will to live. There would be the inevitable reference to *Ender's Game*, to the theory that you can only create a great leader by ruining his self-esteem and taking everything he loves away, turning the world against him and him against the world so he is alone and forced to forge some unique method of survival. Most of them don't survive, Major would say, and that's for the best because they didn't have the stamina their initial promise suggested. Beginning the first day, beginning with the first activity (Major might even swallow his pride and admit that the horse thing was a good idea), the teacher should be able to spot who is intuitive, who is creative, who will burn out young, and who is taking up space. It is then the teacher's duty to make them all miserable, either because they show no potential and they deserve it, because they're insufferably pretentious and they deserve it, or because they could someday change things, could someday save another soul through their art, and they must be hardened early for an unforgiving life, a life that will warrant a choice between personal happiness (ultimate meaninglessness) or the painful, meticulous, miserable nurturing of a single seed that may or may never come to fruition, the one in a billion chance of producing a classic, the possibility of creating living, breathing work of prose. *Improbable*. Connor knew that Major would then neatly sidestep the fact that Connor had fallen squarely into that third category as an undergrad, and had turned out to be, after all of Major's secret hope and

expectations, to be just one of the infinite who supernova-d too young and burned out before he honed his craft. Then Major would certainly direct his bile toward Glynis, whom he knew to be a great friend of Connor's, and he would caution his former protégé to beware of such easy praise, to not let her cheeriness fool him: Glynis, Major had been convinced when last he and Connor spoke, is a soulless succubus who would lull Connor into complacency before dissolving his drive, converting him to her saccharine cult of Barney-like "I'm okay, you're okay"-itude.

And at the end of the whole spiel, after Major had made a dozen or so literate allusions and called Connor a whole plethora of emasculating names, he would bring it back around: had Connor been paying attention on the first day of class, had he known his limits and cancelled it until he was feeling up to the task, he wouldn't have missed this one chance to see his students as nervous, malleable potential *writers*. He wouldn't have missed his chance to catch them before they figured out that this was a class, that he was a teacher, that there would be a grade, and that for the duration of said class their role as writers would function primarily to service their role as students. From here on in, they're going to tell Connor, their grader, what they think he wants to hear, not what they actually have to say.

But no sooner than had Connor begun to drift away and Major begun to pontificate, a bicycle, piloted by an oblivious, blank-faced blonde woman in a cotton dress, rolled into the path of Major's Mazda. Major shouted, swerved, stopped, rubbed his temples. This same woman had cut him off at least a dozen times over the years, and she was never paying attention. She wasn't worth his frustration.

Connor, on the other hand, was frantically rolling down the window. He poked his head out as soon as there was enough room.

“Shay?”

The woman, still riding, stopped, looked, cocked her head. “Connor?”

And with that, Major knew it was all over. Everything he had left to teach Connor could no longer be taught, because she was back. That goddamned girl. That girl, about whom Connor had written every single assignment when he was Major’s student, the one Major had half-heartedly prayed was imaginary, she was back in the picture. If only his brakes hadn’t been so dependable.

“Shay?”

“Connor?”

“Shay!” He was out the door.

“Connor!” She was off the bike.

“You look great!”

“No, *you* look great!”

Major watched them. They were hugging. They giggled and babbled, touched each other’s arms, bumped and batted eyes in the middle of Random Street. Major revved his engine. She was writing her phone number on the back of Connor’s hand. Connor was truly back home now, wasn’t he? In every sense of the word. Why did Major keep bothering? Hadn’t Connor made his decision five years ago? Hadn’t he chosen, every moment for the last quarter century, to surround himself with people who would hurt him, or as the case more often was, people who would make him hurt himself? Connor was writing his phone number on the back of her hand. Would Connor get to live the

American Dream as Major had? Divorced, no tenure, sleeping with a married woman, disappointed at every turn by the student he had hated the least? Maybe. If he was lucky.

Shay handed Connor a small bottle of something, kissed him on his cheek, and drove her bicycle through someone's yard. Connor watched her go, got back in the car.

"She has somewhere to be," he said. "Otherwise she'd go with us."

"To the hospital?"

"The what? No, oh, I'm fine, I don't need to go any more. Shay gave me some herbal remedies they grow at her co-op. Have you met her? No? I guess not. Just take me home."

"It's like you never left," said Major. He shifted into reverse and backed away.

An Attempt to Tip the Scales

"This is Lola B here on Radio WXYC 89.3, Chapel Hill's home for indie rock, and my guest this evening is National Book Award winning author and Morgan Writer In Residence Connor Corrigan. Mr. Corrigan, it's a pleasure to have you with us."

"Thanks, Lola. Have we met somewhere before?"

"You received your undergraduate degree from the University of North Carolina, isn't that correct?"

"That's right."

"So how does it feel to be back home? Back in the presence of great modern writers like Stanley Major and Glynis Glen?"

“Funny you should mention those two, out of all the important North Carolina writers to come out of this area. I’m lucky enough to be friends with both of them. They helped me a lot when I was working on my first novel.”

“What about Shay Pireale?”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ve been quoted as saying that most of your writings during and immediately after your undergrad career, including the female lead in *In Bocca al Lupo*, were based on local Carrboro resident and your former classmate, Shay Pireale. Would you care to comment on that?”

“I never said that.”

“Over the body of your work, including many unpublished manuscripts, there is a dominant unrequited love theme, an aspect of betrayal and self-loathing. In view of your turbulent, on-again off-again relationship with Miss Pireale five years ago, would your readers be correct in interpreting this theme as one of disillusionment? Or the destruction of an idol? And these elements have been noticeably absent in some of your more recent works and notes, which many critics have called ‘subpar’ and ‘uninspired.’”

“I never mentioned Shay in any interview. How... Are we on the air?”

“Never. Do you think that after your encounter with Miss Pireale on Random Street earlier today the element of wounded idealism will inject itself into your writing once more?”

“It never left.”

“Would you care to share the hamster story with our listening audience?”

“No, I don’t want to talk about it in case she’s listening. I can’t. I haven’t thought about her in years. The last time Shay and I slept together, before winter break my senior year, I asked her to run away with me. This must have been 1998. She had already left her boyfriend, or told me she had, and it was what I thought I wanted and what she had told me she wanted for so long, but we couldn’t be together because of her boyfriend, because of her problems, because the World Was Against Us. But the boyfriend, he was gone by now, and I was the one she had come to. We had both said I love you, so many times before, secret, like secret agents, right? But this time when I said it, she responded with ‘When I was six years old, my father gave my hamster mouth to mouth resuscitation, and that’s why I can never love you.’ And I laughed at her but then she got sad and she’s just sitting in my bed naked and crying and explaining to me that her hamster, Robutussin, had been the most important thing in the world to her as a little kid. You know how kids can be with pets. And she was playing with Robutussin on her bed one day, four or five years old, and she got distracted by something else, cartoons I think, I can’t remember, but the point is she accidentally rolled on top of him. And he stopped breathing. So she just started screaming and screaming and within seconds, her dad was right there, performing CPR, thumping that little chest and blowing air into Robutussin’s mouth. And it survived. He actually saved the hamster. But the point was that on that day her father had been the perfect man and had done the perfect thing. He had ruined any chance she would have for finding future happiness with a man, because who could top that? Who could fulfill those expectations? Who could give her hamster mouth to mouth?”

“I could.”

“‘The End of Love,’ she called it. ‘Love Is Over.’ She had tried so hard with Max – that had been the boyfriend – and she had tried so hard with me but in the end she was damaged goods. She was incapable and undeserving of love. ‘Love Is Over.’”

“Of course we’re glossing over your own role in this, aren’t we? That you put her on a pedestal as your soulmate with the full knowledge that she would never love you, and then used that fantasy as an excuse to abstain from any other meaningful relationships. That’s what we’re skipping, here, that you fictionalized your own life, as a coping mechanism.”

“Wait, no, I know you. You lied about your name. Josephine? Are you Josephine? From my story?”

“You’re listening to WSixSixSix, Love Is Over Radio. I’m your host Lola B and we’re here with Writer In Residence Charles Manson. Mr. Manson, what do you think of my wings? Are they on straight?”

The air was dense with spirits. There was canned applause from all around them, nonsense screams, visions of suicide, of chalked horses racing in the same direction. Voysey was riding them all, Josephine hovering above on phony, poorly stitched wings with a submachine gun, trying to pick him off, scattering bodies and red powder. There was a light. A cough. Connor woke up.

His heart was thumping and he was drenched again, but in his own bed this time, at Robbie’s house, and this time he had gone to sleep on purpose. There was something wrong with his vision though. Something wrong with his nose, his throat, his skin all over. He could still hear scream-singing and applause, loud. He stood up. It didn’t hurt. Looking in the mirror, studying the hints of color flushing back into his cheeks, he

realized why everything felt so odd: he was better. He picked up the bottle Shay had given him, rattled the remaining pills. He felt fantastic. He slid on pajama pants and walked into the den, where Robbie sat in a desk chair at his computer, playing a game.

“What time is it?”

“It’s midnight,” said Robbie without looking away. “You went to sleep around six.”

Connor patted his damp shirt. “Did a bald man come in here and dump a bottle of water on me?”

Robbie swung his chair around and raised his eyebrows. “Not that I know of.”

“I think my fever broke.” He looked around. “Except that my hearing’s still off. It sounds like people yelling and clapping.”

“No, that’s real. It’s next door. Some hippie thing they do on Wednesdays. If it’s too loud you can go over and tell them to quiet down. They’re friendly. Just weird.”

Connor got back in bed on the dry side and closed his eyes. Minutes passed like hours. The neighbors were impossibly loud. How could they still be screaming? Wouldn’t they run out of breath? Wouldn’t whatever they were screaming about have stopped by now? Are they screaming in shifts?

Connor got back up and walked into the den.

“What time is it?”

“Three minutes after you just asked me what time it was.”

“I’m going next door. Don’t lock me out.”

Connor wandered outside in his undershirt and sweatpants. The light pollution from streetlamps and cars obscured the stars. He was the only person in the world who had been asleep.

The Universe

This is what the house at 112 Graham St. was like: it was a white, two-story bungalow with a concrete slab for a porch, a dirt yard full of parked cars and bikes, and enough beer bottles scattered across the porch and yard and in the bushes and trees and under tires and stacked in recycling bins that had the house been in Michigan instead of North Carolina, the ten-cents-per-bottle refund would surely have paid a year's worth of rent. There were two tattered armchairs on the porch, one tan corduroy, the other a potpourri of hideous rainbow stripes dotted intermittently with stains that spanned the spectrum from deep water damage to beer to much fouler stuff. There were also two forest green plastic lawn chairs and a busted TV which altogether made five seats on the porch, all five of which were occupied at any given point on a rainless day or night by smokers and sometimes sleepers.

Inside, there were two bedrooms downstairs, two upstairs. The one closest to the front entrance was K's. The kitchen was unofficially condemned and only the tenants of the house ventured into that dungeon, and only when absolutely necessary. As for the den, which was where it all happened, there was something wrong with the floor supports, and when you jumped (or even stepped heavily), it gave and sprung up, like a weak trampoline, and even someone K's height could touch the ceiling (labeled "CEILING!", in blue spray paint). The walls of the den were covered entirely with freak

show Americana: a forced perspective mural on butcher block paper that looked like the wall had been blasted open, revealing a highrise view over a bombed out, smoldering urban wasteland; CD's painted on the shiny side and microwaved until crinkly and holographic; posters and flyers from concerts of dubiously named bands (Lesbian Snow Family, Goblin Penis, Holy Fuck); Bob Dylan's gigantic head made out of wire and plaster, painted blue and yellow, the size of several lesser men; a pair of briefs with the Shroud of Turin face emblazoned across the crotch; an empty bag of "Rap Chips" (flavor: "Lil' Romeo's Bar-B-Que-ing with my Honey") with a reminder to Stay in School at the bottom in small red letters. One wall was a bookshelf, with a galaxy of comic books and enormous volumes of John Berryman and Phillip Larkin and Carl Sagan and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Dostoevsky and Nabakov, T.S. Eliot and Mr. T's autobiography ("If You Want Your Eyes Dotted, You Just Cross Mr. T").

There were always people scattered about the collapsing furniture in the den, the constant rotation of housemates and unofficial housemates and occasionally a basehead from the crack house next door who had wandered in accidentally, but on Wednesday nights the den was full, and on this Wednesday night, the first Wednesday night of the new semester and of Salon's last year, the den was overflowing: hipsters, stoners, drunks, geeks, geniuses, slackers, trespassers, convicted criminals, poets, singers, guitar players, game players, writers of fiction, performance artists, shy kids, gay kids, mod kids, freaky little fuckers in housecoats with gold teeth, old and young, brilliant and shitty, all in love with themselves and one another in more or less equal amounts, packed like rum-breathed sardines in a crushed tin box. K stood before them, hunched over and happy, shifty eyed, holding a microphone that hadn't worked since last March.

“Thank you, Lisa and Arden,” he said. “I think that’s the first time we’ve had scream-singers at Salon. I hope it won’t be the last. Next up is...” He picked up a sheet of looseleaf from the arm of a couch. “Jordan.”

Jordan shuffled to the doorway between the den and the kitchen, the makeshift stage. “Hi.” He cradled the mic carefully, lovingly. “I’m not much at telling jokes. Or stories, even. But this is a story. And also a joke.” He laughed and snorted a little. K, having taken Jordan’s spot on the sofa between Ralph and Moon Diana, smiled at him.

“So there was this contractor one time who bought dilapidated old houses and fixed them up. And this one time he found a house in Chapel Hill, this mansion that was falling to pieces. Just the worst shape a house could be in. The roof was collapsed, and the windows were busted in and boarded up, there was graffiti all over it and termites just crawling through the pores in the walls. Somebody had painted a big pink octopus on it.” The audience laughed. “The yard’s full of car parts and broken glass and land mines and body parts. A real shit hole. This contractor, he’s standing here looking at this house – there’s no For Sale sign but clearly nobody lives here – when a shady-looking guy in a seersucker suit comes up and says ‘I’ll give you the house for free.’ And our contractor says, ‘For real?’ and this guy says, ‘For real. It’s absolutely worthless. Impossible to fix. No one will ever live in this house again.’ ‘No way,’ says the contractor, ‘I’ll take this house and turn it into the nicest house in the town. Rich people will come from Florida to buy it for a million dollars. You won’t even recognize it.’ So the seersucker guy gets this look on his face, like a used car salesman, and he says ‘Not so fast, buddy-bo, I’ll make you a deal. If you can deliver on that promise in one week, the house is yours for free and I’ll pay for all your construction fees. You spend as much money as you want in the next

week on this house, remodel and furnish it, all on my tab. But if one single thing is wrong at the end of the week, if one single brick is out of place, I keep the house and the remodeling all comes out of your pocket.’ And our contractor, he says, ‘Yeah, sure, Seersucker Man. Care to shake on it?’ And they shake, and our contractor gets right to work.”

Jordan shifted his weight and leered out over the packed living room. Some kids were leaning forward with interest. Others were whispering or playing Gameboys. Junebug and Charlemagne were silently making out in the corner. Jordan continued. “So our contractor just goes all out. He uses all his resources, calls in every favor anyone owes him, gets his whole crew and friends and family out here working on this house day and night for a week. They replace everything they can carry, putting top of the line lumber in the walls, and fancy wallpaper, new supports, add a garage, plant perfect green grass in the lawn. They tear down the chimney and build a new one out of perfect red bricks. They use special paint imported from Paintsylvania, furniture from the Ottoman Empire, new wiring, hire a full staff of servants and gardeners and interior/exterior decorators and pay them double to have things ready in time. And they just barely finish but they finish. Mr. Seersucker pulls up in his junky car at the end of the week just as the last of the construction cranes is pulling out of the driveway, and our contractor gives him the grand tour, all with this big grin on his face. Everything inside and outside the house is perfect. No crooked pictures, no uneven shrubs, no room arrangements that aren’t perfect *feng shui*.” Charlemagne smiled.

“‘As you can see,’ says the contractor as they’re coming out the front door, ‘the house is perfect. Here’s your receipt.’ ‘Not so fast,’ says Mr. Seersucker. ‘What’s that

over there?’ And Mr. Seersucker points, way back in the corner of the lawn, way under the bushes where there’s no way our contractor could have noticed it: it’s a single brick from the old chimney. Our contractor knew he was sunk. He turned all red and steam shot out his ears like in the cartoons. He picked up that brick and yelled at it. Cursed at it. Put curses on it. ‘I’ll have the keys to my house now,’ said Mr. Seersucker. And our contractor was so mad, he was so mad he just threw that brick straight up in the air!”

Jordan stopped caressing the microphone and looked over the heads of the eager listeners, leaning forward. “Thank you,” he said. He handed the mic to K, and sat back down. There was slow, confused applause.

“Thanks, Jordan. Does anyone have the list?” Moon Diana, who could have been a starlet out of the 1950s with her curves and glittering dress, handed him the ragged sheet of paper. “Right. Charlemagne. You’re next.”

Connor, who had been wordlessly directed inside by the smokers on the porch and was now squeezed into the hallway beside the den, watched an enormous man of about his own age unfurl his arms from around Junebug Glen and cross the floor to take the nonfunctioning mic from K. He wore an Iron Maiden denim jacket and his hair fell down almost to his waist. He made Connor think of the biblical Samson. K swapped spots with him. From a paper tube, Charlemagne unrolled a banner and tacked it to the doorframe: THE UNIVERSE. Charlemagne produced an acoustic guitar from a stickered case.

“Tonight, I am going to explain the universe.” There were scattered laughs and claps, a hoot from June. Charlemagne strummed and sang: *“Oh, the sun is a mass of incandescent gas, a gigantic nuclear furnace. Where hydrogen’s converted into helium at a temperature of millions of degrees.”*

Connor watched K and Junebug squeezed uncomfortably onto the sofa. Junebug made moon eyes at the performer, clearly her boyfriend or some sordid love interest. K looked like a forlorn puppy, touching June as little as possible, pretending he wasn't staring at the curve of her shoulder, breathing with his neck slightly arched so he could smell her hair.

Connor was either entirely unnoticed or no one cared. They had let him in and left him alone. And how alone he was. There were children before him. Some held hands, snuggled or scratched backs. Others stared straight at the performance with blinders on. Currents of noiseless communication rippled across their huddled bodies: boredom, lust, frustration, hopeless hope. In his corner, Connor felt cold. He looked to the door where he had come in, but Bob Dylan's blue and yellow visage intercepted his gaze: How does it feel? To be on your own? Like a rolling stone?

Charlemagne was jamming, June and a few others singing along. *"The sun is hot, the sun is not a place where we could live. But here on earth there'd be no life without the light it gives!"*

Connor crept for the exit, but K spotted him and lit up with joy. K waved. Connor smiled and waved back. K looked like he could have just died. Bob Dylan winked: Don't think twice, it's all right.

Connor stayed. Charlemagne concluded his song and made a brief, illustrated presentation about the physical composition of the universe, about dark matter and string theory, about how if the earth were on the scale of this orange here, the nearest planet would be as far as Durham, twenty miles away, the nearest solar system would be in China, the nearest galaxy would be on the moon. The universe was bigger and more

mysterious than anything, including the universe. Charlemagne turned out the lights and the audience gasped; the walls, the ceiling, the art, Bob Dylan and the boarded windows, everything in this tiny dark haven was speckled with plastic, glow-in-the-dark little boy bedroom stars. It sprawled throughout the entire downstairs, spiraling up the railing and licking into the upper bedrooms and attic, accurate constellations, proportioned so meticulously that they shocked one's sense of place. Connor Corrigan found himself unexpectedly at the center of a boxy planetarium, staring into the heart of Polaris, due north. He didn't breathe, he didn't blink. Improbable. The starlight in the bathroom down the hall was so bright you could whiz in the dark. Beneath the Seven Sisters constellation, Charlemagne read by the light of plastic incandescence in an even, unemotional tone:

“The Stars Are in Alphabetical Order.”

Arc to Arcturus, golden bright bowing breathlessly down.
By the light of the fading Bellatrix, Betelgeuse,
Cassiopeia of Galileo's vision and charcoal sketchbook,
Deneb, and the flickering casualty candles
eerily burned away by billions of years, you must
find your way home, boy.
Go toward the vociferous barks of spiderwebbed
Hydra heads diamond-dotted across the southern quadrant.
If you close your eyes and fly by the fire of
Jabbah's gravity, down under Kaus Australis's
kingly flambeaux, the torchlight beacons will
lead you to sanctuary, shielded by
Mira's dusky wings. Holy
night shades swing incendiary censers, light the footfalls of
Orion's hounds that map the sacred hunting grounds beneath
Polaris's stable gaze. O Horror-scope, o transient
quasars forging helium hotter than
Rigel, what makes you leak such firewater tears,
second star to the right and straight on till mourning?
Telescope Boy, star-carved and diamond-hearted, scion of
Ursa Major of the Great Bear bloodline,
vagrant of the Vacuum: it is time for you to
wake now. It is Alpha, Beta,
X, and Ultraviolet's turn to sleep, time for

you to rise and face another dawn in the yellow mist of a Zodiac's dream.

The house was silent except for the distracted rumble of passing cars. Connor was deeply unsettled. Charlemagne turned on the lights and took K's spot on the couch with June. She brushed his hair from his shoulder and laid her head down, closing her eyes.

"Little Freud's next," K read from the list.

Little Freud's beady eyes darted like a rodent cornered. "I really don't want to go next, I don't think."

"Then next is me." K opened a notebook. "I don't have a title for this story yet. I wrote it this afternoon. This is for Mister Corrigan." His eyes made electric contact with Connor's. *Please, please like me*, they said. And K read, that whispering voice:

"She had a face like a Georgia O'Keefe painting: everyone said she looked like a flower, but all I could think of was sex."

There were moments in K's story -- a noir about cats from outer space trying to stop a doomsday device in Antarctica -- that made Connor roll his eyes, and other moments that he felt would haunt him for the rest of his life. There were images -- the cat army, waltzing beneath the frozen sun, dying as they danced, or the tiny, edible gods, or the inclusion of Connor and several Salon attendees listed by name among the dead of World War III -- that were like little nightmares approaching the postmodern sublime, short, punctuating knives that perforated Connor's certainty that he existed in reality and this story did not.

It was a boy's story, heavy on style and frenzied subversion, but there was almost something there in 112 Graham Street, wasn't there? Under that crumbling roof, on that

elastic floor? Almost, but not quite. Like eye contact with a stranger on a subway and in that instance you can see building a whole life with them, with a picket fence and His and Hers towels and a joint checking account. Almost something.

Connor and K watched the sun come up purple from the twin armchairs on the concrete porch, K smoking a hand-rolled cigarette in the rainbow lounge, Connor nestled in the corduroy La-Z Boy. Salon had ended maybe two hours ago, which K said was highly unusual. It started at ten every Wednesday and usually went till midnight or one, tonight being exceptional as the first one of the semester. While K smoked, his grey breaths dissipating quickly in the muggy southern heat, he explained, to the best of his ability, his own universe.

Salon had started up the second semester of K's sophomore year (he was beginning his senior year now) by himself and Moon Diana and another kid named Haney who had already graduated and moved on, but who might be coming back soon. It was just supposed to be an alternative to the other local hipster scenes like the indie rock karaoke at Local 506 and the Youth Angst Society at Bull's Head and the Tuesday night showcase at Jack Sprat, formerly Strong's. Connor remembered Strong's and its surprisingly weak brew, remembered the weekly showcase existing a decade ago when he was last in Chapel Hill. Connor had never attended. But K's Salon started as an open mic / workshop hybrid, like the 18th century French gatherings of the same name, a place to share stories and poems and give and receive feedback, a motivational tool more than anything else. If you had to have a new piece to present every Wednesday, you were more

likely to stay sharp and in practice. Major, K's mentor as well as Connor's, had always said that one's skill as a writer is exactly proportional to how much one writes.

But even before Salon, the Graham Street house had been a sort of homeless shelter for local downtrodden artists. K and Moon Diana and Willie and Larsy, the residents at the time, took in a constantly rotating stream of sad-eyed kids who came over four or five times a week to smoke pot or watch anime or talk about Elliot Smith. As the pseudo-residents began to pay attention to Salon, it was really only a matter of time before music was added, then performance art (Kennedy ate a dollar bill in October and that pretty much sealed the deal), then some audience participation stuff, going outside to waltz or launch bottle rockets or learn a real Arnold Schwarzenegger body flexing routine. The regulars who played guitar at the house and smoked on the porch and pissed in the bushes during the day now did the same things Wednesday nights at ten and called it art. But amid the noise and debauchery, under the scream-singing and currency ingestion, deeper than the communal alcoholism and the desire to fuck everything, all the time, there was real art. Occasionally. As they wrote and drank and traded lovers and love stories, those erratic absolutes took them over. The songs and stories and aural kisses became what they collectively looked forward to every week more than anything else. Salon became their primary focus, their topic of outside conversation, their secret society and clandestine hallucination, their way station between adolescent silliness and mature art. K dreamed in microphones and murals.

But sometime last spring, K had become acutely aware that Salon had gotten away from him. He had always MCed and the whole phenomenon had been widely considered his baby, but as Salon grew and changed, K no longer felt the night tacitly

belonged to him. As more acts were added, the workshopping aspect fell away. Haney wrote a theme song called “Bottle Rockets and One-Act Plays.” Moon Diana began to dress like Audrey Hepburn and smoke her dope from a long, slender black holder. Somebody broke the floor. K caught strep throat in March and went home for two weeks, and as far as he heard Salon was frustratingly identical, the only difference being that Moon Diana introduced the acts instead of him. More and more nights K felt simultaneously absent and overwhelmed. The increasing frequency of Salon’s “intermissions” (smoke breaks) confirmed what K had feared: Wednesday night had just become a weekly opportunity to hang out. The art was secondary.

“I wish you had seen it,” said K. “In its prime. When Willie and Haney were still here and the mic worked.” Connor noted that unlike many of his comrades, K did not look cool when he smoked. He looked desperate.

“We painted together once, the whole Salon,” said K. “There were no acts that night, we just took one roll of paper, the whole surface area of the living room, and we all painted. Not separate pictures either, but building together, watching this unplanned spring landscape grow between us, trees and freakish nature as far as the eye can see. Hardly any of us are visual artists, and this thing, this green, epic thing, this thing that ruined the carpet and all of our jeans, it was us. You could see the heart of every single one of us in that painting, all on top of one another. You should have seen it.”

“Do you still have it?” said Connor.

“Moon Diana burned it the next Wednesday, in the back yard. That was her act. They loved it. I was the only one who cared, and I’ve never forgiven her.” K gave it a moment of silence.

“I have a question,” said Connor. “That story tonight. The shy Indian kid?”

“Jordan. Right. The one about the contractor and the old house.”

“Yeah. Was he talking about this house? Is that the story?”

“I have no idea what he was talking about. But no, not this house. I doubt it was a true story. I think punchlines and relevance aren’t quite postmodern enough for this new era.”

“Maybe, but I liked it. I’m not sure why.”

“I liked it too. Welcome to my life. Just so much entangled appreciation and resentment.”

“You could always stop it. Or stop coming.”

“I could never do that to them. The less Salon means to me, the more it means to everyone else. I think we all know it’s going to end when I graduate in May. There’s a younger crowd now, but I don’t think they’ll keep it going. I wouldn’t want them to. It’s selfish, but I like to think I’m still necessary.” He took a last drag and snubbed his cigarette on the concrete. “Mister Corrigan? Would you do me a favor?” Connor stared at Robbie’s house across the street, east, the rising sun eating the edges in blurry chomps. Connor nodded.

“Will you read something next week?” asked K. “It doesn’t have to be new. Just something you’ve written.”

“I don’t know, K. This is your thing.”

“Then just come back next week. We start at ten. You don’t have to read anything, just come to watch. Be present. Read when you’re ready?”

“I can do that. Ten?”

“Ten. But free beer if you read.”

It was late morning when Connor walked back to Robbie’s house. The den was empty, save the nauseous glow of the computer monitor. In his room, Connor saw that Josephine was still in his bed, and worst of all she had taken the dry side. She was wearing the ratty Red Sox t-shirt she had been wearing when Connor first made her up back in ‘99.

“Move,” said Connor. “Your wings are on my side.”

Leap Year

Thursday

To my Dushi,

I am slicy drunk. I'm drunk writing you because I can't stop thinking about you. I learned some papimientto tonight (la lengua maternal en Quito). Dushi means "sweetheart." I don't remember much else because I'm so drunk. So, true feelings laid out as a result: I adore you to no end in a way that I've rarely adored anyone. I want you with me in my bathtub. And there I go... Your words follow me like angelitos murmuring in my ears, fluttering under my shirt, making promises. As far as I go, that sound of flap-flapping from silver-gilded flying aparati will remind me of your eyes, your lips, and your accent.

*You Know Me,
Lola B*

The new letter didn’t bear Connor’s name – it was for “Chuck Bukowski” instead – but it was nonetheless addressed to 113 Graham in that same severe penmanship (slightly loopier this time) and smoky smell. Attached was a print out:

The wind sounds angry
But my coat's kind
Wrapped in blankets
In the daylight
Winters longing
Summer close behind
In a hurry
But there's so much time

I will wait for you
Growing love but like water
Time will always slip through
I will wait for you
But please come soon.

Connor Googled it, and found it to be the lyrics to a song by Maria Taylor called “Leap Year.” So Lola B was a Maria Taylor fan. A clue. Connor did not know who Maria Taylor was, but it was a clue.

1996, 2000, 2004 had all been leap years. Had their overarching sense of longing been in their cosmological makeup, or was it indoctrination? Connor had never noticed the significance of every fourth year until 1996, the first leap year he had known Shay. She had been born at noon with the highest sun on February 29, 1976, a rare date, and she had traced her conception to noon June 29, 1975, nine months to the day, to the hour, to the minute and second, she claimed. February 28, 1996, Shay Pireale turned five (or twenty, according to the federal government) and stepped from her saccharine shell which had defined her in Connor’s mind to this point, and into the dusky robes of a Pythagorean priestess. She treaded upon numbers, breathed algorithms and reeked of the theoretical composition of time. She was on this day a fountain of leapling trivia. She was one hundred seventy-five thousand two hundred hours old, ten million five hundred twelve thousand minutes, six hundred thirty million, seven hundred twenty thousand seconds, or five years, or twenty rotations around the sun. Did you know that since the time of Saint Patrick in fifth century Ireland, there had been a tradition of women making marriage proposals to men on leap years? In 1288, strangely precocious five-year-old Queen Margaret of Scotland levied fines on men who refused a marriage proposal in a leap year, fines ranging from a kiss, to a pound, to a silken girl’s gown. That same day,

Margaret proposed marriage to her male caretaker, age 37. History does not show what penalty was inflicted upon the poor fellow when he refused, but nowhere after this occurrence does his name appear in the court annals. The tradition of proposals was later narrowed to apply only to the leap day, February 29, and then the practice died out entirely in the mid-20th century, due largely to the Greek superstition that getting married or proposed to on a leap year was bad luck. It seemed to Connor that this prancing, howling Shay, padding around her apartment with werewolf ecstasy, was building toward something, a declaration of love, perhaps, a meaningful touch, a proposition, if the number gods were all aligned.

She fucked him that night, for the first time, arching her back like a cat, weighing almost nothing. She loved him electrically, quoted his own poems into his ear, sizzled and sparked, and they counted together, numbered the plastic stars on her bedroom ceiling. In the morning, it was March 1 and there were classes to attend. When she saw him at lunch, she waved and Max waved and she pulled up a chair for him. That wave and that smile had been the same to Connor as Moon Diana torching K's art; he did not know what the right thing would have been for her to do, but it was not that.

In 2000, Connor's mother died. Not on February 29, but close.

In 2004, this year, Connor finished *Red Letter Day*, his follow up to *In Bocca al Lupo*. The manuscript was returned to him in February with two notes on Random House letterhead, one from Nick, one from Katie. Katie's said, "We do not think Random House has a spot for this book in our spring release schedule. Perhaps something more along the lines of *IBAL*? Please show us some of your other projects and we will see what looks promising." Nick's said, "No."

At his computer desk in Robbie's house, in August, Connor pined for Shay, longed to be in her bathtub, words fluttering under her shirt, making promises. Connor set her aside, gently, like an old enemy whose reunion you cherish, and he wrote what he could.

It was the hamster sentence again. He deleted and went to the grocery store.

K and Charlemagne sat Indian style in the snack food aisle between organic veggie chips and potato flavored Jones Soda. They closed their eyes and Charlemagne clamped his thumb and middle finger like he was playing castanets.

"Ohm," said Charlemagne.

"Ohm," said K.

"Clear your mind," said Charlemagne.

"Okay."

"Is it clear?"

"Yes."

"What are you thinking about?"

"Spider-Man."

"Spider-Man is not balanced," said Charlemagne. His unkempt mane dragged the grubby tiles of the grocery store floor, and he looked like a true yogi in denim and sheepskin. "You said you are feeling unbalanced and I am going to balance you. Get rid of Spider-Man, grasshopper. Concentrate. *Feng shui*."

K recalled a porno that Charlemagne had shown him some time ago called *Feng Shui Fuckin'*. Not balanced.

"Are you concentrating?" said Charlemagne.

"Ohm," said K.

K focused on the first image that came to him. It was an image of her. She is standing on a beach, her red locks soft under the sun, her pale complexion probably frying like greasy bacon. No, no, not balanced.

He pictured her in the market, haggling over plantains and coffee by the sackful. She offends a vendor and is stabbed. No, no. Oh no, no.

He pictured her as he last saw her. They are at a Billy Collins reading, discussing the dying art of writing notes in the margins of library books. They both write secret questions in each other's palms, swear not to look at them until they are alone. He has written, "Will you be my girlfriend?" She has written, "Do you still have my Spider-Man DVD?" It was as much balance as K was likely to get.

Beneath the benevolent beams of Sunny Delight, K silently vowed to get over himself, and from this point forward to stop acting and feeling pitiful, to take some risks, and to define himself apart from her. He would save Salon. He would participate in National Novel Writing Month in November. He would help get a Democrat in the White House, finally. He would be there for Junebug when Charlemagne moved to Tanzania, which honestly could be any day now, he'd been threatening to do it for months. He would impress Mister Corrigan. He would run away from everything to which he had promised himself, the ultimate act of bravery. This was going to be the year of running away.

"Are you balanced now?" said Charlemagne.

"I think so," said K. "Charlemagne?" said K.

"Yes?"

"Why are we doing this in the snack food aisle?"

"Positive energy," said Charlemagne. "Zen, grasshopper. Baked Lays, Zen."

K felt a painful smack, a jolt in the tailbone and the back of his head, accompanied by aluminum rattling. He yelped and went sprawling, knocking over a six-pack of the Buddha. He did not feel balanced.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" said Connor, behind the handlebar of a brimming grocery cart, stacked too high for him to easily see over. He looked quizzically at his victim, a crumpled hobbit tangled up in dented soda cans. "K?"

"Hi Mister Corrigan."

"Are you all right? I just didn't see you two. Why are you on the floor?"

"Zen," said K, reshelving the Diet Cherry Vanilla Dr. Pepper.

Charlemagne nodded approvingly. "We're balancing our karma through the chi of our ancestors. Would you care to join us?"

"I have ice cream," said Connor. "I don't want it to melt. But best of luck with that. K, I'll see you in class tomorrow." Connor quickly maneuvered between them and turned left at frozen foods, almost leaving skid marks.

K noted, without judgment, that Mister Corrigan enjoys promotional Spider-Man ice cream.

In the subsequent days, K and Connor Corrigan found their respective orbits crossing with unsettling frequency. Connor arrived home at 113 Graham from the grocery store at precisely the same moment that K did at 112, and they retreated into their facing

fortresses. They both left their houses that evening at the same time, said hello, went their separate ways. Connor drove to Glynis' house in western Carrboro for dinner with her and her husband and their smallest children. K arrived at the Glen residence a few minutes later with Junebug.

On Friday, they left 112 and 113 at the same time, en route to the same class. Once in Greenlaw, Connor apologized for his illness in the last session, and taught about literary architecture, how imitating the styles of authors you admire can help beginning writers get a grip on a style of their own. K drew small, five-pointed stars all over his notebook with glazed boredom. They stared at one another at regular intervals, looking away immediately if accidental eye contact was made. Connor gave the assignment to write an architecture story for Monday, to expand a summarized passage from an established author in that author's style. K showed up on Connor's doorstep that night with his manuscript. It was called "Red Letter Day."

"Let's take a walk," said Connor.

They began in the field beside Connor's house, an overgrown lot beside the Ethiopian grill with a dilapidated wooden stage, once used, Connor recalled, by a local Baptist church. A tattered green tarp framed the stage like a puppet theater, the old boards soft as cork. They walked down Rosemary Street. K gave a homeless man a dime.

"This is a difficult year for me," said Connor as they continued. The streetlamps were dimmer than Connor remembered them ever being. K was surprised they didn't burn out, one by one, as the pair walked beneath them.

"I understand," said K.

"I don't think you do. Random House – my publisher, Random House – is going through a change in management. My friend Katie in A&R is on the way out, and a guy named Nick is on the way in. Nick does not like me. I spent his advance and didn't write the second novel I promised him. Nick is going to cancel my contract if I don't write a bestseller this year."

"If I don't get in to Advanced Fiction in the spring, my life is over," said K. "I may die."

"I'm telling you that what I don't need right now is—"

"My dog died last week. His name was Randy."

"And I'm starting this new job teaching, and I've never taught anything, and it turns out the Creative Writing department is run by a real dismal son of a bitch, and he's already publicized a reading for October from my new work, and I don't have a sentence yet."

"I'm afraid that I won't have enough credits to graduate if I don't pass chemistry."

"I'm afraid that I'm 29 and I've already burned out."

"I'm in love," said K, "and she's in Ecuador."

Connor stopped. His stomach fluttered. "She's what?"

"My girlfriend is abroad in Ecuador. I write to her, but she doesn't write back."

Connor considered his options. "That's terrible," he said.

"I can't do it," said K.

"It's just a semester."

"I am going to survive this," said K, "if it kills me."

They walked side by side over the concrete of Carrboro, under the awnings and neons, past the spray paint mural on Sheldon Street of the Mexican girl that said "descanse en la paz" – rest in peace. There was a bus stop on Greensboro Street with decades' worth of hearts and initials carved into the shatterproof plastic. Somewhere in there, beside a much more recent carven octopus, were Connor's initials, Shay's too, and a jagged, broken heart. She had been engaged when they carved it, hand in hand. It had not been his brightest night.

"K?"

"Mm?"

"Is your girlfriend named Lola?"

"Did I tell you that already?"

"I think I've been getting your mail."

K didn't say anything for a long time.

"I thought they were for me," said Connor. "Obsessive fan mail, maybe."

K laughed. "Mister Corrigan, that is conceited as fuck."

"Is it?"

"It is." K paused again, and then asked for the letters. Connor told him they had been his all along and apologized for having read them. K didn't mind. He didn't mind much. They walked on in silence.

"Mister Corrigan?" K said.

"Yes?"

"Do you want to write a story with me?"

It must have taken balls the size of small dogs. It was like propositioning him for sex. Connor thought of Major and Glynis, all that they had done for him and all that they could never do for him because they were too caught up in hating one another. He thought of all his characters, who were all Shay underneath the glam. Connor had never known how to turn down a proposition. He nodded and they turned around and traced the sidewalk back to the field, to the crumbling stage.

Anathema

Although the war of escalation that would eventually tear the Creative Writing department apart – not unlike Braveheart being drawn and quartered, splattering entrails and congealed intestines all over the royal family's breakfast – although the war never had an official name, we're going to call it the Anathema War. This is how it started.

Professor Novak began the 2004 fall semester by requiring all Creative Writing students to purchase several books, novels or short stories or poetry or playwrighting handbooks, depending on the course. They weren't bad books, nor was this an unreasonable requirement. In fact, it seemed like Novak was making the lives of the instructors easier by saving them the trouble of selecting their own course texts. Stanley Major did not trust anything that suggested Novak might have noble intentions, so he undertook some research.

As it turned out, all of the assigned books were published by a local company called Anathema Press, of which Laurence Novak was the primary shareholder. With the Chancellor's permission, Novak stood to make a pretty penny off this new requirement. Major confronted Novak with his findings and was ignored. Novak claimed it was

coincidence. Major claimed Novak was the literal manifestation of Scrooge McDuck, dancing a merry jig on the twin gold-plated skulls of dignity and art, and drowning out the voice of logic with Scottish quacking and a vacuous smirk. Novak had the janitor stop cleaning the bathroom on Major's floor. Major donated Novak's Pomeranian to a nearby needy family with triplet toddlers and replaced it in Novak's house with Funk, a half-feral Rottweiler from the pound. Novak pledged that none of Major's students would advance to the next level in the department unless they purchased the required texts. Major pledged that not a single student in the department would purchase anything from Anathema Press, or he would personally step down and bring the entire faculty with him.

And it went on and on, with various professors lining up on each side. Major knew that if enough faculty members walked out, Novak was sunk. It wasn't as if he could hire scabs to teach Honors poetry. Major also knew that Corrigan would be on his side. Unfortunately, no one knew where Connor Corrigan had been since Friday afternoon.

He had been on the stage. Connor had slept under the stars Friday and Saturday nights, and he and K marched the perimeter of the field during the day, calling cadence and triumphant monologues, writing it down furiously, lest a syllable escape their sentry. The stories gushed from them both, streamlined as ditchwater, reflective as mercury. They wrote four a day between Friday night and Monday morning, pausing only to eat at Connor's house, to pee behind the Ethiopian restaurant, or to get more writing supplements at K's house (pot for K, cheap liquor for Connor). They composed like machines, their dual pistons pumping perfectly in synch, and the words stamped out were the best any of them had ever written, had ever even seen. Shakespeare's corpse clawed

its way up from its tourist-strewn tomb in Stratford-upon-Avon, furious that he hadn't thought of these stories first. Generations of women would get pregnant by reading them. Somewhere in Texas, Chuck Norris died of an aneurism.

They swore a pact when it was all over, when their graphite was gone and erasers rubbed to nubs, that they would not publish these, ever. These stories would be for Salon – saving words, wounding balms – and the texts would not leave Graham Street. When K graduated and Connor moved on, they would leave the stories here anonymously, between the walls of 112 and under the stage in the field, to be razed, or found by some future lost soul in her time of need.

In the present, Connor and K were not frightened of their power. They did not know where these stories would lead them, or what their lives would be like thereafter, but they both knew, unspoken, that they had only this time together, this year from August to May, to channel one another, and then it would be over and it would not come back. They would drift and forget. But for this year they were Siamese twins, sharing inky veins, and they would be invincible.

Connor typed the stories on his own time and saved them into a folder; *super secret stories*, it said. And they were.

Connor and K parted on Monday morning and converged in class. Connor collected all the architecture stories. K had forgotten to write one.

Poise

There will never be balance, not for people like K, not for people like Connor, for people like Major and June. The best you can do is give yourself fully to one side and attempt to tip the scales. The best you can do is jump. Balance is giving up.

The Dark Continent

Wednesday, after 10

Charlemagne was leaving for Tanzania, to climb things. He had decided in the morning and booked a plane for Thursday afternoon. This would be his last Salon.

There were only fifteen kids in 112 Graham this week, which meant there was more legroom in the filthy Salon den. Attendance usually oscillated like this from week to week; the large crowds would make the fringe members uncomfortable so they would skip the next week, then feel guilty about skipping and return en masse the following Wednesday. Tonight, only the die hards drank and sang Charlemagne off. The big man in denim gave a quiet, evening-long performance, not penned into K's omniscient list, that consisted of getting very, very drunk and eyeing Junebug, who sulked by Connor and nuzzled her professor's shoulder.

The evening opened with a short poem by Moon Diana about silverfish and the eating of silverfish. Ralph played guitar and sang a jaunty neo-Nazi parody of "Hey Jude," titled "Hate Jews." Arden brought an orange boa constrictor, thick as a fire hose, and passed it around the room. With a heavy heart, K read the first of his and Connor's stories, a retelling of the book of Revelation. Outside the house, Orange County's water supply ran crimson with the blood of infants, and the bloody-handed Horsemen tied their skeletal steeds outside KFC, Pestilence and Death splitting a bucket of Original Sin

Recipe. Inside the house, the kids were impressed, and that made K and Connor smile. Flower read a slam poem about how much Republicans suck.

Finally on the list was Junebug Glen. She stomped her combat boots onto the card table in the den, hauling herself up to her new height, double-fisting Pabst Blue Ribbons. She surveyed the hipster masses.

“This is a toast to Charlemagne,” she said, her jet black bob swaying lazily as she wagged her head. “Charlie, Charlie, Charlie, Charlie. Charles the Great, the King with the Grizzly Bear Beard.” Charlemagne, in his corner, was expressionless and blazed.

“Charlemagne,” said June. “Killer of Moors. Died of pleurisy.”

This is what Junebug Glen is like: She owns two stuffed animals, Tate Modern the firefox and Frederica the pink octopus. When June is high, Tate Modern is an anthropomorphic firefox who tells her of things to come and swears to never die. Frederica’s likeness can be seen on the campus of UNC Chapel Hill and Franklin Street in the form of octopus graffiti. As Frederica is simple to draw, June draws her on everything, smiling that cephalopod smile as she swims the walls, speaking an enthusiastic “!” word balloon. Frederica is omnipresent in UNC, from seat backs in the dining hall to the men’s toilet in Davis Library to dorm rooms to locker rooms to storage rooms. A few anonymous admirers have even continued June’s work elsewhere, and there are pink, “!”-ing octopi in the rocketing subways beneath Chicago and New York, London and Tokyo. The wallpaper in the kitchen of Pepper’s Pizza on Franklin, where June used to work, is obscured entirely by a painting of a semi-truck in the process of transforming into an enormous, battle-ready Frederica. It is captioned “Octopus Prime.”

June posed nude on the internet once, under the alias of Tara Firma, and it was because of this that Charlemagne Watson actually saw June Glen naked before he met her in real life. It was an awkward first encounter at a bus stop, each eyeing the other nervously through the plastic.

“Are you...?”

“June.”

“Can I...?”

“No.”

Between her shoulders, June has a tattoo of an open bay window. Down her left arm is Azazel, the chief of the Se'irim goat demons, stretching the wings of an owl back around the bicep, the heads of Christ and the Archangel Gabriel impaled onto pikes, its beating, brambled heart pink with eight tentacles. Azazel is saying “!” Her left leg is a depiction of Calvin and Hobbes playing Calvinball, chasing one another infinitely, across deserts and under streams and through the valley beneath her knee, running forever under and over her foot and between her toes. She keeps the heavy sandalwood revolvers of the Old West permanently inked into her hips, cocked but unloaded. She has rose petals between her breasts. Her oldest tattoo, writ large in her mother's checking account, is the complete Rider Waite tarot deck, in glorious, medieval color, sleeving her right arm: the Hanged Man suspended from the Tower, circled by the horsemen Death and Sun; the Lovers, fingers fiercely twined, under the Howling Moon and Bathing Star, sealed by the Hermit, looming behind it all with lantern and cane; a border of Swords, Pentacles, Cups and Wands; the thrones of the Emperor and Empress, the Hierophant in red, the Magician, the Fool; tiny, almost imperceptible, in the eyes of the High Priestess, spin the

twin Wheels of Fortune and Judgment. The top of her foot says “Ceci n'est pas un pied.” Her inner lip says “!”

“For Charlemagne,” said Junebug, “who’s the only one of us who knows how fucking huge the universe is. Who could fucking string a fucking suspension bridge with that big beautiful fucking hair of his, but he’d never do it because it’s magical realism and he fucking hates magical realism.” The audience laughed, but June didn’t.

“You were never ours, Charlie. You were never meant for this tiny, incestuous kingdom.” She paused and gestured grandly to the room. “You belong to the world, Charlie! You belong to fucking Tanzania. The fucking universe.” June held up her beer can, red, white, and blue.

“This is my toast,” she said. “If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.” Beer cans clanged throughout the living room, despite the fact that most of the drinkers had no idea what she was talking about.

“I hope,” said Junebug, sliding down from the card table, “that you find no meaning in your travels at all. I hope that you come to no personal revelations, no discoveries, not a goddamn one. I hope that you worship no empty idols of religion or philosophy or patriotism or art or whatever. This is it, Chuck, this is everything.” She clasped Charlemagne’s hand and winked. It was a malicious wink. “There is no secret meaning, lover. There is nothing that anyone can teach you. You already know how to live. You’re alive. You’re fucking alive already, Charlie, I can see you breathing. So you know how to live. You eat when you’re hungry, you sleep when you’re sleepy, you kiss when you love.” She touched his knee. “You don’t when you don’t.” She took the PBR out of his hand and finished it.

"If you meet the Buddha in Tanzania, or wherever you'll go after that, if you meet someone who inspires you, someone whose experiences have something to teach you, just fucking kill him, Charlie. There's no meaning outside yourself. The heart of Zen is self-absorption. The heart of the self is health. The heart of health is knowledge, and the heart of knowledge is Zen." She bent over at the waist and stared into his eyes.

"It's a tiny fucking universe, Charlie. Almost nothing at all."

Connor drove Charlemagne and June home, both of them too inebriated to find their own way. They held hands silently in his back seat and stared straight ahead. Connor would never see Charlemagne again, and the big man didn't even shake his hand when he was dropped off, just clasped him like an indifferent fish, his keys on a lanyard in his mouth, and the Killer of Moors stumbled into the air conditioning of his apartment complex without looking back.

"We broke up this morning," said June. She moved to the front seat. "The only reason he stayed as long as he did was that we were dating. He was always going to leave."

"Are you going to be okay?"

"It went the only way it could," she said. "I'm not even sad anymore, I swear. One day of incomparable sadness. He was always somewhere else anyway, halfway to sifting through some backwards country. His body, and that *hair*, that was here. But he was somewhere else. Climbing something. Because he fucking understands the fucking universe." June closed her aching eyes. "Tiny fucking universe."

Connor did not believe her. The universe was big, incomparably sad every day for the most brilliant among them. June and K and the others in that house never looked happy or sad, just sincere. For his part, Connor could not remember the last time he had been sincere. Or incomparably sad, for that matter.

June told him more than he wanted to know that night, on Carrboro's winding streets, past the co-op plantations and into the suburbs. She had stopped taking antidepressants and was just letting Jordan hypnotize her. Some of her friends treated people like utensils. Others were brilliant and brilliantly awkward, rather than antisocial, self-absorbed, and ambiguously evil. Even in his short time at Salon, Connor could tell which were which. June's mother was having an affair with Stanley Major, and everyone knew except her father. Who on earth, Connor wondered, would let Jordan hypnotize them?

It feels like a sacrilege to write about them. We're not that close, and we never will be because I'll never see any of them again after these next months, but they are sacred in a way no others are, because the spectrum of design and frailty and swaggering blasphemy is represented among them, and most of all because this will never happen again, anywhere. I cannot allow myself to use them to refind my muse.

Connor typed, for no one in particular, like a telegram to some future incarnation of himself, like a fever among clear minds.

I will never write again before I take their dignity.

The Seasons Changed Fifty Times

August finished fiery, and September rode in on the back of a hurricane, Ivan the Inconvenient, which blew the siding off the back of 112 Graham. The house itself would stand for two more years before the city razed it, along with the stage and field and Ethiopian grill to make room for a parking deck, but that siding would never be replaced. From September 2004 on, the back half of 112 would be cold.

Leaves fell, all in one day in October. The infernal North Carolina summer which had melted the campus flowed a thin river of molten tuition money shallowly under the sidewalks and into the roots of trees. Leaves turned orange from the heat and they fell, in blankets, between classes on the last day of midterms, and the force of their falling created a breeze, an exhalation, to ease the sweat on the brows of students and to fray the nerves of the groundskeepers. For now, everyone survived. Fall is one of the few seasons in Chapel Hill where survival is almost assured.

Josephine was getting out of the house more now that the heat had tapered. She would leave Connor and Robbie's house from the back in the mornings and climb to the roof. From there, she took a running jump and flew, pushing the air clumsily. Her wings, sewn into her shirt, did not afford much control, so she glided wherever the wind wanted her to.

Josephine had been written in 1999 as the heroine of an epic time travel novel called *Blood Children*, as the ripped-up victim of a truly sinister vampire/shark combination, resurrected to spread the white trash Gospel across history. Instead she had set out to alter the past enough to really fuck over the guy who killed her, wading through zany adventures and subversive themes along the way. Connor had written a solid opening chapter to *Blood Children* but lost interest when he saw a Discovery Channel

special on seventeenth century rum running and decided to write an epic pirate novel instead.

Although her storyline had died ignominiously, Josephine as a character had proven more resilient, appearing unexpectedly in many of Connor's subsequent fiction and poetry as a deus ex machina, sacrificing herself in order to ruin everything she could for everyone else forever. She was a spiteful bitch, that Josephine, and Connor had never known quite how to get rid of her.

Pressure was coming, winds and leaves and hurricanes, and Josephine intended to be written again. She would not accept "pirates" as an answer.

The east wind carried her across the street where she crashed into a satellite dish, which made The Price is Right fritz right in the middle of the Showcase Showdown. K, two stories below in his pajamas, was disappointed, even more so that all the channels were out. He powered off the static and reopened the most recent letter, addressed to "Gaby Marquez," folded and unfolded a hundred times in the last day:

K-to-tha-K-to-tha-I-S-S

My twenty-eight year old virgin house sister took me out with some of her friends last night. Not too, too fun, but I did receive a little chop of intellectual meat to chew on, an interesting comment made to me by one of those Latin lover types. This guy Juan Carlos, my sister's best friend, told me that las gringas are so desired here because they have lion hearts. En serio, I know that las gringitas catch the eyes of Ecuadorian men because we are so easy, but I was thinking about what Juan Carlos was trying to coo into my ear and I realized that, for me, this observation really does apply. I think that one of the elements that electrifies my mercurial blood is passionate love. Love unlike the love that many others feel. This is certainly true for you as well, and is perhaps the most similar thing about us. We love with everything we have, by nature. I think that this realization is one I could never have had in the States, but in Spanish, everything that I have just told you is simple truth. La verdad sencilla.

Every time I re-read your poems, the words fuse with greater sparks spelling, "you are the one whose heart warms mine like a firepit burning so bright I can feel it across the oceans."

Drunk in so many ways,

Lola B

K affectionately pressed the letter inside the fat text Charlemagne had left him, the manifesto of Situationists International, a DIY guide to artistic anarchy, with which K would wield in his final collegiate autumn like a flamethrower and torch everything in range. Until she returned, K would burn joyfully the world. Josephine, satisfied with the prospect of this, untangled herself and moved on.

She grew dizzy from the fumes wafting up from the tattoo parlor on Rosemary, at the sheer amount of ink the proprietor was pouring onto Junebug Glen's back. It was an extension of an old tattoo. A green landscape was emerging slowly through the bay window between her shoulders. June had taken a photo of the original painting from a long ago Salon before Moon Diana burned it, the painting a dozen amateur artists had unfolded together: a spring meadow, smudgy trees, Chapel Hill as it existed in the minds of the most idealistic and deluded among them. The next time Junebug showered, it would rain and rain. Josephine popped a Dramamine and flapped those strung-together things.

She waved to the hippies in the co-ops west of Carrboro. Shay Pireale sweated through her thin t-shirt and dug into the soil, churning the hemp underground, and waved back at the flighty sociopath.

"Who are you waving at?" said her husband Max.

"An owl," she said.

"Oh. You know it's October though. And daylight."

Shay shrugged and swung her hoe. "Dig, lover," she said. They dug, and Josephine flew on.

Back in the suburbs, she looked through a second story window and spotted Major, standing naked in front of Glynis's full-length mirror, squeezing Colgate onto an orange toothbrush. He stopped admiring his chiseled physique long enough to notice the reflection of Glynis in the shower, the silhouette of her tiny, hollow frame behind the sheer curtain, bending to the water. She had almost no curves, but when she lifted her leg, like a flamingo, and soaped beneath it, Stanley Major realized that he was in love with her.

"Ah shit," he said.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." He brushed his teeth, with horror.

Josephine was finally blasted out of the sky at the edge of the suburbs by Laurence Novak and a sniper rifle. She exploded in a burst of blood and feathers and dropped to the ditch in the driveway's low shoulder.

"Did I just hear a noise?" asked the man on the phone. "A banging noise?"

"Twas nothin'" said Novak, blowing the smoke from the barrel. "But I will accept your generous offer to purchase this failing, failing contract, poor fellow."

"Yes," said Nick from the Random House office in New York, "I think Mr. Corrigan will feel right at home in the Anathema family. A smaller press will be good for him. Encouraging."

"Oh, he will be encouraged. And he will pay your advance back in full by spring, I'll see to it." Novak folded his hands behind his head with satisfaction. He would take that lazy man, Novak would, and like a laser he would focus him. He would make money.

He would retire. He would purchase corrective laser eye surgery so he could stop looking like a surprised Muppet.

Outside, Josephine bled into the leaves, the reds and oranges, and she wished she could ride the phone lines to tell Connor before he heard from anywhere else, to see the color drain from his goon face. She crawled out of the ditch triumphantly, raised herself and picked the rotten gumballs out of her sweatpants. She started the long walk back through Carrboro, carrying the wings under her arm, cracked in the crash but repairable. Being a fictional character, dying was not in the cards for her, and resurrection, Josephine knew from experience, was for those who didn't get it right the first time.