

cherry tree

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RICK BAROT

The Names

Now it's time for the lilacs, blazon of spring, the prince
of plants whose names I know only when they bloom.

The blooms called forth by a bare measure of warmth,
days that are more chill than warm, though the roots must

know, and the leaves, and the spindly trunks ganged up
by the trash bins behind our houses. The blue pointillism

in morning fog. The blue that is lavender. The blue that is
purple. The smell that is the air's sugar, the sweet

weight when you put your face near, the way you would
put it near the side of someone's head. Here the ear.

Here the nape. Here the part of flesh that has no name
at all, the part that is shining because it has slipped naming.

In the crumbling photo album, the dead toddler on a bier,
dead for decades, whose name I now carry. On another

page, the old man, also decades gone, whose same name
I now carry. The name a fossil, the calcium radiance



that I bear and will eventually give up. Again it's time
for the lilacs. The quiet beautiful things at the sides of the
rec center parking lot. The purple surge by the freeway.
The sprigs I cut from the shrub leaning towards me
from the neighbor's yard, taking them at night because
I shouldn't be taking them. The blooms that are a genius
on the kitchen table, awful because I want to eat them
with my terrible eyes, with my terrible hands. The awful
lilacs, the brief lilacs, the sweet. Here is the recklessness
I have wanted. Here is the composure I have earned.



SARA BIGGS CHANEY

AD 120. MEMORANDUM: To Eustratius of Alexandria, regarding Enhanced Interrogation Technique Subcategory B, “The Inducement of Shame and Elimination of Bodily Sovereignty Via Forced Prostitution and Other Mechanisms.”

Re: The detainee “Theodora,” having formerly been held in a secret location or locations, now awaiting transfer to the house of vile sisters, or holding center 4789.

The prison guards wish to document the internment of one Theodora and formally request of Eustratius that she be transferred to a more suitable holding center for the necessary administration of EIT (Subcategory B).

Let it be known that we have attempted all of the following:

—Dietary Manipulation—defined here as the gorging of the subject’s mouth with excesses of milk and honey. Defined also as the ingesting of mass amounts of befouled water. Defined



also as the restriction of any food stuffs that the subject might normally consume.

—Extreme Deprivation of Required Rest—defined here as appending of the detainee’s limbs in order to secure her in a standing position. Defined also as the laying on of hands to prevent the closing of her eyes. Defined further as the production of loud and terror-inducing noises.

Given the failure to produce adequate intelligence through these means, we request permission to begin:

—The Inducement of Shame Through The Elimination Of Bodily Sovereignty—defined here as the stripping naked of the detainee, defined here also as engagement in acts classified as sexual but not undertaken for the means of pleasure, but rather the extension of total control.



VIEVEE FRANCIS

Given to These Proclivities, By God

...bound by sin's galling fetters

—Hymn

And like every sinner, I prayed,
“Take this sin from me” but
the sin was mine, and how to take it
and not call it stealing? And why
place my sin upon another? So
I ate my sin. Like any good sinner
I have an appetite. I could eat as much
as I drink. And you know how much
I like a neat Mark. I don’t think twice.

I swallow it down.

Two fingers, no water.

Once, then once more. So it burns?

What won’t?

Like any dirty girl, I went down
to the river to wash it all away.

To be made clean. But

the river threw me up,

water wouldn’t have me,

back onto the trail left to my trials.



And sin reigned down upon me
like those hot rays of sun that penetrate
the leaf. Like the feathers of a blackbird
come down like rage. “O God,” I cried,
 “Lay me down in a cool bed
 of rhododendrons”
and “Let them cover my naked ambition”
but like all sinners I don’t get what I want, so
I want it all the more, the petal’s sweet droop
like lips, their generous spill over the verge,
the shade below where I might be safe
from the light that did not love me enough,
 not really.
All sinners know that. We stumble
enough to know: not everyone rises again.



Hatchet

an excerpt from *For More on That Story*

March 6, 5:18 p.m.

A Clearlake woman reports a man in a wheelchair is chasing a dog with an ax.

Please disregard the misplaced modifier, as well as the line break that exaggerates it.

The dispatcher promised the Clearlake woman that someone would be along soon, though that was not the case, as the dispatcher knew perfectly well. And all to the good—for starters, it wasn't an ax, just a hatchet. The man had been doing his best to make kindling, is now chasing the dog not to kill or hurt it, just to catch it and bring it home; he forgot to drop the hatchet before starting off, and isn't about to lose it now.

He calls the dog's name—a human name, let's say Arthur, or Donald.

—Arthur! he calls.

The dog keeps its pace along Oak Avenue, a slow amble, the exact speed at which the man can wheel up this road in this particular chair, a newish version of the model he's been in since Vietnam. He was high and fell off a bulldozer, is what he has told most people. It was a VC grenade in a US ration can, is what he has told a few. These days he doesn't tell either story,



doesn't talk to anyone about anything if he can help it.

Both stories are true in the sense that they took place. The bulldozer thing has nothing to do with the wheelchair—he should never have been up on it in the first place, was just fucking around with friends, landed weird on hard-packed soil, messed up his shoulder. The grenade in the ration can is what took his legs. What he's told almost no one—at least not once he processed how little anyone here wanted to hear about it—was that the ration can in question was way down deep in a hole.

The dog's five or six years old, friendly but incorrigible. Brown and black and white, some shepherd and something smaller mixed in. According to the man's mood, it's either a mutt or a fucking mutt.

You can guess which it is just now.

He calls the dog's name again. It looks back but doesn't break stride as it turns off Oak onto Davis, which at least is paved. At the corner, just visible off the man's left shoulder—the one messed up when he fell off the bulldozer—is a wedge of lake below Mt. Konocti. It's a pretty view, but he doesn't turn his head.

The sun won't be down for another hour. A car or truck every now and then, and they honk and he gives them the finger. Two blocks, three. Fucking mutt. But then the man crests, rolls hard downhill, makes up a little ground.

His mouth is dry, and there's a smell, hot metal, maybe the recycling place? A left onto Emile. Nice and level, and the wheels shush his brain each time they hit gravel. The houses turn to scattered prefabs. He loves this time of year, the way all the grass is green and you can pretend it will stay that way for a



while. Past Praises of Zion, and some dunderhead waves from the parking lot. A slow bend, uphill again, and now he has to stop to catch his breath.

The man shakes out his arms, adjusts his ass an inch backwards, wipes sweat from his face with a hankie. The dog has stopped too, probably just to fuck with him—it's lying down in the shade of someone's tool shed. The man inches forward, silent. The dog yawns. Stands. Ambles.

At least I've still got my thighs, is what the man sometimes used to say, and no one quite knew what that meant, but they nodded, shook their heads, said they were sorry and thanked him for his service. Most of them, anyway. He enjoyed their discomfiture. Others mumbled about small blessings, and they're the ones he hated the most, hated almost enough to make them hear the whole story.

Way. Down. Deep.

That's how it would start, if he ever told it again. Twenty-odd miles northwest of Saigon, if he felt like giving context. The Iron Triangle, and the Ho Bo Woods across the river, and south to Cù Chi, the whole thing hollow underneath, though nobody knew it at first—you came across tunnels every now and then, but no one ever went down, just rigged up some C-4 or dropped in a grenade, watched it go boom, maybe called in a bulldozer to seal the entrance. Then a couple of Australians got themselves shot during Operation Crimp, and their colleagues traced the shots back to this weird anthill-type thing with open slits at the bottom. A few of them went down the tunnel beneath it, and found munitions and radio equipment and medical supplies, and Westmoreland finally figured it out.



Which led to the clusterfuck known as Cedar Falls. 32,000 troops—the biggest ground movement in the whole war—evacuating and bombing and shelling and defoliating and napalming and bulldozing the absolute living fuck out of sixty square miles of jungle so that skinny little fuckers like him and Jennings and Lassen and Rodriguez and Holdermeier could crawl way down deep in a hole. It was the goddamn damndest thing.

If the hole was already open when you found it, that meant the tunnel beneath had been abandoned. The ones still in use were camouflaged with sticks and leaves and whatever, impossible to see at first, the covers themselves lined with sponge rubber and wax, felt just like natural ground if you stepped on it, but the inside edges were beveled and latched—you could drive a jeep right over one and it wouldn't cave in. In the end the napalm did its work, and everybody dragged tree trunks behind their vehicles to smooth out the ashes and dust, and in the morning you found footprints leading from the holes.

The entrance was always snug, and there was usually a shaft dropping straight down that got even narrower—maybe eighteen inches square, way too small for most GIs, but certain skinny little fuckers could just barely slide through. They all volunteered for the honor. And why in the fucking fuck had they done that? Because they were eighteen or nineteen or twenty and too dumb to know they weren't immortal, for starters. Because they weren't afraid of dark tight spaces, at least not when they started. Because it was something they could do that no one else could, and there was pride in that. Because who knew what it might be like down there, and who knew what



kind of treasures you might find?

At the bottom of the shaft there's an elbow, and now the tunnel parallels the ground—a few of them are big enough to stand up in, but mostly you're crawling, hands and knees if you're lucky, down on your belly if not. The soil's mostly dry clay, hard as cement but porous. Most of the time you've got your pistol in one hand, usually a standard issue .45 which, if you happen to actually use it down there, will give you a nosebleed at best and blow out your fucking eardrums at worst, leave you stunned and stupid, so later in the game you trade for a .38 or even a .22. In your other hand you've got your flashlight, which shows most of what's right in front of you but only in bits and pieces, and none of what's behind you and oh holy shit don't you dare think of what's behind you, what's maybe crawling out of one of the tunnel branches you haven't had time to check because there are never more than two of you down there at a time and sometimes the tunnels branch three or four ways oh no don't you dare think of that. And you're crawling forward, and maybe someone's waiting for you around the first bend, or the second one, or any of the million fucking other bends because these tunnels don't know about straight lines—they zig and zag every ten or twenty feet. And there are false walls with VC hiding behind them, looking out through peepholes, waiting; and there are false floors with shallow pits underneath that hold metal spikes or bamboo stakes smeared with human shit; and there are Claymores and grenades rigged to trip wires; and there are pit vipers with their tails staked to the ceilings; and there are fire ant nests planted in piles of leaves; and of course there are just your regular old spiders and centipedes and bats and rats that happen



to live there; and sometimes the tunnel's just kind of sloping downhill and then you come to where it bottoms out, and here the tunnel is flooded. Completely fucking full of water. And you have no idea what's going on, and figure everyone beneath it is good and fucking drowned. And you make your way back up. Good day's work. Except it wasn't, because, as you finally learn, that doesn't mean the tunnel is flooded, it means the VC figured out a way to stop the gas your unit keeps pumping into the tunnels from getting anywhere near the parts they actually live and work in. These water traps are just little elbows of tunnel, a dip and a rise, and you only have to be underwater for a couple of seconds if you crawl fast but here's the fucking thing: *you don't know this for sure*. How could you? Even when you're there? You're way the fuck down in a hole and you're under fucking water and what if this elbow is longer than you thought and what if something snags on your clothes and holy fuck what an unbelievable thing. But you do it. The air's nice and cool and still you're sweating like crazy and your chest aches from how hard your heart is beating and your legs and arms get so heavy you can barely move them and you're so afraid but you do it, you crawl into the water and can't see anything and keep crawling and come up the other side and holy shit. And you'll get to do it again on the way back. If you're lucky. If nothing else happens in the meantime. And usually the VC knew you were coming way in advance so you crawl and crawl and maybe you hit an empty barracks or an empty classroom or an empty kitchen but there's nothing worth dragging up top and finally you crawl back out and pour some water on your head and tell everyone it would be great if they'd just give you a fucking minute. But



sometimes the VC mess up, leave stuff behind. And you haul it all up piece by piece, and if it's weapons or intelligence you hand it to whoever is in charge of doing whatever needs to be done, and if it's anything else, clothes or flags or posters, you get to keep it, get to trade it for cigarettes or booze or whatever else catches your eye.

Then there are other times. How is it that he doesn't hear you coming? But he doesn't, and now it's you and him, and you've got a flashlight and he's got a candle and you've both got pistols and holy shit. That happens to you twice. Plus a time when you're down on the third level, find a trapdoor in the roof, stick your head up through and there's half a dozen VC in their bunks, resting or healing or whatever the fuck they're doing, and you start yelling and shooting and so do they and holy shit who even knows, it's all flashes and shouts and then you're wriggling down and out and how in the world do they not follow you?

Plus that one other time. Creepiest fucking thing: a child. Not even a child, a toddler, maybe three years old. Just sitting there in some alcove. Alive. Watching you. And you almost shoot the kid. But then you don't. You just crawl past. Think about that: a fucking three-year-old sitting alone and silent in the pitch dark of a tunnel forty feet underground and a fucking GI with a flashlight crawls past and all the kid does is watch.

Plus also of course the final time, and you're moving too fast or not checking well enough or maybe the camouflage is just too good, and you crawl right over the trip wire, almost miss it entirely but then your boot catches it and the grenade in the ration can goes off, and for several seconds you're really



in between such shadows

When I sit on a couch, I bury my feet or hands or both into the tight crevices. Next to you, I intertwine my arms and legs, intertwining fingers—limbs overlap and linking, weave my body, with yours.

These are physical connections, not as in *there is electricity*, but as in *I am trying to mark a bodily attachment*—

*

Two points in space suggest a line. If Line AB connects you to me, then Line CD separates us, intersecting AB at a point of no return.

There are lines everywhere: they run around pine trees and elms, across horizons, beneath my eyelids where it is dark, up and over broken cities, along your fingertips as you are born, throughout architectural blueprints, in paintings and sculptures, or between ocean waves where lines tuck into corners and become hidden, untraceable—

*



Do you hear that, Jie Jie?

(The sound of melancholy birds flapping their wings against the world.)

No, I don't—

*

When we were teenagers my friend turned to me, with a look of distaste on her face, and said that when the connection is too strong, I cut it loose from myself. She swallowed her tea in that overfilled coffeehouse with the overstuffed chairs and told me I was both a masochist and a wimp. I heartily agreed and said physics was to blame: the tighter the connection, the more tension there was. If neither of us moved, the force of tension was equal to the force of pulling on either end until I loosened my grip so that tension was minimized: because the force of the tension was equal to the force that exhausted me.

If I could, I would have crawled underneath our kitchen tables and admitted to her that I wanted the familiarity of skin patterns without the constant anxiety of symmetry, flesh against flesh. When she read my letter and told a friend she didn't believe the words, I thought this continued throughout the years and didn't know that somewhere along the way she had learned to trust me. I saw the papers she folded away or tore into pieces and feared it would be me. Instead I lay on the floor, my cheek pressed against the tiles—



*

Words meaning *connection*, starting with *acquaintance* and ending with *union*: *acquaintance, affiliation, affinity, ally, associate, association, attachment, bond, conjunction, contact, correlation, correspondence, coupling, fastening, go-between, interdependence, intermediary, interrelation, joining, joint, junction, kin, kindred, kinship, link, linkage, network, partnership, relation, relationship, tie, togetherness, union—*

*

First time I felt like a sister without being blood-related: She and I held each other's hand throughout the charismatic service because we were afraid of the supernatural and also of cults. At some point in high school, they asked if we were lesbians, but we were not; I rested on her shoulder, we shared chairs, held hands, this being important: her always moist and cool fingers on the rough surface of my skin.

Indication that I isolate myself: when walking down Thayer Street, I only looked at the people passing by if they had dark hair, I didn't bother to notice the others because I knew that I wouldn't recognize them. Once, I did recognize a tall blond-haired man but only after a blank moment of confusion at his *bello*. He was my professor. I was startled, and then I kept walking—



*

Bodily veins run from cheekbones to ankles in the manner of road maps. When you emerge out of the womb, the translucent strand of bundled vessels is clamped and cut. How we each mark our entrance into the world: a broken line—

*

For three years as we wrested with adulthood, she and I were estranged, though neither of us knew exactly what had happened. A pulling motion—between her and me for others, between others and me for her, between ourselves for each other. I only knew it had to do with *intensity*. Of what? It is on the tip of my tongue. During those years I wavered between desperation (the tips of my fingers) and a slight shrug of the shoulders—nonchalant and disinterested.

When we saw each other in the winters and summers, as we always made the effort to do so, there was often a silence followed by strange cackling laughter that somewhat resembled the sound of large predatory birds, though I have never heard one before. As we sat across from one another in nearly empty diners, she would ask me if I ever thought about what happened between us. *YES*, I would cry, and then I could say nothing. Afterwards, as I lay in bed with my childhood pillow, I would think of the words I wanted to say, all jumbled and tossed instead of coherently linear.



In some cases, *union* ends with *acquaintance*—

*

Note: *Jie Jie* is a designation for *Sister*, as is *Mei Mei*, *older* and *younger*, both are *sister*. Sometimes I am repelled by the intimacy of blood, yet here are the clinging-onto motions of my small hands—

*

Childhood behind me, and still my throat tightens, and still I grow even more uncertain, wavering like tree leaves throughout the day (the tips of my fingers, my cheek against the tile). Having moved to a new town, small and quiet, I find the wind on my street blows gently but in several directions, sending the tree branches into dizzying dances between softer lulls.

Until a new friend bends her voice around the corner, energy zigzags around me in my apartment with partial verbalizations of possible explanations, possible plans of action. It swings back and forth in half-obscured landings: to reach out but not to overstep, to feel warmth but not weakness, to seek but not depend. *Careful maneuvering*, and my hands are pulling at the carpet's threads. It does not slow until her voice is finally within reach, beckoning. I am so relieved, my lungs will rise for a series of short erratic breaths before calming.



But why do you ask so much? she says to me as I climb into her white truck.

When I was young, behind the strain and tension were our intertwined fingers—

*

Years ago on the night that I arrived at our college apartment, I cried in the bathroom, overwhelmed by the distance of the hours I had crossed, the dankness of the room, the feeling of night. She held my hand while I could not stop crying, and when she offered to sleep next to me on a mattress on the floor, I refused—

*

More than once comparisons have been made to islands, borders defined by the outstretch of water. Where shores collide is where tiny insects crawl into sinuous cracks and push outward, slowly, invisibly, until cracks deepen and water begins to leak again.

At times inexplicably I ceased reacting, emotions stopped, words stopped, as if in defense my body and mind suppressed all things. *What is the weather like today?* I could not answer. *What do you see?* Bending my head, eyes closed or projected downward.

Eventually, I let myself breathe and watched knots come loose, float away—



*

I have always been shy of strangers—those around me to whom I was hidden, who were yet hidden to me. Once for an entire summer I refused to go to the bathroom without my lover there with me. I was staying with his roommates at the time, and though the bedroom was a safe place, the rest of the apartment was unfamiliar, outside. Some days I would wait for hours for him to return, my body bursting with impatience. He finally asked me why I couldn't just go by myself, and I told him that I didn't want to. I realized in that moment that I could force myself do it, make those short steps to the bathroom, one foot in front of the other, it could be done.

When his grandfather died, his grandmother was sent to the hospital with a fever and an inability, a refusal, to eat or talk. One week after the funeral was over and everyone had returned home, the family flew back for the second funeral—

*

Yesterday we took a walk to the bridge in the woods, my friend and I, and stood looking up at the trees. The rain had just fallen and the branches were darker in color, fragrant. *The sky is a nondescript shade*, she said, and feeling defensive I replied, *It's gray*, but my voice was small and quiet. The woods were silent for several minutes as we stood looking upward with our hands in our pockets. *We can jump into the trees*, she finally suggested, and



we stood looking upward on the bridge where I was counting
the space between our bodies—