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M.I.A.

*An' my hea't was beatin' so,
When I reached my lady's do',
Dat I couldn't ba' to go—*

Jump back, honey, jump back.

—"A Negro Love Song"

Paul Laurence Dunbar

I know why the third day is so hard. See, on the first day, you still mad and so you tell yo'self you don't care. On the second day, you start gettin' real salty, and if they don't call you, you sho' ain't gon call them. But that third day's a bitch. On that third day, all that madness give way to the truth and your soul go into hidin', leavin you by yo'self, tryna get your mind around it all. This here is where you wake up with that feelin' in the pit of your stomach and you cup yourself between the legs and pretend your hand is his.

I'm standin' in front of the counter at the neighborhood butcher over on PCH, the street near the housing projects where I grew up. PCH really ain't no street. It's more like this super-long highway that supposed to run down the coast by the Pacific Ocean. But where I'm standin' at, it's about twenty blocks from any ocean. The street that cross PCH right here is called Atlantic, and if you follow it all the way south, you eventually get to what pass for an ocean. Ships come from all around, from all kinda places bringin' stuff to Long Beach. That seem like a real cool spot to live, right? But in order for all them ships to make it to shore, somethin's got to be done about the waves. They can't have nobody million-dollar ship

flipped over before they get a chance to get to port and get paid. That'd be funny: Nikes and Levis and all kinda other made-in-China stuff a be floatin' around in the ocean. People who don't even know how to swim be out there tryna loot. So what they do is, see, they build this big wall-thing right in the middle the ocean. And this here wall-thing keep the waves out. Somethin' like that. They told us 'bout it at school. S'called a breakwater.

The thing they musta forgot, the thing you gotta remember, is this: any time you wall somethin out, you end up wallin' somethin in, too. In this case what got walled in is this nasty-ass, dark, green cloud that always be there, floatin' right under the surface of the water. You can't see nothin' below that cloud, so anything that might happen to float by or wrap itself around your leg damn near scare you to death.

And every time somethin' do bump against your leg, it ain't movin'. It don't just brush up against you and wiggle away real fast like it might be as scared of you as you is of it. Instead, it *sliiide* up against you real slow and easy, and it don't move unless you make it. And that's way worse. In real oceans, the waves circle all that stuff out and new water flow in to replace the old, like bein' born again.

But they walled out all the waves in Long Beach. So anytime I do make it twenty blocks down Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, what I get to look more like a big swamp than any ocean I ever seen. It's miles and miles of green-clouded water that look—flat-line—like it could go on like that forever. But it don't go on forever. It end right at that wall.

Mmmph. This place can hold on like some crazy ex who rather see you dead.

Anyway.

So I stopped in at the butcher's to get some oxtails for Easter dinner 'cause I know my husband like 'em so much.

The Chinese lady behind the counter is starin' at me like she ain't been knowin' me since I was little. This smilin', bowin' rich-ass lady and her husband been in the 'hood forever—even stayed through the riots when some fool that had to be from somewheres else tried to burn the store down. The neighborhood boys got some hoses and sprayed some water on the fire until it went out. We all know Mr. and Mrs. Chang, and ain't none of us was down with no fool that probably thought the riots was all about carryin' away as much stuff as they could on they spineless backs.

I got enough sense to know that Chang ain't these people's real name; it's just what we call 'em. They cool like that, though. It ain't about no politics with them, and they probably call us all Washington behind our back. As long as we payin' for those matchin' Benzos they got parked outside, I guess we can call 'em p-a-i-d. See, that's the difference between the Changs and these other kinda Chinese folks that's done moved into the 'hood recently. With them others, you gotta watch your back or it end up full of bullets.

They got all kind a stuff lined up on the shelf behind where Mrs. Chang is ringin' up my tails and givin' me that Are you alright look that old people always be givin' people that's younger than them. But I don't pay her no mind. I just keep my eyes roamin' over them shelves. They got everything back there from candy bars to condoms, both of which I bet they keep behind the counter 'cause they got tired of followin' these little thievin' thugs around they store. When I see some cans of ground black pepper squeezed in between some boxes of white salt, I remember that I need me some real spices, the fresh stuff, to throw in with my oxtails. So I smile at Mrs. Chang's crazy ass and look out the glass doors standin' open, framin' the car parked out in front. I need to make sure it's okay.

It's fine. As a matter of fact my husband's car look fine like Tupac Shakur. It's a black on black six-four Chevy Impala with the ass dropped real low in the back. Chrome sparkle at the front, on lots of different places along the smooth hard body, and, of course, at its twenty-two spinners. It got tinted windows all around that hide the leather interior from this snoop dog world. It sit there, long and low and restin' in the afternoon sun.

That car a lot like my husband, Daryl: black and cool and all legal. I know everybody think he stole his car, or as my signifyin' homegirl once said, "Musta sold a whole lotta dub sacks for that thang." But I know betta. My baby bought that car fair and square—he even showed me the kid he got it from. We was in court on some a little assault charge, and Daryl pointed the cat out from a bunch of bustas waitin' to go to County.

Anyway, we beat that assault case fair and square. I mean that other kid musta got the beat down of his life by Daryl—he didn't even have enough nerve to show up in court! Oh, well, that's how shit go twenty blocks into the city—fair and square.

I'm still watchin' outside and I step towards the door as two boys hip-hoppin' they way across the parkin' lot slow down to check out the ride. They don't even look at the Chang's Mercedes, just at Daryl car. That's why he love that car so much. That car get him big respect in the hood. And when Daryl get respect, Daryl girl get respect. People used to pick on me a lot back in the day cause I ain't never had no daddy or no man or nothing around to protect me. But I got a man now. And ain't nobody never gon take him away.

"*Mira, ese carro esta chigon,*" the first boy say when he see the car.

"Hell, yeah," say his friend, "that shit is hella tight." His

hand come up and his fingers wiggle like he wanna run 'em along the Chevy's skin, but he look up first and see me standin' in the shadows. I shake my head, frown a little, and shoo them away with a flick of my wrist. The boy drop his hand and shove it into the pockets of his deep-saggin' jeans. He look me up and down with flickerin' eyes. 'Cept for his eyes, he done stopped and stood stark still. His friend get him started again with a *pendejo* and a little push. As they zigzag across the blacktop, they both turn and toss stares at me. The one with the meddlin' hands snap his chin up sharp lettin' me know we cool. Yeah. I know we cool. The lil' homies know a project girl when they see one.

Mrs. Chang is still starin', so I tell her I'm gon go back and get me some spices, and I hurry along the dusty aisles to where the vegetables is piled up in wooden coolers against the back wall. I hear Mrs. Chang say somethin' in Chinese and I been knowin' her long enough to know she talkin' 'bout me, so I turn around. Mrs. Chang is coverin' her nose with one small hand like she smell somthin' stinkin'. She done called her husband and they both watchin' me. I press my lips together tight and give a little double shake of my head. I lift my shoulders and spread my hands as if to ask . . . *WHAT?* No response. I know they don't think *I'm* tryna steal nothin' out they dusty store! Oh, well! I don't know what the hell is wrong with them, and I ain't got time to be tryna figure it out. I got 'tails to cook.

I grab me a red bell pepper and a green one and a couple a *chile pisillas* 'cause that *serrano* shit is just too hot, and I quick step it back to the counter to pay up and nod and bow at the Changs. Most the time, they like it when I do that, but this time they don't bow back. They just stand there lookin' at me like I really did steal somethin'. Mr. Chang start puttin' my stuff into a black plastic bag, real slow like he can't keep his

eyes off me long enough to bag groceries!

“Somethin’ wrong?” I ask them straight out, puttin’ my hands on my hips.

Mrs. Chang hand come up to her chest and rest there for a minute, like she clutchin’ pearls, then one of her tiny fingers point to a mirror over by the butcher counter. I follow her finger to where it’s pointin’ and see myself. In the mirror my hair is stuck to my head in some places and stickin’ straight out at different angles in others. My eyes is wide white circles peepin’ out from darkness, and some reddish-brown color stuff is all over my face. The same stuff is on my white shirt, but there it’s bright, shoutin’ red. I blink and the me inside the mirror blink too. I remember the blood. Daryl blood. I stare into the glass, into my own wide eyes, and try to remember more. But all I can see is myself starin’ back at me. Behind the counter, the Changs is starin’ too.

I throw some money on the counter, and I don’t even wait for the change. I just snatch up my grocery bag and switch my butt outta there. *Fuck the Changs. They can’t stop no blood.* Maybe they need to pray to that little, fat dude they got sittin’ on that altar ‘bout they messed up attitudes. I giggle out loud at my own joke and grin over one shoulder at the Changs as I step out into the sunshine. I head for the car, my head down, my body already feelin’ its dark, leather interior.

With my hand on the handle, I feel somebody steppin’ up on me from behind and a bony hand drop down on my shoulder. I freeze. I don’t turn around in case that hand belong to somebody who don’t want me to see they face.

“Mia, you got—what’s this shit on yo’ back, girl? It look like—”

I spin around, a *Get your fuckin’ hands off me* look already on my face, and look into the ugly mug of Redman. This cat here is a strange lookin’ motha with them grey eyes sittin’ in a

face that's kinda red and kinda brown. His lips is all pink and thin and he got freckles that look like brown moles since his skin ain't really light enough to justify no freckles. He got that good hair and he got it braided back and down to where it curl over his shoulders. I dip my own shoulder so his hand slide off me.

"What," I say more than ask, and he take a step back and stare at me. I turn back to the car and try to open the door. Only I forget that I still ain't unlocked it yet, so the handle just jiggle in my hand. I flip the keys out of my pocket, smash down the button on the alarm, and start to open the door again.

"Mia," Redman say behind me. And again, "*Mia*," like I should turn around.

I don't turn around again. Instead, I just stand there wishin' he would say whatever ig'nant thing is on his ig'nant mind and go away.

"I ain't tryna hol' you up or nothin'," he say. "But I ain't seen choo in a minute, sweethawt. I know you my homeboy best, you know, best girl."

He say that with a smile in his voice and he standin' there behind me, pausin' and waitin' for me to react, but I don't. I only tighten my hand on the door handle and grit my teeth.

"Anyway, girl, I jus' wont choo to know dat if you need anythang, I'm down fa ya. Dat what the homey, Dirty Boy, rest-in-peace, loved, the Redman love."

Redman talk like honey and most times when he say somethin', he like E.F. Hutton, people just shut the fuck up and listen.

But then Redman touch me again. This time he put his hands high up on my shoulders. His thumbs rest on the back of my neck and he squeeze like he tryna give me a deep massage, or a deep message.

“You know, Mia,” he say in a low voice I can barely hear over the far away shoutin’ of kids playin’ in the street. “D.B. called me on his cellie that night. He wanted me to come with him. Go take care of some bidness. And, well, you know me, Mia.” Redman squeeze a little harder, diggin his fingers into my neck. “I’m always down for whatever. You know I’m the one brought him home, right? I tried to help my nigga—stop the blood and shit—but he was bleedin too much. I couldn’t stop it.”

Redman is quiet behind me for so long after that, I think—just for a minute—I think that he done gone away and maybe who I’m feelin’ grippin’ my neck is somebody else. ‘Cause ain’t nobody seem to stop the blood. Then, “You didn’t say nothin’ to the police ‘bout me, did you, Mia?”

I jerk open the door and throw my grocery bag in makin’ sure it hit the floor and not the leather seats.

“You know, you ain’t lookin’ like your usual fine self, either,” Redman say while he still holdin’ tight to my neck, “You runnin’ roun her lookin’ crazy as shit. Whatcha know good, Mia?”

I twist around without thinkin’ and Redman hand burn my skin as it rip away from my neck.

“Fuck you,” I tell him. But it ain’t my voice. I feel it raw in my throat, vocal cords vibratin’, hittin’ hard up against my throat, but it still ain’t my voice. It’s a deep voice, empty except for the flat line in it, and it want Redman to know. “You can’t stop no blood,” my voice tell him. “It’s flowin’ like a mu’fucka and can’t you and nobody else,” I wave my hand around the parking lot, “ain’t nobody gon’ stop it.” I look at him, but he starin’ straight into the car. His eyes is half closed and his mouth is half open.

“You really. Girl,” he say, whisperin’ through them half-open lips. “You really trippin’. You need to get this car

cleaned up." And now he look at me with his rock-grey eyes. "Bitch get cho' self ta gether."

I turn to throw myself into the car and slam the door shut. Redman look at his hand, frown, and the rub it against his pants leg. I shove the key in and twist it in the ignition, mashin' on the brake and gas at the same time. The car V-12 rev loud and angry and I like that so I do it a couple more times. I maddog Redman with my face up close to the tinted window before I slam the shift into gear and peel out. As I pass the front of the store, everything around me slow down, and I see real clear for about one second split. Mr. and Mrs. Chang stand in the doorway. Mrs. Chang is a little behind in the shadows. They faces is so sad. Mrs. Chang lips move and I can read them easy. She say, "He's gone." Then they both raise they hands and wave goodbye.

After that, things speed right back up again. I look in the rearview and see Redman. He grab at his crotch and pace back and forth, pointin' after the car with a straight arm and double-barreled fingers. Like he gon do somethin'! Redman can't do shit 'cause he ain't about shit! I start to cry for the umpteenth time, those strange tears that don't never spill over. They just sit in my eyes makin' everything blur up.

And that's fine. I wanna see in a wet blur. Ain't shit out there to see anyway. Mmmmp. I had a teacher once used to tell me to look at the big picture. But the big picture ain't no better than the little one. All these people out here crazy as hell! Everybody goin' around callin' Daryl by that stupid gansta name, when Daryl was clean—*never dirty*. Never dirty and damn sho' no where near no boy! He gave all that bangin' up when we moved out to Carson.

But don't nobody care 'bout none of that. Not Redman, not the Changs. Not nobody. We all rats in a maze made outta

brick walls. And we keep bumpin' our heads tryna get out. City birds runnin' into glass skyscrapers.

By the time I drive all the way up from the south side to the condo Daryl got us far away from everybody and everything, I'm cool again. Only thing is I didn't even get a chance to enjoy the car on the way home, so when I pull up in the garage, I decide to sit for a while. I reach over and pull the grocery bag up off the floor and sit it in my lap. I take out each thing in there and hold it up to my nose one by one. The red pepper and the green pepper and the *chile pisillas* smell hot and spicy like me, but the oxtails smell fresh and cool like Daryl. Together in the pot they gon smell like heaven with a little bit of hell mixed in. I smile 'cause that's what Daryl said to me on when he was beggin' me to go to the Changs' and cook him some oxtails. "They got the best cuts, those Changs," Daryl had said. "Just like I like 'em."

I was complainin' though 'cause I didn't wanna have to drive all the way over to the south side, and 'cause I was gon' be cookin' Easter dinner in a couple a days anyway. But I was gonna go. I can't never deny that man nothin'. He know that. That was Thursday. By early on Friday mornin' Daryl was lyin' on our livin' room floor tellin' me about how some slanty-eyed bitch had shot him in the back. I had pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and was dialin' 911 when he curled his hand around mine and said, "Naw, Mia. Don't be callin' no police. We don't need them."

So there we was. On a Good Friday mornin' with his head heavy in my lap and his blood soakin' warm into my jeans, while I held him and rocked him and asked him why. The last thing he said to me was "The car." The car. Like it was kinda real goodbye like *I love you*. After that I had went down to the garage and stood lookin' at the car. It sat in the same spot in

the garage where it always sat, the windows dark on all sides and the engine still *click clickin'* as it cooled down from Daryl last ride. The garage door stood open and so did the door on the driver's side of the Chevy. The car keys was lyin' on the cement next to it. I'd walked up close to the car seen all the blood inside. Blood that sat and soaked itself into the car. Daryl blood.

I had got inside the car with my heart beatin' loud in my chest, then I backed the car out and drove. Drove down the hill from our house watchin' the lights from the city below blur. At first I'd thought the blurrin' was from the rain that flowin' down the front window, but then I realized I was cryin'. Well not cryin' really, 'cause even though tears was in my eyes, they didn't never spill over. Not even when I started shakin' so bad I couldn't stop. The tears sat still in my eyes 'till I blinked. Then they would go away and more would swell up to replace 'em. It was like the tears was fallin' inside me 'steada out. And I never even shed a real tear for Daryl. I'd taken my hand off the wheel to wipe at my face just cause that's what I'm usta doin' when I cry. But there wasn't no tears on my face. My face felt wet though. When I looked in the rearview, I saw Daryl blood smeared on my cheek. The blood looked good there—like war paint. I'd drove all the way down to the bottom of that hill and turned off onto a dirt road. Then I just sat there for awhile 'cause that's where Daryl was. Not in that piece of meat, shot full of holes, lyin' on our livin' room floor.

It was early, early in the morning by the time I got out and walked back up the hill. Back at the house, I'd stood over the body that wasn't Daryl and looked down at it. I nudged it a little with one foot and, when it didn't move, I dropped down so I was real close and leaned over to pull up the eyelids one at a time. Same dark brown eyes underneath, but

with no laughin' light in 'em. I touched my lips to the forehead, the eyebrows, the nose, and, finally, the lips. That's when I knew Daryl was gone.

If I wanted to be with Daryl, I'd have to go to the car.

I'd sat with the body most of the day. Starin' at it. Tryna figure out what to do with it. I'd taken a shower. But watchin' his blood swirl down the drain—I didn't like seein' it go away like that—diluted so it was pussy pink and not bright, shoutin' red. But there was more in the car.

After the shower, I called the police to take away the body, and answered all they questions with the same hard stare and *I don't know. I just got here. Left early, early this mornin'. Don't know why the body's cold. Where I been? Just walkin' around. Thinkin'. About what? Wonderin why my man didn't come home last night.* And they eventually left, but before they did, one cop without a blue uniform, but with hard blue eyes stepped to me.

"Hiya," he'd said. A wet, scruffy toothpick was stuck in the corner of his mouth. "Hiya doin'?"

He stepped closer and I looked at his mouth so I could watch what he had to say. Bits of stuff from the little wooden stick was on his bottom lip when he asked, "Where's the car?"

I'd panicked, and answered with the only thing that came to mind, "What car?"

He'd screwed up his face into a ball of disbelief and dropped his head for a minute, shakin' it back and forth.

"Honey, did you know who I am?" He shifted his cop pacifier from one corner of his mouth to the other and stared at me. "I've worked outta the gang unit in Long Beach for over fifteen years, all the O.G.s know me."

"Mmmmm."

"Well, no, now I guess you wouldn't be innerested in the duty record of an old five-oh, would you? But fifteen years is

a mighty long time in the hood, you gotta admit, huh?" He'd rested his weight back on one leg and cocked his arms. He put his skinny arms on his skinny hips. "Everbody in the hood knows Dirty Boy drives that Impala, Mia."

I'd tried to throw him the hard stare, but I felt my eyes jumpin' around the room. *How this fuckin' cop know my name?*

"Oh, yeah, sweetheart, I know who you are. And I know the streets. You wanna know some other things I know? Things about a certain Vietnamese liquor store over on Anaheim and Walnut somebody tried to rob last night? Somebody who got a nice round of bullets in the back for their trouble?"

"That's the 'hood where Dirty Boy and his homies put in mosta their work, right, Mia?" He started walkin' around the body, lookin' down at it and workin' the toothpick around with his jaw. "So an old beatwalkin', shit-talkin', head-knocker like me put two and two together and got six-four. A six-four that's *not* parked in a certain garage at a certain house where a certain gangsta lives—or *lived*, God rest his black dirty soul—"

"He ain't dead." That had come outta my mouth uncalled for.

"What?" The cop cupped his hand behind his ear. "What's that you say, Mia?"

"He—he wasn't no gangsta," I'd said.

The cop's eyebrows went up and he took the toothpick outta his mouth and dropped it his shirt pocket. Like it was somethin' to be saved.

"Tryna quit," he'd explained, baring his big, yellow teeth. "I'll see you again, Ms. Mia," said ol' blue eyes.

He'd left without another word to me—just jerked one thumb over his shoulder for them to take it away and they had. When they zipped it up in a long black bag and lifted it

like a sack of potatoes, the cell phone was still on the floor where I dropped it. One policeman's rubber-gloved hand scooped up the phone and put it in a plastic bag, and I knew. Knew I shoulda listened to Daryl when he said no police. Just like I shoulda listened when he asked me to cook them oxtails. If I'da been cookin' 'tails that night . . .

But I sho' don't feel like cookin' no 'tails now. I make up my mind about that so I push the whole mess in the grocery bag down on the floor between my feet and kick it backwards under the seat. I run my hand over and around the steerin' wheel and up and across the dashboard, flakin' off dried blood and smearin' some of the wetter spots as I go. I touch the seat next to me and my fingers break the thick film coverin' a big puddle. My fingers sink in and the smell get stronger. Like scratch n' sniff. Oh, boy, I'm one funny bitch. Laughter rumble up in my chest and I bring my fingers to my lips and smear the blood there. In the rearview it look like lipstick for love 'stead of paint for war. I wonder what Daryl would think? I reach into the puddle for more, but then I decide to move my hand slowly along the front of the seat, feelin' where Daryl knees useta touch when I drove. He would press on brake pedals that wasn't there whenever I swooped around a corner too fast. I smile and taste his blood in my mouth. My hand touch somethin' cool and hard just underneath the seat and I stretch, get my hand all the way around. My hand close around it, and I pull it out from underneath the seat. A nine-millimeter with a blue rag knotted around the handle.

I turn the black weapon over in one hand, place my other hand on top of it. The gun is cool and heavy. I lay it in my lap and rest my head back against the leather. I press against the seat so blood soaks into my shirt. Redman got a lot of Daryl blood on him, too. I wonder if he tried to stop the flow. He

was right, too, Redman was. I shoulda cleaned up the car. But I didn't want to.

After that first shower, I didn't bathe or nothin' 'cause I didn't wanna wash no more of Daryl down the drain. After the police left, I'd walked down the hill to get it and park it in the garage. I slept in the car on Saturday night, when the smell of his blood was strong 'cause the rain that always fall on Good Friday had made it damp and sweaty inside the car. Woke up in it on Easter Sunday mornin' when the sun that always shines on that day started to bake and thicken the blood on my face, my clothes, my hair. And bright and early Easter Sunday mornin', I went to go get oxtails for Easter dinner like Daryl wanted.

Now I sit in it with a nine in my lap and a question for Daryl. A slow smile on my face turn into a chuckle, then a giggle, then a laugh out loud that bounce around the car and settle in my lap beside the gun. Daryl gun.

And Mia, who has been waiting for the third day, asks one question into the blood-drenched silence of her husband's temple: "Do they build walls around the oceans up in heaven? Or let'em flow free down in hell?" ♦

BURRITO

After the disgrace of Immaculada, Cruz issues an ultimatum.

“Next stop: glue factory. I am serious.”

I know he is serious. I can be melted down for quick cash. The rendering in Nuevo Laredo takes place at a plant down the road. The smell haunts my days when the wind shifts from the south.

The new girl is Felipa. She is from Vallecillo, a tourist town on the way to Sabinas Hidalgo. Long ago, I used to pull a cart between those two places. I miss the road. Felipa did not come here for this work; it was not her dream. This is not a career one plans and hopes for. When jumping the border fence fails, a girl often stumbles backwards into this place. Felipa has big teeth like mine and a rose in her hair which I lust after.

Immaculada tells Felipa about how I am circling the drain on the killing floor. Cruz makes glue factory jokes. Immaculada laughs and rubs the crotch of Cruz.

I find apples, carrots, and peanuts in my feedbag. Felipa winks. I take my time, savoring. The man-crowd has boiled into a liquored frenzy. A few naked girls prance out to tease, but what the hombres really want is Burrito. Not even in Tijuana do they have a spectacle like this. Even though this kind of show is most often associated with that place, it is a myth. If you go to Tijuana in search of this, I promise you will be disappointed. Some say it is an abomination for a woman to lay with Burrito like this, but to perform onstage is a special calling. A job I wish to keep. All peripheral performers enforce

a sacred contract with the world.

I am carried out by Cruz and three strong men. I am placed on my back, held down. The crowd is a thousand car horns bleating for me to get on with it. Felipa does her level best but it is no good. Once again I cannot rise to the occasion. I see the killing floor. She covers me with her body, fakes everything. There is booing. Bottles bounce off chicken wire.

I bray. I cry. They lead me back to my stall. Cruz kicks and curses. I want to shout: I am not a beast of the field! But I know what I am.

Cruz is not moved.

"Things are about to get very sticky for you, Burrito."

Felipa comes to me, weeping, throws her arms around my neck.

I seize the chance. The rose is thornless, delicious; everything I thought it would be.

At once, I am ready. Felipa fetches Cruz.

"A dozen roses, then," he says. "Every day."

They lead me back out. Felipa places another rose in her hair.

"I love you, Burrito."

Te amo, cariña.

Let the abomination begin. ♦

CLAY POTS

I recognized myself once in a ghost story I heard from a woman in Wichita. We had stopped to stay a night with her, and we sat in her basement on a secondhand couch, eating celery sticks and drinking ginger beer. It was late and I was tired, but we tried to be polite as she offered road advice.

“When you get to New Mexico, you fill that tank as often as you see a gas station. Don’t never skip it, a gas station. If you aren’t careful, you’ll end up stranded when you get going up into them mountains. Don’t mess around. It’s different there. Lot less people.”

We nodded, and my mind wandered, across the plains and up into those mountains to the ski resort, our destination.

“And you don’t pick up no hitchhikers, not a single one.”

He laughed. “Isn’t that how you met my parents, ma’am?”

She leaned over, across the coffee table. He was sitting on the floor across from my perch on the end of the couch. She took the ginger beer out of his hand and set it down gently, taking his hand in hers.

“And this is why I’m telling you. That was a different time. Now, no hitchhikers. And I don’t mean just stopping for them. I mean looking at them. Don’t make no eye contact with no hitchhikers in New Mexico. You understand?”

He didn’t break her gaze. He nodded, solemnly, an obedient child grown into a compliant young man. I slanted my eyes a bit. Why wasn’t she warning me?

“Why no eye contact?” I asked, but she didn’t turn

toward me.

“Because that’s how they take you.”

“Who?”

“The skinwalkers. Them glowing eyes will look into yours and switch you out.”

“Switch you out? Where do you go?” My boyfriend’s voice was small.

“Into them. For a time. Maybe a short time, maybe a long time. However long they need your suit.”

“Suit?”

“Body, love, they take your body and keep your soul trapped in theirs.”

“And this is only in New Mexico?”

She dropped his hand and glanced over at me, a tight smile stretching in a straight line. “No, love, not just there. But that’s where you’re going, so that’s where you should look out. Remember now, don’t look them in the eye, neither one.”

“Are they evil?” I asked. She looked at the floor.

“Well, something like that don’t sound real natural, does it?”

“How do you know it’s not natural?”

“It’s just a legend, Deirdre,” he broke in, trying to keep me from saying something wrong, something that would get back to his parents. “But it’s probably based on some bad thing that actually is real, so let’s just leave it at that.”

She met his eyes again and after a moment gave a slight nod and handed back his ginger beer.

My client list is based on word-of-mouth. I have rules: one session per client per month. No questions, ever. I take cash only. I typically decline cases with revenge as the sole motivator, but I’m willing to negotiate. Violence costs extra, a lot extra. I do not guarantee my results, but I expect to get

paid anyway.

Not long after the night Annabelle was beaten with a broomstick, I realized this could be a job. I have no other skills, not really. Annabelle is his sister, the one from the ski trip. We all grew up together, so closely I treated her as my own little sibling. She was annoying, yes, but she was curious and loyal and kind to small animals. The first time her boyfriend hit her, with his hand, she said nothing to anybody. The second time, with a coffee pot, she told her brother, who did not know what to do. The third time, the final time, he came at her with the broken broom, and she fled to my house, crying.

I was angry and responded with a deep, primal instinct. I took her hands, looked closely into her eyes and switched her. She looked out at me from my face, disoriented, bewildered, as Annabelle's hands locked my body in the bathroom. Those hands also remembered to grab a steak knife on the way out.

Annabelle's finger pushed the bell on her own front door, and her boyfriend opened it, barefoot, in boxers and a t-shirt, expecting perhaps the police or even Annabelle's brother, as unlikely as that was. He was not expecting Annabelle herself to be standing there, with that small knife and a look of rage. He laughed and turned his back to Annabelle, heading back up the landing steps. Annabelle's legs crouched and her body lunged forward. Her arm extended and made a quick, hard slash across his ankle, cutting the tendon. He let out a startled cry, his face twisting back toward Annabelle's face as he fell. "You? How?"

Annabelle's hand gripped the handle like it would throw the knife overhand into him. He recoiled and scrambled up the stairs, a trail of blood following him. Annabelle's legs backed up and out the door, and Annabelle's feet carried her again to my apartment, to my bathroom.

I was so, so sorry that night. But eventually the boyfriend moved out. And women started to visit Annabelle and ask for advice. For Annabelle, the night itself would always be fuzzy. She had felt out of her mind and had no memory of leaving my apartment, much less of attacking him. She did not know where she got the knife. All she remembered was looking at me.

According to the legends, I should be able to switch with animals, but I've never been able to do that. The first time I was conscious of switching was in kindergarten. Annabelle's brother was making a mound in the sandbox. He said it was a volcano. I wanted to help, because he wasn't doing it right and I told him I could fix it. The sides were crumbling, but instead of just patting the sand to firm up the mound, I kept trying to brush off the bumpy parts, and I kept on brushing and brushing. "You're gonna knock it down, go away," he had told me, and a little blonde girl next to him nodded. So I went away to cry in the corner with the baby dolls, who stared at me with vacant eyes. I decided I wanted more than anything to be one of those dolls. I wanted a still, porcelain face that couldn't crumple or frown or form a mouth into anything hateful, anything at all.

The teacher's aide came up to me. Annabelle's brother wanted to apologize, she said, though I can't remember how exactly she strung the words together. I turned toward her, away from the dolls, and looked into big brown eyes rimmed with makeup. I wanted to be far away, and suddenly I was, apart, looking back into my own teary face, which was red as a ladybug. I had felt sorry for my little face. I looked so sad. I moved a hand, a big brown hand, to comfort my little body, and my face became startled. My eyes rolled around the room. I made the aide's hand wrap around my little shoulder

and pull me into a hug against a ratty green sweater. The wool was rough, but I couldn't feel it against my own cheek, because I was mercifully, wonderfully, no longer connected to that face. I breathed in the scent of baby shampoo coming off my hair, and for the first time, I realized how soft I was, how small, how precious. I was deeply comforted by this view of myself.

My little body wriggled away from the sweater, and the big hand wrapped around my arm and pulled the little body back, too hard. That hand would leave a bruise, which would later make the teacher's aide be sent away. I looked once more into my little face and went back in, home.

Most of my clients aren't in situations as dramatic as Annabelle's. Most of them simply lack the courage to engage in an important argument. They don't know how to debate or are too afraid to say what needs to be said to someone. Sometimes things get physical, but I've noticed a shift in client preferences over the last couple of years. I've learned to be gentler.

I was studying my latest case when the bell rang. A woman's boyfriend wouldn't propose, and she didn't know how to bring it up. She was afraid he wanted to leave her, and if so, she'd rather leave him first.

It was a soap opera for sure, but it would probably end up with a straightforward break-up. No violence.

The bell startled me out of the planning. I put away the file and locked the drawer before going to the door. Annabelle's brother's voice came through the intercom, and I grinned. I paused by the mirror before hitting the buzzer and gave my face a quick check. There were hollows under my eyes, and the crease in my forehead was more pronounced

than I remembered. I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair.

"Daniel, what are you doing here?" I was waiting for him outside my door when he finally got to the top of the final flight of stairs, panting.

"Deirdre, it's good to see you. Can I come in?"

"God, of course, I'm sorry. Come in, come in. I'll get you, um, water? A beer?"

He came across the landing and looked around my dark, cluttered apartment. I became conscious of how it looked, of the dirty clothes piled on the couch. I scooped them up and tossed the mound just beyond the bedroom door. My desk, too, was cluttered and covered in papers and photos of strangers.

"No, really, I'm fine. I should have called first."

I lifted a cereal bowl from the coffee table and gave a tug on a mug I'd left out for God knows how long. A ring of sticky brown remained behind on the glass top. He used to think I made money by selling drugs.

"No, no, I'm glad you came by. It's good to see you."

I darted into the kitchen with the dishes, calling out questions about Annabelle, his job. He was so put together these days, so successful, so much more outgoing than the quiet boy who had been my first kiss. Everyone in high school thought he'd follow me when I left for college, but that ended up backward. He had a master's now and a house on the lake.

When I came out of the kitchen with two beers uncapped, he was still standing, running his fingers around the inside of his coat cuff.

"Hey, I can take that if you like." I stepped forward and he shifted back, almost like a reflex. He caught himself, embarrassed, and forced a smile.

“Oh really, Deirdre, no worries. I’m fine. It’s just so funny, being here again.”

My initial excitement at seeing him dropped like lead in my stomach. He hadn’t stopped by like this, out of the blue, in a long time. Why had I never been invited to see the new house?

I set the beers on the coffee table and sat down on the edge of the couch. I could never seem to just settle into any piece of furniture, mine or anyone else’s. I patted the adjacent cushion, but tentatively so. He hesitated and a flicker of anxiety went through me. Finally he flung off his coat and sat down. He didn’t reach for the beer.

“Deirdre, we go way back.”

“I don’t think you can go any further back than we go.”

“Right. And just like we said when broke up, that last time, we’ll always love each other, in our way.”

My heartbeat quickened.

“Daniel.”

“And you know I truly want you to be happy. And I know you want me to be happy, too.”

“Of course, of course. You know, I’ve been thinking about calling you, really, just today I was thinking that.”

“Yeah, we should definitely get drinks sometime soon. All of us. But hang on, before we plan that, I have something to tell you.”

I began to fidget. “Hey, just a second, I left something on the stove. My lunch. Let me just turn the burner off.”

I got up and went into the kitchen. At that moment, I wanted to be anywhere, anyone, else.

Daniel met Vera on campus after I had broken up with him, yet again. She was quiet and wore purple glasses. I thought her hair looked like the color of dishwater, but when I said it

out loud Annabelle gave me a warning look. Vera wanted to be an art teacher. She liked to make pottery and volunteered for a program that mentored kids from troubled homes.

The four of us, along with others, got drinks on a bar patio. We were celebrating. Annabelle was starting classes after coming back from some sort of spiritual trip to Mexico. She'd been gone for months. I was settling into my line of work, although I talked about it with no one, of course. I had let go of the idea of school entirely, which displeased Daniel.

"So, what kind of money does an art teacher make?" My curiosity was genuine. What was it about this girl that was so respectable in ways I was not?

Vera giggled, and I liked to believe she did so nervously. She pushed those dopey glasses up her nose and met my eyes briefly.

"Oh, the money will be terrible. But I just love helping them, especially with the wheel. Sometimes it's so hard to not jump in and do it for them—I can always see when a piece is starting to tilt, and I just know when the end is near."

"So why don't you?"

"Don't what?"

"Jump in and save it. Seems a little cruel to just hang back when you know what's going to happen."

"Well, they can't learn that way. With clay, you have to get the feel for how to apply pressure in the right way. Otherwise, you'll just go on collapsing your pots forever!" She giggled again and glanced at Daniel. She was visibly relieved when Annabelle took over and told a story about hunting for peyote in the desert.

I admit it: I switched Vera. But it was for a good reason. Daniel was graduating, and I wanted to be there. I felt I deserved to be there. It was me who sat with him during all

those long nights of homework. It was me who would get take-out and rent movies when he needed a break. It was me who remembered to pay the electric bill when the lights went out or the space heater stopped whirring. It was me who moved so far from home because I believed in him, in us. And yet never, not once, did he say, "Thank you, Deirdre. I couldn't have done it without you." So I decided that day, graduation day, would be my thanks. Then we would be even.

It was hard to pull off. They turned me down for a pre-graduation brunch, so I'd had to do it the night before, at the bar where we were toasting Daniel and his friends from the program. I waited until the very end of the night, when tiny Vera was well past tipsy on white wine and a shot of rum and milk. They were getting ready to leave, and she wanted one more trip to the bathroom. I followed her, and as she washed her hands, I made eye contact in the mirror. She broke the gaze so quickly that I had to put my finger under her chin and tilt her eyes back up toward me.

Drunkenness is physiological, not mental. To keep Vera sedated in my body after the switch, I'd been drinking, too, and I'd also taken something else, something in a pill. It was kicking in as we came out of the bathroom, and with Vera's tiny body and birdlike arms, I struggled to support my own slumping, larger one. Daniel rushed over and cursed. His anger surprised me.

My body came with us in a cab that detoured to my apartment. Daniel wheezed as he pulled me up the stairs, and Vera's useless arms pushed from behind. Once there, he settled my body into bed. Vera's hands got a glass of water to put on the nightstand, and when he wasn't looking, those hands crushed up another pill, leaving it to dissolve. When my body woke up, water would be the first thing it craved

and it would reach for the glass. The extra pills would give me the better part of the next day, easily, to stay in Vera.

It had felt so normal to go home with Daniel, as we'd done a thousand times before he'd ever heard Vera's little giggle. It was easy to kiss him and fall into bed beside him and watch him pass out quickly from so much liquor and physical activity. I liked Vera's small frame; it fit more naturally under his arm than my lankier body ever had. I could curl up against his side and be almost totally enveloped by him.

Graduation day itself was long and tedious—not exactly as I'd pictured. I clapped hard as he walked across the stage not only out of pride but also out of sheer joy that the event was coming to a close. At one point during the day I had tried to bait Annabelle into saying something about Deirdre, but she didn't take it, saying instead that universal love and forgiveness trumped any ill will she may have once had against that poor soul. I wanted her to say more, but I also didn't, so I let it go.

After dinner with Daniel and his family downtown, near my apartment, I begged off for a quick errand nearby. He seemed worried for a moment, but I mouthed "lady time" and he simply waved me off.

That time I switched Vera, I'd come close to killing my own body. I got the dosing wrong, and it was hard to rouse my body into waking up. After we switched back, she had no memory of how she'd gotten into my apartment, but she said she was glad to have followed her gut and come up to check on me. It was Vera who called the ambulance, and Vera who stayed with me, holding my hand until it came. Daniel had been furious.

“You have got, absolutely got, to get sober,” he yelled, before his voice crumpled over the phone, his nerve shot. “I just can’t, I can’t deal with this anymore.”

“Deal with what, Daniel?”

“You, Deirdre, deal with you. I don’t think we can hang out anymore, not for a while. I’m sorry. I cannot see you, I just. Can. Not.”

It was the last time we spoke until he came to my apartment that time I was working on the soap opera case. He came to tell me he had proposed to Vera.

On the mountain, in New Mexico, we both got altitude sickness. The air had been cold and clear when we arrived, and the brochures promised we would be able to see for miles from the lift. In the morning we laced up rented boots and hand-me-down jackets. We laughed as we tried to push ourselves from the lodge to the lift, both of us eventually giving up and popping off the skis to waddle over, putting them back on for a heroic slide to catch a hard metal chair that pinched our thighs. We were supposed to be able to see Albuquerque, but a fog had come up, a damp cloudiness that I wanted to touch. I took off my glove and waved my hand through the soup, feeling nothing. I was dizzy.

I passed out at the top, after we dropped out of the lift onto packed powder. The ground was inclined just enough that I started to slide. Daniel was—is—awkward on skis, and he said later he had shouted for me and fumbled to untangle his poles, finally flinging them into the air. He clicked off the skis, running with his heels raised in the boots, his knees straining, as I skidded into the orange fencing separating the run from the brush. I came to with him over my face, shaking me, gently but insistently, repeating my name over and over.

The wedding was beautiful, it truly was. The theme was country rustic, and the whole event was held in her family's barn. Vera had selected periwinkle, yellow and brown for the scheme. It wouldn't have been my choice, but she had overseen every last detail, and everyone agreed it was all so lovely. The wildflowers tucked into the cake slices were an especially nice touch.

I had never really imagined my own wedding to Daniel; it had always seemed so far off, so assumed it need not even be considered. I could never have imagined the look on his face as he pulled the veil up and over his bride's face or his unfaltering voice as he promised to always be faithful and kind. I could never have imagined his happiness at the reception, where he danced like an idiot and ate like a bear.

They will find my body after the happy couple leaves for the honeymoon on an island far away. Daniel will not be at the funeral, as everyone will agree to avoid telling him until he is home. When he hears the news about my body's final overdose, he will feel heavy and light at the same time. But mostly, he will feel the sensation of coarse sand between his fingers. He will touch his wife's cheek, smooth and soft, and he will hold her gaze for a very long time. ♦

ANY OLD APOCALYPSE

You are the clog in the pipe in the ceiling. This explains the leak from the pipe in the space between the floor above and the ceiling above the bathtub. The pipe, soft and corroded, bubbles the ceiling and gathers in the basin for bathing. Maintenance doesn't have the snake they need to clear the clog. When the boxed-in claw foot can no longer contain the leak and it puddles in the indents of one-hundred years of footsteps, shuffles, knees and backs pressed into the wood warped floor, no one minds. It means the clog is still in the pipe demanding overflow, off-site retainers, and buckets and buckets for catching all the leaking resulting from that space filled.

As the floor expands and the walls push away and someone enters the apartment and notices their ankles wet and the second story collapses into the first story and the leak water falls, no one minds. There will be casualties.

When the water level is high enough to encounter the pipe of its source and the water bubbles and gurgles at the point of leakage, everyone thinks it's cute. When it goes silent as the pipe is submerged, the building filling to the top, everyone is placing bets on how it will end. When the nails bend out and the sealant peels away and the bricks dissolve and the glass shatters under the pressure of the water and the pressure of their square frames forced trapezoidal, then the dam of the building breaks and the water from the leak from the clog stops eeking out from under the front door and

looses a radial tidal. The winners do not collect on the bets; everyone wrong is underwater.

When the tide finds its edge for a moment of calm and the leak goes on leaking from the pipe exposed now, it offers something to look up to from the edges of the lake the leak has claimed. These depths change every day and the stakes rise in the gambling culture everyone now lives in. The losers find their pets drowned, the photographs and artifacts of their memories consumed. The winners ban bridges from floating across the increasing leak made lake so that every inch of shore is accessible to the expansion.

The winners become ship-builders, deep water divers, historians of this new era, archiving what is lost under the surface of this sea steadily rising. There is a new math, a new measurement of time and distance. This is the era of post-clog and present leak, this is the age of all-in and nothing to lose. The casualties become something to wager and everyone is gambling with their lives. There are no docks to aim for; navigation is negated by the shapeshifting body of the leak lake leaking.

The ships in this leak are unmoored, preferring horizon's horrifying endlessness. Their hulls displace the volume of this uncharted mess, ever leaking, ever clogged. Every liter of lake, of waking lake waters drown the solid world and the soil is easily boarded, undeveloped as it was. It's the clogging that pipe in that building creating the leak at the center of this lake with these boats on it. And it's the boats, S.S. Everyman, so heavy in this lake that rises and rises in reaction and in reaction the shore is taken under and the tides of this simple shifting tsunami are rushing to the foothills of the cascades and slapping against cliffs and clapping the continent into islands, snowcapped peaks protruding.

Still the dripping gathering, dispersing, dripping, defying determined systems of measurement. Still the wagering of winners, only winners left at the end of everything with no end in site. It doesn't take long to lose the memory of the clog in the pipe, the pipe that is leaking, the leaking that was a lake, a sea, an eddy and is now the vast and pulsing ocean. No one needs to remember the source of all this water to accept the waves and for the waves to crest in time with their source. No one can tell where the clog is still under all these areas flooded and under all these ships pushed out to open water. It is just so and all that is known.

Do you see now, how you've altered the geography of me? ♦

CREATURE / PREDATOR

The habitat (pick one): a crowded lunch counter, a latenight bar with full kitchen service, an all hours Laundromat.

At first encounter Predator sinks, blending, camouflaged, in the habitat's darkest corners. Creature's plumage an open presentation of fecundity, though such flamboyance is typical of the males in most species.

For example: male *Poecilia reticulata* (million fish or guppies) have been known to swim close to predators in courtship displays of vigor, a behavior only exhibited if the female is witness. Male *Cyphotilapia frontosa* (mouthbrooding cichlids) construct indented courtship arenas, up to two meters in circumference, fastidiously maintained, at the water's bottom. The female is lured by its depth and breadth and cleanliness, perhaps too, the dance the male performs for her. If she veers close enough, they may share a disturbing kiss.

Similarly, *Ptilonorhynchidae* (bowerbirds) build bowers. Yes, the bird builds a structure to attract a mate, decorating with shells, leaves, feathers, stones (pop tops from Pepsi cans, perhaps, should they be present) and chewed up berries as paint, brushed with a pine needle onto the walls he has built. The berries are a hue of her preference, though they have not yet met.

In the animal kingdom, it is the female who selects the mate.

In the wild, mating occurs with the solitary promise of offspring. Some species such as *Ceratopogonidae* (biting midges or punkies) may not live after the initial insemination. While still clasped to the female, the male's genitals are severed; blocking future mating attempts, ensuring his sperm will generate progeny. For the *Cyphotilapia frontosa*: the eggs will be laid in the courting arena the male has built and, once fertilized, stored in the female's mouth to incubate. In two weeks time, she will release the offspring, to be sucked up again should danger encroach.

Seeing his prey is tired, vulnerable, weakened, Predator advances into the territory she has marked as hers.

"What'da they call you?"

"Guess."

"Beautiful?"

"Creature."

Beautiful Creature.

Nuptial gifts play a vital role in safe copulation for males in numerous species. As such, Predator will offer to provide for Creature the meal, a few cocktails, the quarters for her wash. Furthermore, the female will select a mate who displays direct benefits to ensure survival, including decreased risk of parasites.

Now that surprise has failed to flatter, the chase will ensue.

Bottom-feeding African Lake Flies, *Nkhungu* to the natives, emerge synchronously at the new moon or shortly thereafter. Should they come ashore: babies cry and mothers collect the clothes drying on the line. Windows shut as the populace wait out the swarm in hot darkness.

I have been told they are delicious when deep fried, perhaps sprinkled over small cakes.

Early European explorers told tales of lakes which smoked as if ablaze, describing columns of mating insects a meter high or more. They live for a single day.

Falling to the water's surface as the sun sinks, they release their eggs.

They perish.

(At the chase's conclusion: the kill!)

Come Sunday morning, Creature displays a section of grapefruit and inquires if it looks to Predator a brain. His kitchen walls' hue is a shade of her preference, as is the fruit's.

Sometimes, romantically viewed as an extreme form of monogamy, the prevalence of sexual cannibalism in *Latrodectus* provides the origin of its common name "black widow." Female *Salticidae* (jumping spiders) have been known to consume their potential mate should the courtship dance contain a flaw.

Predator's eyes now fill with fear—the piano's lower register dominating the soundtrack's theme.

The organic body: the most efficient of machines.

Once the male has mated, the bower is abandoned decomposing dust hills. Even something solid as wood decays to soft like buried bones. ♦

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

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Robert Morgan Fisher's fiction has appeared in *The Huffington Post*, *The Spry Literary Journal*, *34th Parallel*, *The Snake Nation Review*, *The Seattle Review*, *Spindrifft*, *Bluerailroad* and other publications. He's also written for TV, radio and film. Robert holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch and often writes companion songs to his short stories. Both his music and fiction have won many awards. Robert also voices audiobooks.

S.M. Knisely is based in Madison, Wisconsin. Her fiction has appeared in *Dogzplot*, *971 MENU* and *Six Sentences*. She also writes for magazines and nonprofits. The lady in Wichita who advises against hitchhikers is real. And yes, you really should gas up at every opportunity in New Mexico.

Shilita Montez holds the MFA in Creative Writing from CSULB, Long Beach in California where she is a professional fine and performing artist. Shilita is also an English and ESL instructor and community activist; therein, she uses art to open minds and change lives.

Chelsea Werner-Jatzke is a writer from New York City living in Seattle. She was selected as a finalist in the 2013 Tupelo Press Prose Open contest judged by Matt Bell. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Keep This Bag Away From Children*, *Extract(s)*, *The Conium Review*, and *ListenParty.com*. She has received fellowships from Artist Trust and Jack Straw Productions and Co-founded *Lit.mustest*, a reading series, as well as *Till*, a writer's retreat.