The angels interred him on the Isle of Whispers—

Phew, they said. Our work here is done!

For my father now sat alone, stranded, in that final dimension, beyond the fourth, where sound was time: you could walk on it.

And being so alone, my father, or the thing that would become him (or he, become it?) built statues in his likeness. He would then, in fits of rage and disgust, tear apart—by tooth and by hand—those stone mirrors and, in a frenzy, shunt their remains off the Windy Cliffs into the Ocean of Silence—

It was timeless: vast, unlimited. A body not of water, but air, liquified, mercurial, viscous. It pressed down on the horizon and shrunk the sky to a needle's width. Again: a storm gathered. And so went my father to the tower, which emitted not light, but a different kind of darkness. *I'm here!* he screamed at the gathering mass of silence.

I'M HERE!

The storm passed right through him. Blink. On the floor. Lighthouse deck. Soft waves below, lapping up on the sheer cliff's dagger-like escarpment of debris.

He had tried already to escape, to swim, to die, but he returned each time—*Thus.* So what now to do but wait, again, for a storm? To climb the lighthouse. To suck his tongue and pretend it was another's?

Once a year, the hosts of Heaven—or whatever Place Above (or, Below?)—that doles out the universe—God, we'll say, 'Order'—came down in a raucous procession of jolly and mirth. In

bright, long, be-streamered canoes, they rowed through the otherwise impassable silence, and banged their gongs on it, crashed their symbols, their songs, and were so merry, and drank, and lit off fireworks that spelled out grand words in the sky cursing my father—

> Thanks be to we,
> And shame be to you:
> The long war is over.
> Rejoice! Rejoice!

Funny—he had taken no stars down with him. No, each time, to Life, before the prison, he had taken only himself. He had emerged as we all do: crying, listless. And so he had grown. Opened his eyes to windswept plains. Opened his mouth to warm sourness, creamy, chalky, white. He had cried for his mother, wept alone in the night, and had fallen back asleep the instant she came in those frosty nights, and hugged herself to him, dispelling his infant visions—

Fear. He knew that now. And in the lives he had known, he had known only that as well. He had been girl, boy, prince, jester, office worker, scribe, and war chieftain's son. He had risen at dawn and milked the goats. He had returned, bucket empty, the goats dry, to his father's scorn, his uncle's condescension, his mother's slaps, his brother's taunts (What, they teased, did you do to the goats?). He was sensitive. Too sensitive. Each time, in rage, he would sleep. And would wake to find, again, the camp slaughtered, the villagers eaten, babies hung upside down on lush figs, arid junipers—those morbid fruits followed him through land and time: a loose head, he was; carried by wind.

He had confronted emphatic old prophets, and they, too, had tried to slay him. On the summit of whatever doomed mount, my father had dueled them, wrestled, fought, bit, tore, and my father, finally getting the upper-hand, had dealt the final blow to his opponent, and, in his

eyes—in those dark cavernous eye-sockets, in the pink flower of the brain—saw the projection of his fate: alone he would walk, again, into the desert, into the woods, onto the ocean, and he would keep walking, and wind and spit and sand and time would undo his flesh, his sinews, and the last couple cells of him would float their way into another womb, and hook themselves up to the cord, and he would sit in there, and don his little bowler cap, and smoke his little pipe, and cross his little legs, and say, What is Evil and what is Essence?—

He had been searching for The Design since the beginning of time. Everything he did was toward that end. Greatness, you see, and power are but a cocoon. He wanted none of it. He had even taken his own life when the cost of his wanting was too great, and yet there he would be again, trudging through the swale, along a desolate, rocky moor, forging his way uphill through mountains of thorny shrubs towards a light—the one light—of the one house in that austere land, into which he would go and sit and wait for the lonely couple, the next couple to, again, make their furious Love.

And Life would begin, again. And he would search, again, for The Design. And, again, he would be intercepted by the angels—Agents of Order, White Blood Cells of the Universe—who would, again, dispatch all officers in order to prevent my father from acquiring the Design—that catalyst, which allow him to realize his one true goal: universal apocalypse, The Great Fold. And yet, my father's desire was so great that it cleaved the whole planets, entire galaxies, and so the angels, tired, and God, frightened, began contracting independent researchers to make a prison—one that could contain an incorporeal, transcendent being.

In the beginning, began the winning grant proposal, *there was silence*. And that, it reasoned, is the place to which the Agent of Fury & Noise must, thence, return…

But how, asked God, do you *create* silence?

Like this, the Angel answered, and killed God. She cleaved open his chest, scraped out his guts, and placed some props—an island, water, a lighthouse—inside, and then brought God's severed cavity over to Earth and placed it beside the sea, tangential to the horizon (the Earth's flat, get over it!) and my father's spirit, alone, tired from yet another life, felt, upon glimpsing the lush island, such a relief that he diverted from his original cross-ocean course and so heaved and hoed himself, cackling and raving, up onto the island's shore, and, climbing up to the lighthouse, weary, expecting another couple, another womb, another chance for birth, and thus the realization of his one goal—instead found the structure empty, bare, stocked with dolls, and so sensing the ruse, my father ran out onto the balcony and witnessed the horizon's great closing: Heaven's eye blinked upon him, then shut.

The angel scientist then, after sealing God's chest, wheeled the carcass, and the Devil, AKA my father, inside it, into one room, inside another, inside another, inside the ocean, inside a vault, inside a whale, strapped on top on a turtle that, itself, was kept in an aquarium that was itself stored inside a van, which drove straight ahead, through night eternal—quite under the radar.

*

The angel scientist returned home, and, unable to settle her mind's bucking, she drank some angel liquor, and, with mind sufficiently disabled, finally felt calm enough to just sit and watch some TV. The Angel flipped through the channels and settled, at last, on the History channel. The program was about a book called *The Man Who Only Says Rain*. It was a memoir, written by me, Joan Desussa, penned in madness and ecstasy in a single night (actually that's a lie: I'd been

writing the book since graduating from college in 2018) as I tried to decide whether or not to kill my father—who, to the Angel's dismay, had been somehow freed from the inescapable prison in God's Chest and who, with the help of The Design, had achieved his final, true, evil, grand-infinite, mad, hmmm, *swooning*, unbreakable, eternal, bombastic, incorporeal Form. The apocalypse had happened, was happening, and the Angel, panicked, threw on his (Her? Their?) pants and went to the van, opened the aquarium, pulled the turtle out, unstrapped the whale, reached into its stomach, pulled out the vault, drained the whole ocean, and opened all the doors to all the rooms, and—

My father was gone.

On the wall of the lighthouse, facing the sea, was: *Hasta LaVista Baby!*, written in blood and shit.

The Angel—now, by default of his culpability, "God"—decided it would be best to incarnate himself as a human on Earth. He would take the place of my grandmother, Edna. He would steal her order in birth, and would, thus, thus inhibit The Design's creator—Edna—from ever being born.

To his family and his colleagues, he, God justified his one-way decision to become mortal by talking about Silence, and Agency, and the Fate of Heaven itself.

In reality, the Angel was bored. The memoir, though incoherent at times, and tedious, even egotistical, insensitive, crude, lude, and, according to one critic, reeking of amateur slop, and, in the views of another, sentimental and schizophrenic in its grandiosity—for all its morbid faults, the memoir had achieved its goal: the Angel wanted to *live*, not to breathe only the chaste,

bottled air of heaven. The Angel, Herr Professor Kuhn *ศาสตราจารย์* God, was quite tired of the certainty: he craved what we mortals fear: Death, and the passion it brings.

And so the Angel shucked off his Heavenly robes and leapt, naked, into The Void of Birth—O swirling hole of stars on the edge of Heaven: one way out, no way back. His wife and children and friends and colleagues and students and mistresses stood on the precipice and wept—

O my friends don't worry, he cried, I'll only be but a while gone!

*

The two young people make love, again, for the second time. It is gentler than before, more passionate. Aek is not as eager to prove himself, and Rewadi isn't hurt by his exertions. *Be careful*, she says, but it is already done. My great-grandparents finish and crouch, naked, before the window of Rewadi's tower. They rest their elbows on the window sill and blow the smoke of Aek's crude provincial cigarettes out the window, into the night, and they watch with love and sadness as the smoke wafts out and dissipates over the city.

Aek comes back the next night, and the next, and the next. In the day, Aek works, saves money. The monarchy falls. It is 1933. People are dejected and elated. Aek's university friends ride the zeitgeist. They play jazz and have sex with each other, and build, from scratch—no, from their feverish opiated dreams from their gap year in Paris, a democracy—or at least they try, but come up against both their parents and themselves. They get dejected. Aek is elated at first, then, too, becomes dejected when he, one night, like every that night that month, sneaks into the Baron's compound, cap-a-pe in guard's gear, with orchids, instead of a knife, tucked

inside his hilt. As he climbs Rewadi's tower, he is feeling good. It is that simple goodness that young men feel before they are tested by the world.

He knocks. No answer. He knocks again. Her door remains shut. A note slides out from under it. *Go away,* it reads. Her father's work? No. Aek's eyes lap up the note: it is written in her hand. He does not expect the obvious, and so he thinks their affair over. He leaves the tower and runs to the river. On the way, he fills his pockets with stones. By the time he reaches the abandoned dock, his guard's frock is so heavy that he can barely stand. He stands at the edge of the dock, but cannot make himself jump. *Fine*. He slides out of the coat, and lets it, and the rocks sink. That, he says, was my heart!

In the compound, Rewadi starts wearing loose clothes. Her father notices and asks. No, *inquires*. She lies, makes excuses. Then, one night, her father returns from a long, harrowing business trip up North and finds Rewadi's room empty. Instinct leads him to the medicent's shack. He finds his daughter there, holding three mugwort pills. Take 'em, he grunts.

She refuses.

He crosses his arms over his chest: Who's the father?, he asks.

A boy, says the medicant, trembling. Aek.

And what does he do?

He's poor. From the south, says the crone. He's dark, like charred honey. He's a poet and a doctor and a นักปฏิวัติ! A Revolutionary!

Well, said her father, we'll serve him his just deserts.

The next morning, Rewadi wakes to the news that every young, destitute poet-student-doctor-revolutionary from the southern provinces who lived in Bangkok is now dead.

Rewadi wept and ran to the river. She stood at the farthest edge of the compound's mossy bamboo pier and hurled curses, obscenities, and tears into the night. She took the mugwort pills out of her pocket (*No!* thought God. *No!*), held them in her palm for a second, then tossed them back—*Gulp!*

Right then, a head broke out from under the water's surface. A head with dark, wet hair silhouetted by the moon and by the light from the opposite bank, Thonburi, shining behind it. My great-grandmother tried to shriek, but the sound would not come. Instead, she made a kind of dry whooping sound before the ghost, seeing her, burst fully out of the water and stood up from the reeds. Finally, when the light from her lantern shone down on him, she cried and leapt off the pier and jumped into the marsh and hugged him, tore at him, and tried to bring him back from the dead—

Shhhhh! he said. What are you doing?

I'm saving you! Come back! You have a son!

What? he said. I *am* alive!

No, she said, You're not!

And with that, my great-grandfather tilted back his head and let out a laugh that threw discretion to the wind: I heard of the order, he said. The medicant warned me. So, I decided to hide in the one place The Baron would not look: in the river, right next to his own house.

So, stammered my great-grandmother, so then you know… about…

Oh my God.

She turned away from him and stuck her finger in her throat, and my great-grandfather watched his young bride-to-be projectile-ly vomit into her hands…

They won't, she whispered. They won't come back up.

He knew exactly what she meant, and then moved over to comfort her. He tried to put his hand on her shoulder, but its damp chill made her recoil.

It's okay, he said, hiding his dejection. That old hag, she just mixes stuff together. The baby's fine, he whispered. Sugar pills never hurt anyone!

My great-grandmother turned around and hugged him. It was one of those long, insane hugs meant only for the end of the world. My great-grandfather, by then a human prune, shivering, dysenteryic, and half-alive after spending two nights hiding in a river, underwater, breathing through a thin reed, reciprocated the hug for as long as humanly possible before the faint noise of stirring feet and the shouts of guards stirred them both from their swampy bliss—

We have to go, said Aek.

Where? asked my great-grandmother.

To Chonburi, he said. There's a boat. It leaves tonight, for America.

*

The boat ride was long. They slept in the lower berth, on flour sacks. Throughout the month-long ride, their mattress got lower and lower. It became uneven, then even, bric-a-brac it went, lower and lower to the ground. They're eating, sung Aek, our bed away!

The two practiced English. My great-grandmother was prodigious—

Rogue, she said. We've gone rogue. R-o-u-g-e.

Rouge? he asked, struggling.

(The Angel, meanwhile, watched its own transformation: its talons vanished, as well as its tentacles, and its aura, and its glowing, thousand-fingered, sea-aneomeish hands were boiled down to two brute tools: five and five. But even more abhorrent was the gradual fading out of the Angel's singular identity—which, refined through eternity, was infinitely more complex and intricate than that of humans. All the places the Angel had been, and all the people and spirits and worlds he had known—those were going… What had begun as an experiment, as a play at life, had now become the opposite: a death more depersonalizing than even the oblivion that humans face. The Angel wept and kicked his mother. He resolved to starve himself, to take the umbilical cord—that crude organ—and put it to a more fitting use, but—What, he thought, of the end, after I die? Will I simply resume my old life, as God? Will I be stuck here on Earth, shucked into another life? Will I go to heaven? Or will it be what it is: here, and then gone?)

The boat pushed ahead. My great-grandparents climbed up ‘the crow’s nest’—really, a smokestack—and watched, through the smoke, a grand dawn emerge. The boat sailed forward, it seemed, at the exact speed at which the sun rose, and so the ship’s passengers and crew lived in dawn for the rest of the trip. Nobody slept. An eternal concert unfolded on the deck. The musicians were in constant rotation. In the Antilles, they sang *An Iceberg’s Lament.* People pic-nicked in the lifeboats, suspended off the bows, hundreds of feet above the water.

What no one, of course, on the boat knew was that that eternal day, which had so set them all into merriment—which had, for one, sweet, brief moment, caused the passengers, drunk with co-feeling and love and madness, to forget or even ทิ้ง their echelons and their classes and their races and their language so that they all had, for a second, risen even above themselves and (my great-grandparents had a threesome with a famous French novelist) live, for just a moment, in *joy*. However, that never-ending day was, in reality, Heaven or *สวรรค์*’s or Whatever—Universal HQ’s last-ditch effort to locate and recapture the prodigal prince before he, she, was lost forever to humanity.

But after six days, night fell. Dusk. *What?* The Gods had given up their search. And so The Eternal Revelers (the band’s name, and since everyone on the ship was in the band, it became the ship’s name)—all those consummate merry-makers sat through their first night in a week twiddling their thumbs, packing and repacking their bags, exchanging hushed whispers that, though in different tongues, were mutually intelligible: the lights of New York were approaching—what was their fate?

Dawn found them all standing on the deck watching a metallic, godless sun rise up from behind the smoke of The Big Apple’s factories, piers, towers. The water in the harbor glistened

with oil. Dead fish floated, and the boat parted them, and the fish surfed the wake. Don't worry, said Aek, patting my great-grandmother's back. How do you think Bangkok looks to falang when they come into it?

She nodded, but could not shake the strangeness of that tall, brass statue of the tall, brass woman who held, in those days, not a torch, but a skull, *chapless*, up to her face and stared, lost in its eyes.

The great skull whinnied and burned and flicked its tongue, and licked the flames that wicked out of its sockets. The skull disintegrated—in real time, in her bare, upheld hand—into dust. Into people and dock hands and cholera inspections. Into muddy planks slapped down between the ship and the harbor, which one must traverse with their bags held up above their hand. My great-grandparents watched those who had brought many things with them from…wherever they had come, leave them at the ship side of that plank and, naked, cross it with only their money, their documents, and whatever saleable things they could fit into their pockets.

The young couple crossed the plank and followed signs down to Customs, where a large, rumbustious, powder-wigged officer took their documents. He smiled and slapped my great-grandfather on the back—

Welcome, he said, in the Queen's English, to the United States!

The young couple couldn't, yet, identify irony. They stepped out of the crammed and stuffy customs office onto the streets of New York City. They set out for the train station. They clasped each other's hands and walked forward. Intuition, and sheer awe, told my

great-grandmother to say nothing, yet, about the unspeakable, almost wondrous grotesqueness of industrial poverty—the children, barefoot, some missing toes, or whole feet, jumping through little white squares drawn right in the middle of the road, who then, noticing the two lost *yellar 'uns*, looked up from their games with an adult-like weariness and caginess, but, still being children, really used their adult emotional masks to hide their still untouched sense of wonder and fascination, and, perhaps, hoping to tame that wonder, to control it, to keep it contained within the ten white squares drawn in chalk on the cobbles, said nothing else to the young, bewildered couple except, pointing with their chins: *Station's straight ahead*.

So, thought my great-grandfather, this…is *it*? But it's nothing like the movies! Where were the brass bands, the galas, the Model-T Fords? Where were the humorous, charitable, syphilitic gangsters? Where were the blues singers? Where was Marilyn Monroe (of course, she didn't, then, exist)? He walked beside my great-grandmother and held her hand, yes, and even nodded and smiled when she stopped to talk with literally every person they passed—some of whom smiled (they didn't understand a word she said), and others who, not understanding, ignored her and kept on with their brisk paces. He felt, though present, apart from himself. He thought of his friends, of their revolution. Of their gritty Bangkok jazz bars, of their debaucherous clubs. No—that was gone. It was all gone. The past—he took a big mental eraser and ลบ'ed it off the map. And in the past's place, an idea sprouted that, later, would become his one, single obsession: to show—to himself, to his contemporaries, to his revolutionary bothers-in-arms—that America was as *primitive* as any third-world country, it just had more money. And then, walking to the train with the love of his life and their child-in-progress, the supreme resonance of each step on the crumbling pavement was momentous. Yes, even the idea of an obscure death carried glory and weight, and his iron-clad resolution carried him and his

family through their confused interaction at the ticket counter (*Where?* asked the lady. *Where do you want to go? Minneapolis!,* said my great-grandfather, picking the first place that came to mind). And that same resolution carried them through the train's long slog out of Grand Central, out of the city, up through Syracuse, and then to other stops: isolated, Adirondakian villages, where the White Indians (no, *settlers*) boarded the train in their long, milk-maid dresses, and the Amish men in their black suits and top-hats, carried washboards and oil lamps. My great-grandmother leaned over to my great-grandfather and made a joke about them, and my great-grandfather pretended to laugh, but really, in his heart's core, he felt a respect for the Amish that bordered even on love: they confirmed his newfound conviction. They were proof! My great-granny Rewadi fell into a fitful sleep (the baby was kicking), and the train rattled on ahead, pushing into and penetrating the dusk—split right through, into the chilly night's wind…its (Oh God) *careless whispers* of barren Great Plain Wind that pushed its way in through the window's tiny cracks. This foreign air heightened my great-grandpa's senses. The wind's total absence of smell created a mental image of: empty, barren, snow-suited rows of tilted earth, with lonely, funny little homes, sitting alone. Across the vast opennessess, the strips of skint maples delineating property lines, he intuited the Midwest long before it came (they sat in the 'Colored' section of the train not because they, then, thought of themselves of "colored"—no, to them everyone else was *colored*: farangs—but because, upon boarding, they had assumed a train car with a *colored* interior would be more visually stimulating than one that was totally "White.") The train rolled on. My great-grandmother's sleep become stormy and disturbed. She woke: fever. Wet face. Eyes' pallor of pain. Clammy hands. The shakes. "Oh my God," she said. Great-grandpa Aek's feet were suddenly damp. He looked down, looked back up, then looked back down again— "It's okay," he said, trying to steady his unsteadiable voice. "We're almost

there.” In reality, the train had only just departed from Chicago’s Union Station and was, as they spoke, trawling past Rockford. Six more hours, darling, seven…. “Oh!,” cried my great-grandmother ‘โถเอ๋ย!’ She lied down on the seat on her side, faced the seat back, and rolled herself into a ball. The other passengers stood and gathered around my great-grandparents. They offered water and snacks. One man told the conductor to stop the train, but the conductor was drunk, or mad, and so threw up his hands, and cried out, apologized, and threw himself off the train, into the night, but the people in my grandparents’ car paid little attention to the unhinged conductor and instead milled about my great-grandmother who, writhing, called out for that, for this. A couple of women on the train were midwives, and so helped my great-grandmother while my Great Grandpa “Egg,” as the Americans called him, sat or stood and looked on, mad-like, observing what he knew to be a still-birth: their baby was only four months old. As Granny Rewadi’s screams intensified, he, a young man, only 20 years old, a father, now prepared himself for grave-digger duties, and so he searched the upper berths for an unused blanket—a white one—with which he could swaddle their poor miscarried child. It would, he knew, be so small that even a travel-sized towel would do. This he procured, and so sat on the floor, with it on his lap, and watched as the four or five women (the other passengers had since grown bored and annoyed) escorted my great-granny through the trials of that doomed labor. A fellow passenger saw my great-grandfather’s suffering and offered him a flask of moonshine. *But*, replied Mr. Egg, weeping, *it’s already so bright!* The moon, indeed, did beam down on those fallow, icy fields. The moon—*its* drunkenness, not *his!*—shone into the train car, and, shining, cast all the passengers in the pale glow of a universe that was totally ambivalent to my great-grandparents’ child’s death. Or so it seemed. However, those stars were watching. They had turned all their faces to Earth and had all together congealed into one gigantic searchlight, which had abandoned

all other planets to illuminate only the American Midwest in order to locate that lost, rogue ("r-o-g-u-e") Angel. 'It's coming!' shouted the midwives, "He wants to come out!" They were wrong—the Angel, AKA God, was, instead, digging his fingers into the walls of the womb, hoping to forestall his birth. His new life flashed forward to him, and back, and with that final presentience, with that last shred of Heavenly power, he saw, knew, that he would waste his one life on Earth. He would waste it on egotism and pettiness and obsession and distraction. He wept, there in the womb, and tried to lace the umbilical cord around his neck. But Rewadi Wongmek's body took control over God's whims: he was mortal, and so let the contracting muscles and the light erase all of whom he had been.

PART ONE: EDNA WONGMEK

1.

There is no shortage of genius…

said her father as he was leaving, again. Why was he leaving again? *But I remember my own birth*, she wanted to say. *I recall the shapes of things in the blackness of the ether; I'm FOUR and I know the word ether; I know too the ways of the stars at night; I know too the depressing yyyyawl of the gutter when the rain falls down into it and when all the good, sweet tears of sky are sucked down into where goes all?* But my grandmother—Edna, age: 4—just stood there and nodded as her father gathered up his stethoscope, again, and his briefcase, again, with all the "toys" in it—ophthalmological equipment—(*I won't leave this room until you come back*, she told him. *Well,* he said, smiling with one half of his face and crying with the other, *You might have to wait a while, my sweet)*, and then he turned up to her mother and said something she didn't understand, and my grandmother knew he knew that she wouldn't understand what he said, and that was *why* he had said it, in Thai, and then my grandmother Edna looked up at her mother, with the pre-dawn pink-punkly-purple light streaming in through the slated blinds and striking her face in lines—the picture of knowing-all was imprinted there, on her mother's face. She seemed so stoic then, so immune to her husband leaving for a job he didn't have to take. *Why are you taking the job?*, asked my grandmother, right then, sensing something in the sound of their words, the shape of them: *เวทมนต์*, spell—*Why'd she know that?*—and wasn't it weird that they weren't taking him to the train. Why was he leaving their house like a beggar or a thief? Whose fault was it, or was it fault, even, that was making him go? Or was it her older brother, that stranger, that ghost, who'd died on the train, years before? My grandmother looked around

their living room, and it seemed, to her, vast, and insipid. She told her father: *But I was the only baby the veteran gynecologist had met that didn't cry; I was the only one that remembered its own birth; I was the only one that could speak full sentences by two months old; I wrote a song on the piano for you at one year old—and, sure, it was a pretty corny song and, now, frankly embarrassing, but I did that, at one, at three hundred and sixty-five days out of the womb. Three hundred sixty-five days!* But then: the train came, right to their front door. The train of dreams. Train of traveling health care professionals, with all their arms hanging out the windows. My grandmother saw the train. It stopped there, and waited. *All aboard!* shouted the conductor. But he did not mean all. He only meant—one.

*

The front door shut. The train rumbled away. Edna and Rewadi stood there in the foyer, silent, for a moment, frozen, until my great-grandmother Rewadi looked down at my grandmother, smiled, dried her eyes, and asked, Shall we go to town?

The two of them walked down the street. They got ice cream and sat on a bench in the park. The air that evening was hot and muggy. Their ice creams melted, and ran down their hands, and dripped—*plock, plock*—onto the ground.

My grandmother stared at her feet, drew in her breath, and—Mom, she asked, did you…have *an affair*?

The words felt funny, ice-cube-like. Just saying them made her face burn.

Her mother sighed. You're too smart, she said, for a dishonest answer.

What about the honest one?

You won't like it.

Don't you feel bad?, asked my grandmother.

I don't know, she said.

My grandmother excused herself, and walked to the fountain. The water in it was cool and clear, and it smelled like wet earth. The coins on the bottom, thousands, caught the sun's light and glittered. Their shine singed my grandmother's corneas and pulled tight on her optical nerves, which, in turn, wrung her occipital lobe, wet-towel-like. *The volume a brain makes…*

She would have stared for eternity had the wind not called her name. *Enda…* She glanced up, through the glare, a thin old widow sitting alone on a bench in the park, wearing a black dress with a white muslin veil.

Time unspooled and respooled, and my grandmother saw her mother both as she was now and as she would be—a scarecrow. Full of leaves. But then wind came and blew the leaves out of her clothes, and then she was no one.

Her mother's ice cream must have fallen. The single vanilla scoop lay on the ground. Pigeons picked at it. They stood on the scarecrow. They shat on it. They plucked it with their beaks and tried to bring it back to life.

But Rewadi saw not the pigeons, nor the fountain, nor her daughter, nor any other features of the park of that perfect night in her perfect town on our luscious planet Earth. She, too, had forgotten herself, even, and so stared up at the a person—*The Poet*, whose disembodied soul floated there, before her, high above the trees.

*

My grandmother heard about The Poet's funeral the next day, at school. She left early, ran home, and found my great-grandmother sitting alone at the kitchen table, watching a clock.

He's dead! said my grandmother triumphantly.

My great-grandmother took another swing of the Deep Red Blood of Christ and said, It's an act.

You mean he faked his death?

No, said my great-grandmother. I mean he never really died.

I'm going to the funeral, said my grandmother, hoping for opposition.

Great, said my great-grandmother. Let me know how it is.

*

The funeral room was small and square. The air was hot. The people sat in pews and looked on ahead to the empty coffin. Not even the priest seemed to believe in God. He gave a sermon about everlasting life, and after he was finished, my grandmother raised her hand and asked, What was his name?

Harold, someone said.

A boy wept in the corner. Four women were crying. They rocked back and forth, and smoked cigarettes indoors. A father was crying named Chuck. Harold's four scrawny friends stood and walked to the front of the room, and each of them grabbed one end of the coffin and lifted—it was light, and so Harold's friends swaggered on ahead to the cemetery.

Harold's grave was all the way at the cemetery's farthest end. It was more a field than a grave. Harold's little headstone sat on a plot of weeds. The hole was already dug, and the four men laid Harold's box down into it.

The priest gave a quick blessing, then left. Then the people left, then the gravedigger took up his spade. He sung under his breath—*Funny as it may seem…some people…stompin' on a dream*…. He shoveled the dirt back into the hole.

Hey, said my grandmother, standing across from him, What song is that?

That's life, he said.

And what, she asked, pointing down at the empty coffin, is this?

The gravedigger shrugged. Personally, he said, I think he's just run off somewhere.

We all, continued the gravedigger, stopping his work to light a cigarette. We all saw him before he left, and he was a sad sight. He'd been a good boy. But then, what?, sophomore year, he moved away from home and lived in that café down the street, and just spent his time reading and carving god-knows-what words into his hands, and talking to himself, too. Staying up, not sleeping, no school, readying himself, we thought, for something. A duel, perhaps. But at least, then, he was something. But after that night of the storm, the tornado…after that, he just started being nothing.

Now, said the gravedigger, his mother and father are religious, and they think that his soul fizzled out and took him with it. Or maybe he was abducted, or got killed somehow while running around, sad and drunk, beside the road. Six months, after all, is a long time for someone not to come back home.

But I don’t, said the gravedigger, think he ever had a home.

How old was he?

Eighteen, said the gravedigger. Imagine that. Your whole life happens before you even grow chest hair. Pain does something to the mind, alright. Sharpens it—He was in love. I know that much.

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2.

Then the letters came, Harold's. They started down in a torrent—the storm of envelopes flooded my great-grandmother's doorstep. And she would run out and try to swipe them all up before anyone else saw. She even called the mailman and told him to stop delivering the damn letters they weren't for her! But the mailman refused, and so dropped off, each week, another envelope, and another, and another.

At first, my great-grandmother Rewadi destroyed the letters—burnt them, unopened, in huge backyard pyres. But she must have eventually grown tired of the acrid smoke and sticky ash. Or she must have torched so many letters that the base of the cast-iron patio fire pit just caved and broke. Or perhaps it was the beauty of the script, of Harold's calligraphic Thai, that made her pause, hold the envelope, and shift it back and forth in her hands, feeling its weight and wondering, *Well, what is he writing about?*

You'd think my great-grandmother would try to hide the letters from my grandmother. But she, Rewadi, would just sit at the table and read through them, right there, out in the open. Luckily, my grandmother couldn't read Thai, and after the letters, she didn't want to read Thai, and she had to fight her brain's precocious, reflexive pattern-solving ability, to stop it from, for example, sounding out ก as *gaw* and อ as *aww*, and น as *naw*, and she had to ignore the vowels and tone markers on the tops and bottoms of the letters, too. So, *ก่อน* could not be (low-tone) 'Gon', as in, เมื่อก่อน, as in 'Before'—

No! No! So, instead of the letters, my grandmother watched her mother and tracked her progression from a hateful letter burner to an all-out letter lover. Gone was her social life. Gone too were her meetings at the temple or church. Gone was book club, and poker night, and

painting club, and all other processes of healthy social life. My great-grandmother folded into herself and hunched over their kitchen table, her head hidden between the columns, the stacks, the extremely-not-comprehendable mass, The One True Pile, growing and growing, beside her, just growing, as she read.

So he's not dead, right? asked Edna.

My great-grandmother shook her head.

Where is he?

Thailand.

You're going to tell his parents, right?

My great-grandmother waved my grandmother off. They already moved away, she said.

You could call them.

My great-grandmother looked up from the letters to my grandmother and gave her a little indulgent, patronizing smile before taking a deep breath and getting back to the reading. My grandmother sat there, watched, and prayed: *Oh Sweet and Merciful God, just let my mother die!* Maybe then her father would come back home. Yes, he would abandon his dream of civilizing America, and he would set down his stethoscopes from poor farmer's chests, and he would come back home, and he would take her back to his lab at the university, and he would, again, explain each of the pieces of equipment there, with all their knobs and sprockets and gauges, and he would teach her all their names. And she would be free, again, from his house, with its TV set and its neighbors and their gossip and her once-princess mother who had, somehow, become a depressed, bored (*Say it!*) pedophilic housewife.

But the letters kept coming. More and more. Stacks and stacks. Rewadi gathered them all up and hoisted them up the stairs to her bedroom, where she crammed them, in chronological order, into the different drawers of an imposing wall-length row of metal filing cabinets. She also, then, moved all of Aek's clothes, books, and shoes into the study down at the other end of the hall. My great-grandmother then bought a big iron padlock styled like a lion's face. *It's not*, she explained to my grandmother, *that I don't trust you*. But—*Basic precautions taken, lest Aek*—Dad!—*find out*…

And yet, that padlock failed to keep the letters inside the room. At night, they whispered and invaded Edna's dreams. Their mad, pulsing light gave way to a series of drawers opening and closing, a matrix of letters being taken out and set down, groped by pale hands that spoke, and on the pale hands was script—ก ข ค: The voice of a civil servant floating in the bare chamber of Death, teaching her the alphabet.

Mom! she cried. *Mom!* But the woman once known as Mom was nowhere. Except in the letters. Rewadi didn't move, and so she got ulcers on her legs. She didn't eat, and so she became thin. And she draped herself in bedsheets and bathed in weird herbs to hide the scent of her rot.

She whispered things as she read (*How'd I get so unhappy so fast?*) and from these whisperings, my grandmother put—despite her best effort, despite every effort of every cell in her brain, despite her brain, she put and couldn't help but put—the basic story back together:

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