

**Non Finito, A Novel**

BY

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DISSERTATION

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This dissertation is dedicated to my late father, Terrell B. Costello, who believed though he did not see it.

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Non Finito /nŏn fĩ-nē-tō/ (from the Italian *not finished*) 1: *adj.* term applied to a work of art that is deliberately left in what appears to be an incomplete state; 2: *noun* unfinished object, esp. in art, e.g. a sketch or sculpture; 3: *adj.* without end

## Prologue

They say that your life flashes before your eyes when you die, though no one really knows who *they* are, or even how they would know. You'd have to actually die, and then not die to report that you actually sat through your life, slide by flickering slide like a divine kind of eight millimeter home video. Imagine the trailers. And if you did survive near annihilation, would you really rush to spill your existential guts to *them*? There about ten billion kajillion other things to do and see and think and feel if you had a second chance.

But most people don't have a second chance. They just die. It makes you wonder, though. Is it really a flash? Maybe time runs differently in death than in life. All of this really could be a flash, a millisecond whose parts tick ponderously down so that each breath is a year, ten years. A lifetime in each exhalation.

**Part 1. “Some an army of horses, some an army on foot/ and some say a fleet of ships is the lovelies sight on this dark earth”**

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie Archer cracks one eye open, the one not glued and gritty with the crust of sleep. She is staring at a wall; it is muddy in the washed out light from the streetlamp in pre-dawn, but she thinks she remembers that it is supposed to be green. Some kind of green. Like cucumber. Or mint. Or sea foam. Sea foam sounds good. It sounds familiar somehow. She doesn't recognize the wall even though she thinks she should. Her breath catches in her throat. Where is she supposed to be? She isn't at home. She vaguely remembers that she is not supposed to be at home. Not home. Not with—

*Bernie, 2007*

No. This is wrong.

She can't—start again.

*Bernie, 2007*

It is probably a green wall. She is on her side. She knows only because half of her face, the half with one crusty eye that pulls her lashes every time she blinks, is smashed into her

pillow. It is hard to breathe with only one nostril, with only half a mouth. There is a plastic tube in her nose. Bernie tries to remember if this is the way it is supposed to be. The muddy wall is brightening just a little. Yes, it is some kind of green. Her one open eye flickers. Her head is heavy, even nestled in her pillow. It feels like what she thinks rock must feel like. Her head is rock, like a boulder. Like a boulder pushed off the side of a cliff. Tumbling and crashing and falling down into the waiting sea.

Falling.

Falling down—

And

Bernie cracks one eye open. The sun is up, a strong, bright L.A. sun, reflecting on the wall making little shadow puppets against a dazzling sea foam background. She tries to swallow, but her mouth is thick and cottony. She wants water. She rolls over on her back, which is harder to do than she thinks it will be; she rolls onto the oxygen tube in her nose. It pulls a little. She tries to adjust it but her arms do not cooperate. They hang heavy. This is not a good day. She can't feel them except their weight and a light tingling in the tips of her fingers, like a soft electric current. Maybe staring at them will coax movement, but it doesn't, and right now she only has one good eye. The other seems stuck shut.

She cranes her neck around and tries to see the wall clock. Her one good eye is blurry, but it looks like the big hand is on the two. Day Nurse should be coming in soon. Bernie will ask her for a cup of water. She licks her dry lips, but her tongue is dry too. It doesn't help, but almost adheres to her bottom lip. She closes her one functional eye and waits for the nurse. She hopes

the water will help. She hears the sound of waves, but they seem to echo, as if from inside somewhere. She drifts.

*Sappho, 590 BC*

The ship's bobbing, casting finally settles into the calmer waters of the Aegean; she has spent most of her time on deck digging her nails into the railing, fighting fatigue and nausea and the despair that she will never reach the shore, or that she will. Above, like the scream of a Fury, the sailor in the crow's nest cries land.

What can she do? She steels herself against the wind and sting of salt spray and waits for the ship to take her home.

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie hates sea foam green. That stupid wall is the first thing she sees every morning. The vague memory of a dream: she was floating in the ocean, bobbing back and forth, but the salt water chapped her lips and she was thirsty. She's still thirsty. She reaches back behind her for the call button, but her arm is sluggish. It doesn't want to respond to her. Not a good sign. Not good at all. It may not last long, but these episodes seem to come more often. She contemplates the PCA pump in her IV—morphine—but does not use it. She's not in pain, necessarily. She just wants her body to work like it used to. Like it did before she came to hospice, before she had cancer. Before she was dying. She remembers someone once telling her,

long ago, that we start to die the moment we're born. But still, this doesn't seem fair. Most of those people get on with dying for seventy, eighty years. Thirty-three years isn't exactly a lifetime. But for her it is.

At least her abdomen doesn't hurt—not really. It's a kind of dull, constant ache; she can't remember what it felt like before, to be without this throbbing. She imagines the tumors are asleep. They are taking a break from their slow move from her ovaries, through her bloodstream and into her brain. No, she doesn't use the PCA. No pain meds right now. She feels a grim kind of satisfaction. As long as she doesn't have to use the meds then she is okay. She pretends she is winning.

The door opens a crack, and then opens fully. Day Nurse. Bernie doesn't know which one, since there are a few who rotate throughout the week, and frankly she doesn't care to learn their names. She calls them as she sees them: Day Nurse, Night Nurse, sometimes Doctor, and occasionally Perky High School Volunteer(s), but Bernie tries to avoid them when they come. When Day Nurse leans over her to adjust her tangled oxygen tube, she sees a name tag, but her one open eye is blurry. It looks like the name begins with an S. Sandy or Shelly or Sally. Sally sells seashells by—somewhere.

The nurse's name is probably something upbeat. The word perky is again in her head. She doesn't think she likes that word anymore. Bernice is not a perky name. It is the name of an old, dead great-aunt who smelled like mothballs and camphor, not a thirty-three year old. What was her mother thinking to saddle her with such a name?

Day Nurse asked her something, she can tell by her raised eye brows. She's waiting for a response.

"What?" Bernie tries to make the word come out clearly, but her mouth is so dry and gummy. She's not even sure if the word makes sense in her own head.

"I said, are you hungry, dear? Lunch will be coming around in a bit. And I'll be right back with that water you asked for."

Bernie nods her head, but not in response to lunch. She doesn't remember asking for water, but she must have, since Day Nurse said she did. How can she not remember five seconds ago? What else is she forgetting? She lets her mind go blank, hoping it will fill with those forgotten things. Of course, there were stupid things forgotten like from childhood: the name of her pet goldfish, the capital of Botswana, where she buried the jar of pennies in the backyard. It's okay to forget those. But other stuff. Important stuff. Would she even know that she had forgotten them? Does that mean they never were? She leans her head back into her pillow and closes her eyes against the light in the room. It's starting to give her a headache.

"Don't worry, B. You won't forget me."

She tilts her head in agreement. It is too much to make her mouth move right now. But she thinks back, *I know, Paul. I wish I were at home with you. But you understand, right? You know that I can't.*

She doesn't hear anything except the door open and close.

*Right?*

She opens her mouth. No matter what it costs, she has to say it. It comes out a whisper. “Paul?”

She feels the cool plastic of a cup, and then water touches her lips.

*Bernie, 2007*

It must be morning because light is playing on the green wall. It’s a pretty kind of green. She would like to paint her bathroom or a guest bedroom that color. It reminds her of—she doesn’t know what exactly. Something soft. Something soothing. Bernie yawns big and loud. It just comes out of her and she giggles a little at the sound. The room is so quiet that she feels like a child in a museum or library who has just run screaming down the halls. She expects a tight-bunned librarian to come and shush her, or slap her with a ruler.

She rolls over onto her back and glances at the wall clock. 11 a.m. She nestles back down into the sheets; they smell fresh, like lavender fabric softener and just a touch of bleach. She doesn’t remember anyone coming in to change them. She sees that she is also in a new night gown. It is soft on her skin. She feels good. Her short, brown hair is damp against her pillow, which means she was also bathed. Well, at least she *didn’t* remember that. It’s one thing to be in bed, to have the IV and the oxygen, even to have a catheter—don’t even think about that—but the bathing makes her feel—

Why is she crying?

Drops collect at the point of Bernie’s chin even before she registers them. One or two drip onto her hand. Bernie scrubs at her eyes with the palms of her hands to smear them away.

She tries to hang on to that soft, good feeling. *Don't cry. Don't cry.* She hates crying; a year ago she wouldn't have minded. A year ago, she cried often: when couples exchanged vows at weddings, when newborns gurgled happily in their mothers' arms, when the guy got the girl in romantic comedies. Paul would see her tears and kiss her eyelids, his breath puffing softly on her skin. Now she tries to squeeze them back. She doesn't have time for tears.

There is a chipper knock on her door, unlike the soft but efficient knock of Day Nurse.

"Go away," Bernie calls.

The door opens anyway.

"Guess you don't want your lunch."

The voice is soft, but compellingly bright. Bernie struggles for the name before it comes to her. Jeanette. Next room over. They have only known each other for a week, but in her circumstances, if you are going to make friends, you make them fast. Jeanette has Bernie's lunch tray; it appears to be mashed potatoes, green beans, what looks like a slice of roasted chicken, and a cup of wriggling red Jell-O. Beside the plate is a cup with a straw and a napkin wrapped around a fork and spoon. Jeanette pulls over a rolling side table with a tray attached on an elevated arm. She sets the lunch tray down and slips into an upholstered chair on the other side of the bed, near the window. She is stork-like, Bernie thinks. A stork. All tall and thin limbs. The downy tufts of hair on her head are her feathers.

"How you doing?" Jeanette asks. Bernie watches Jeanette watch her ignore her lunch.

"Craptastic," she says. Her throat is dry, so she sips at the straw.

Jeanette leans back into the cushy embrace of the wingback chair, tucking both legs underneath her bottom. She seems to have no bones, and yet is almost all bone. How can that be? She is a straight line: no breasts, no hips, no soft paunch of belly—last stages of pancreatic cancer. But lines can curve, can't they? Lines of charcoal on a canvas. Paul's hand moving in a blur over the pad of newsprint, over and over in an arc. The arc of her jaw.

*You understand, don't you?*

Jeanette sits in the chair with her chin in her hand. "Are you going to eat your Jell-O?" she asks.

"You can have it."

She hands it over to Jeanette, then reclines back against her pillows, her eyes closed. Jeanette slurps softly.

"I don't know how you can eat that stuff," Bernie says. "I can't hold anything down."

Bernie hears the plastic cup click against the tray and then a soft rustling.

"Sharon brought me another bag this morning. It does help, you know. And I have plenty."

Bernie opens one eye. Jeanette is holding a Ziploc of marijuana, shaking it back and forth in front of Bernie's face. "I thought I smelled that on you," Bernie says. "For a minute I thought I'd died and gone back to college." But she declines the pot. "You need to be careful with that."

"What are they going to do? Arrest me?"

Jeanette and Bernie both laugh, but Jeanette tucks the bag back into her robe pocket.

“Sharon said hi.”

Bernie nods in reply. She has only briefly met Jeanette’s partner, when she first moved into the hospice, but Jeanette talks about her so often she feels like she knows her personally. She has memories of Sharon studying judiciary procedure late into the night at a dining room table, hidden in stacks of text books and notepads; she remembers Sharon, petite, dark, straight hair, at a Fourth of July barbeque in a red tank top. But Bernie doesn’t think those are her memories. She just met Sharon two days ago. She thinks it was two days ago. Jeanette and Sharon have been together for nearly eight years. Sharon comes to visit almost every day.

“We looked in, but you weren’t awake.”

Bernie closes her eyes and nods again.

“You were crying in your sleep.”

Bernie doesn’t respond.

“Again.”

Bernie opens both eyes and trains them on Jeanette. “I’ve been having a pretty shitty couple of months,” she says.

“Join the club.”

Bernie shifts against her pillows. Her back aches now and she can't get comfortable. "I'm pretty sure I already have," she says. Her mouth is dry again—always dry—so she sips more water.

They sit together in relative silence while Jeanette eats most of Bernie's lunch. Jeanette wipes her mouth on the napkin. She keeps looking over at Bernie, though she looks like she is trying to look like she isn't.

"Just say it," Bernie says. "Whatever it is that you're working up the nerve to say, just say it."

Jeanette sighs. "Who is Paul?"

Everything around Bernie freezes. The wall clock stops ticking. Jeanette's mouth is open like a gasping fish.

*Is this really what you want? he asked. We can make it work. I know we can.*

*No. Yes. Yes, this is really what I want. I'll call you when I get there.*

Time starts again, almost like it had never stopped. "Where did you hear that name?" Bernie asks. She doesn't remember saying his name. She *doesn't* say his name.

"You said it in your sleep," Jeanette says. "At least, it sounded like Paul. I guess it could have been something else."

Bernie rolls over on her side and winces a little as she hits a sore spot in her belly. Fluid is building in her tumor again, she can feel the pressure. Hard. Dull. Dead. “He’s nobody,” she says. “I’m tired.” The soft, good feeling is gone. It’s gone.

She hears Jeanette get up and walk to the door. “Okay, sweetie. I’ll see you at dinner.” Jeanette touches Bernie’s arm lightly, then leaves.

Bernie doesn’t sleep. She closes her eyes and tries to fall asleep, but the room is oppressive. She kicks the comforter off the end of the bed; she is just in her night gown. No panties. The catheter line snakes over her thigh. Her legs glisten with sweat. Just under the hem of the gown, her oophorectomy scars, where doctors removed her ovaries and later her uterus, rub the cotton fabric. The armpits are soaked through now; the sheets beneath her are damp. She rolls over to a place on her bed that is not sweaty and closes her eyes.

*Bernie, 2007*

There is so much noise: crunching gravel, low voices, clinking metal, someone’s TV, her own thoughts. Sound is choppy and layered like a collage of ripped paper, one bit slapped over another and lacquered. Transparent and flimsy.

“Here we go, Mr. Nelson—

*You should get up and take a walk. It will clear your mind.*

—sit up for just a minute.” [Rustle of fabric]

“We need to replant the begonias closer to the walkway.”

[Crunch. Grind.]

“Seriously?”

*I’m too tired.*

“Can you bring me some water?”

*Then take a nap.*

“I’ll be right back with it.”

[Squeaking rubber soles]

“We need room for the rose bushes and pampas grass.”

[Wood and metal crash and knock. Gravel crunches.]

*It’s too hot in here.*

“Doctor Marshall, line one, please.”

[Electric buzz]

*Well, quit bitching.*

“Nytol will help you get your Zs.”

[A chorus sings]

*I didn't ask you to be here. You can leave.*

*Is that really what you want?*

*Bernie, 2007*

“Who are you talking to, Bernie?”

Day Nurse is standing at the door of Bernie's room, a metal cart with discarded dishes on it, beside her.

“No one,” Bernie says. “Can you turn the air up?”

Day Nurse nods and sets the thermostat lower; the air kicks in with a hum. Day Nurse gathers up the lunch dishes. “Do you want me to bring you anything?” she asks.

“More water, please. And some ice cubes.”

She nods again and leaves the room.

The room sways dangerously. Bernie clutches the safety railing on the hospital bed. She squeezes her eyes shut.

*“Mommy, I don't feel good,” Bernie cried. She held fast to the starboard railings of the cruise ship as it rocked gently over the waters of the Pacific, on its way to Catalina Island, and then Baja.*

*She felt arms wrap around her little shoulders. But when she looked down it was no longer the ocean swirling around below her, but the porcelain innards of a toilet bowl, a ring of calcium just beginning to form at the water line. She vomited in one seizing convulsion, gripping the seat with blanched fingers.*

*“It’s okay, B,” Paul said softly, rubbing slow circles on her back. “I’m here. It’s going to be okay.” He produced a wet washcloth from somewhere behind him and dabbed her forehead. She lifted her head and sat back on her heels. She trembled with fatigue and an unsettling emptiness in her stomach. Paul gave her a cup of water and she rinsed her mouth out, spitting into the toilet bowl. When she couldn’t lift her arm far enough to reach the handle, he flushed it for her.*

*“You only have one more round,” Paul said. “We’re almost there.”*

*Bernie tried to smile, but she was just too weak to put in the effort. She rested her sweating forehead against the cool of the porcelain and watched the bleary outline of her face swirl in a tiny whirlpool. Another spasm gripped her belly.*

*“Paul,” she said, and then threw up again into the toilet.*

*“No, Bernie, it’s Sandra. I brought your water and ice cubes. Can you sit up?”*

*Bernie does, and lets Day Nurse plump her pillows behind her head.*

“Are you in any pain, dear? Do you want me to get you anything?” She takes Bernie’s wrist between her thumb and first two fingers with professional efficiency and checks her pulse. Bernie feels it beating rapidly, not in her wrist but pounding deep in the center of her brain. Thumping. Little bits of cancer speeding around, knocking into her gray matter like microscopic bumper cars, chipping it away little by little. Chipping her away.

Bernie shakes her head and Day Nurse drops her hand back gently in her lap. “Why don’t you try to nap? I’m about to go off-shift, but Linda will be here. Just buzz if you need anything.”

Bernie doesn’t know where the day goes. Jeanette shows up at her door a little past six-thirty, followed by Night Nurse wheeling a tray with two plates of food. Dinner is penne pasta with a kind of red sauce, broccoli florets and a brownie that is close to tempting. Bernie picks at her meal. Some cliché about life being too short flits through her mind as she watches Jeanette devour her brownie first, sighing with almost obscene pleasure.

“You’ve got to try this,” Jeanette says, popping the last bite into her mouth. “It’s so-o-o-o good.” She licks her fingers to get every last crumb.

“You haven’t been smoking again, have you?” Bernie asks.

“Why, you want some? You look like you could use it.” She gives Bernie a significant look. Bernie ignores it.

“No, I’m fine.”

She flips on the television but there is nothing on. News programs. Infomercials. Some singing competition where people can’t actually sing but think they can and are emotionally

crushed when the judges confirm what the viewers already know. When Jeanette finishes with dinner, she gets up from her chair and begins absently inspecting the items on top of the bureau. There is not much there.

Bernie continues poking at her pasta.

Jeanette lifts a pair of pearl earrings from a glass bowl. “These are pretty,” she says. They are simple teardrops with gold filigree hooks.

“They were my great-aunt Bernice’s,” she replies, not even bothering to look up. The only other gift she got from the woman besides her name. They were going to be for her wedding someday—her something old. She had hoped, maybe, Paul would be her something new.

*I’ll call you when I get there.*

No. Go back to the earrings.

Now she plans to wear them for her funeral. A simple navy blue dress hangs in her closet with a note pinned to it that requests she be buried in it, with the earrings. She had tried it on before the move here and thought she looked rather pretty. Is that a sick thought? To think you’ll make a pretty corpse? She isn’t even sure if the dress fits her anymore. She is down to about one hundred pounds. But the morticians can figure something out—that’s their job.

The earrings tink softly back into the bowl, followed by the dry rustling of papers. Jeanette has a book in one hand and has just opened the cover.

Bernie’s head shoots up. “Don’t touch that.”

“ ‘Turn to me, O my Sappho.’ Let’s jump the cliff together. Yours, Phaon,” Jeanette reads. She flips the book over and reads the cover: *Poems and Ballads* by Algernon Charles Swinburne. “You know, you didn’t strike me as the poetry type, Bernie.” As she turns it back over, a photograph falls from between the pages. It whispers something light and delicate.

“Oh, who is this?” Jeanette calls, holding up the photograph to Bernie. The picture is of Bernie, wrapped in the arms of a lean, shaggy-haired man with a day’s growth of stubble, their eyes locked and only for each other, just about to kiss. Behind them, a fragment of the arc of a Ferris wheel, traced in bright bulbs of light, cuts through an expanse of California coastline.

“Put that down.”

Jeanette holds up the picture for a better look. “He’s a hot one,” she says. “Is this Paul?”

“Put that down!”

Bernie hurls her fork at Jeanette, but misses. The fork strikes the wooden bureau and clatters to the floor.

Jeanette drops the book and the photograph onto the bureau with a smack. Her eyes are round.

“Get out!” cries Bernie. Tears etch their way down her cheeks. She struggles to get out of her bed, but her limbs tangle in her sheets; her cheeks burn. She pounds her fists impotently against her mattress. “Why can’t you mind your own damn business?” She crumples against her pillows. “Just leave me alone.” *Both of you, just leave me alone.*

Bernie buries her face in her arms and tries to pretend she is alone, to ignore the quiet footsteps smothered by the carpet. Her belly aches as a sob drives up into her mouth.

“I’m sorry, Bernie,” Jeanette says softly. “I didn’t mean—.” The door opens and shuts.

The latch is a trigger. It is the detonator of the dynamite that bursts the dam. She shakes. She tries to brace against the pounding waves, but they hit her one after the other; she wails from somewhere deep inside, some hollow place. She doesn’t know if she actually cries out or not. It feels like she fills the room. Bernie slides down into a fetal position, her pillow clutched to her belly.

A moment, or a lifetime later, the door opens. She feels a hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t want to move, but the hand insists; it helps her to sitting. Bernie opens her eyes. Night Nurse—Sandra maybe? —is stooping over her. Ever so gently she removes the sodden pillow from Bernie’s hands and replaces it with a small paper cup with two pills rattling inside.

Bernie pours them into her mouth and accepts a second cup, this one with water. Though her throat is raw and swollen, she chokes back the pills in one swallow. She lets Sandy tuck her back into bed, then watches as she clears the dishes and trays from the room. In less than a minute, the room is empty again. She doesn’t know if it had ever been full.

An orange glow from outside lights the room; shadows are cast in charcoal against its false warmth. Though she couldn’t see the photograph tucked inside the volume of poetry when Jeanette held it up, Bernie knows it by heart. She smells again the ocean, hears its roar mingling with the loud, excited voices of tourists along the boardwalk. Her mouth curves and forms Paul’s name over and over, empty of sound.

Bernie closes her eyes and waits.

Somewhere, a violin plays a soft, somber tune and a man's voice says, "Turn to me, O my Sappho."

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon Charles Swinburne is just taking another sip from his glass of port, ridiculing a particularly ostentatious painting of a Parisian street scene hanging on his host's wall, when Mary Gordon walks into the parlor.

"Turn to me, O my Sappho," he whispers, and taking another swig to fortify himself, is about to approach his cousin when another man, an officer, tall and confident and dressed in the sharp red of Her Majesty's service, comes to her side and offers her his arm. She takes it with a smile and proceeds to make her rounds about the room. She does not once look in Algernon's direction.

Algernon turns his head as if slapped and quickly downs the rest of his glass. He crooks a finger to a servant and is soon equipped with a full one. He cannot remember how many glasses he has had, but to his mind it certainly is not enough, though indeed, it numbers four since the start of the evening with two prior to his arrival to get him along—he rather hated such events. He strides out of the room lest he encounter *them*, but grabs another glass off of a platter before leaving.

Out of the parlor, Algernon leans heavily against the ornately papered wall, head back and eyes closed. Why do I let that Delilah torment me so? he thinks. She is nothing to me, nothing at all. In his mind he grabs her by the shoulders, they are wantonly naked, and he shakes her, her head whipping to and fro on that long, delicate neck. So white and slender. Salty skin on his lips. His teeth graze her throat and she gasps—

“Algernon, my boy,” comes a voice, deep and booming and familiar. “You are not tired already? Dreaming of a lovely wench, no doubt.” A meaty hand grabs his shoulder and Algernon groans inwardly but manages a weak smile when he opens his eyes and sees his friend and fellow writer Dante Gabriel Rossetti looming over him.

“No, Dante,” he says. “Though if this be a dream, I would gladly wake, for any nightmare is better than this.”

Dante is familiar with Algernon’s melancholy. “Mary is here, is she?”

Algernon’s lip quivers at the name, which is confirmation enough. “The Colonel is here too,” he manages, barely a whisper.

Dante pats the younger man on the back, nearly sending him sprawling. “I am sorry, my boy. I know it is difficult.”

Though his friend means well, Algernon cannot help but think that no, indeed, Dante does not know. Dante had married the love of his life, precious Lizzie Siddal. Granted, she was this winter three years dead of consumption, but Algernon would rather the short time with his beloved than an eternity watching her on the arm of another man. The port heats his blood

enough that he almost lets slip that very comment, but he is saved when someone calls Dante's name from across the room and he excuses himself.

Feeling ill disposed to a night of genteel entertainment which the Lord and Lady Norrington's supper party is proving to offer, Algernon makes as if to head to the cloak room to retrieve his coat and hat, but a voice arrests him.

"Cousin, is that you?"

*O dearest gods of perversity.*

Algernon swallows down the bile that rises in his throat. His stomach plummets to the soles of his shoes and he knows there is no escape. He can only turn around and face them—

No. Her. Mary is alone.

Algernon straightens a bit before bowing to the lady. "Dear cousin," he says, his voice low, but thankfully steady. "Far sweeter than any flute,/ more golden than gold,/ far whiter than an egg."

He is gratified by Mary's soft laughter. "You are ever the poet, dear cousin. Is this a new work?"

He shakes his head. "No, divine one. An old one. It is from the second lady of my heart."

Mary blushes, but contrives to ignore the implications of the comment. "Oh, yes, I recall your particular interest in the Greek poetess."

"We two have so very much in common," he says.

“What, pray?”

Algernon catches her eyes and refuses to yield. “Our hearts belong to those whom we can never have.”

Mary turns away first and busies herself smoothing the bodice of her gown. The light of the chandelier reflects on the jeweled ring on her gloved finger. Without looking at Algernon, she says, “I am glad my aunt is feeling better. I was by yesterday and she was able to join us in the sunroom for tea. She sends her love to her dearest Hadji.”

Algernon clenches his teeth. He wants so very badly to talk with his cousin as he once did, before her marriage to Colonel R.W. Disney Leith, squelcher of Hindustani rebellions and defender of the Empire, but neither does he wish to repulse Mary from ever speaking with him again, and so is forced into civility. He replies that he is glad his mother’s health has improved, though he never doubted the Lady Jane Swinburne would succumb to anything less than the Day of Judgment itself, let alone a mere winter flux. The sparkle returns to Mary’s eyes, and Algernon is emboldened. In the parlor, a quadrille begins, and in a move at once daring and desperate, Algernon offers Mary his arm.

Mary hesitates. She does not fear for her reputation, not at all, for she is an upstanding woman with an upstanding husband, and she knows that Algernon would not attempt anything untoward; rather, she knows her cousin well, and she does not wish to raise his hope. But his melancholy countenance induces such pity within her that she places her arm on his and lets him lead her to the parlor. There, they join three other couples to form a square and begin the first form of the dance.

Algernon is quite in raptures as he and Mary dance, and she too is flushed with both exertion and diversion as they clasp hands and turn about in a circle before returning to their place. Algernon watches Mary join the women in the center as they form a wheel; her slender arms are white, gloved to the elbow with silky lavender to match her gown, a corsage of lilacs at her wrist. When the music finally flourishes to a close, Algernon bows and Mary curtsies and all the dancers clap enthusiastically. A blond curl has fallen loose from Mary's coif in the rigors of dancing and Algernon raises his hand to tuck it back, a tenderness he often shared with his cousin in their youth, when the hard, sure steps of officer's boots breaks the spell. Algernon drops his hand like a dead weight.

"Well a day," says Colonel Leith, "my doll is such a dancer, wouldn't you say, Mr. Swinburne?" Mary blushes at the compliment, but is clearly pleased by it; she tilts her face up toward the much taller officer and their lips meet. Algernon cringes back as if burned.

Mary sees his pain from the corner of her eye and ends the kiss; Colonel Leith draws his wife in closer to himself in a way that is at once proprietary yet not boastful. He knows of Algernon and Mary's childhood affection and can plainly see the anguish on the poor chap's face whenever he holds his wife, but the Colonel is confident in his claim to Mary's heart—she, after all, chose him. Though a man and an officer, and so given to a natural bent of competition and pride, Robert Disney Leith is not a cruel man.

Wishing to give ground to the dejected Algernon without yielding his own place of victory, Leith says, "So, chap, I have heard your latest poem has done capital. Bully for you." He

is not a great reader, and so cannot see what the fuss is over scribbling a few lines, but he wishes to encourage his wife's cousin all the same.

And indeed, Algernon's spirits improve just a measure. *He* is the poet, the master of words, and this was a passion he and Mary shared in their youth. Leith will never have that.

"I say, yes," Algernon says, "a modest little book." He stands a little straighter, though this brings his head only barely level with the Colonel's ribcage.

Mary is encouraged by Algernon's revival. "I read only the other evening in the circular that *Atalanta in Calydon* was hailed as a wonder." She does not say that the exact phrase was 'a horror and a wonder,' but instead induces him to recite some of it. She and the Colonel draw up chairs and sit in anticipation.

Algernon's throat dries at the mention of it; his keenest desire is to recite his poetry for the beautiful ear of Mary, and her alone, though this desire has its cousin in his need for public affirmation and accolade. But he does not want to subject his work to the dull hearing of the Colonel, who does not know a simile from a sledgehammer. In the end, however, desire wins out, and Algernon clears his throat solemnly. Those standing around feel something momentous stirring and turn their attention to the poet as well. Some join the Leiths in arranging chairs in a half-moon before the poet. Before he utters a word, Algernon has a crowd gathered around him. Matching the grief in his heart, he cannot help but begin the recital with Meleager's dying words. Catching Mary's eyes he speaks:

Time was I did not shame thee; and time was  
I thought to live and make thee honourable

With deeds as great as these men's; but they live,  
 These, and I die; and what thing should have been  
 Surely I know not

Mary turns away, unable to hold his gaze. Algernon closes his eyes.

Dying, I beseech you, let my name not die.  
 Be thou, dear, touch me with thy rose-like hands,  
 And fasten up mine eyelids with thy mouth,  
 A bitter kiss; and grasp me with thine arms

Tears well in Algernon's eyes as he imagines Mary holding him gently in her lap, as if he were the one dying. She smooths back the red waves of his hair, patting his cooling, clammy brow with the delicate tips of her fingers. Unable to bear it, he opens his eyes, but Mary is not looking at him. Instead, Colonel Leith is whispering something in her ear. He gestures to an officer in the back of the room who is waiting rather impatiently by the door. Algernon wants to scream, but he cannot interrupt the poem.

Me who have loved thee; seeing without sin done  
 I am gone down to the empty weary house

The Colonel takes Mary's elbow and they rise.

Where no flesh is nor beauty nor swift eyes  
 Nor sound of mouth nor might of hands and feet.

With his arm wrapped around her waist, the Colonel leads Mary away. She glances back over her shoulder once, and then is gone through the parlor door.

And now, for God's sake kiss me once and twice  
And let me go; for the night gathers me,  
And in the night shall no man gather fruit.

Clapping erupts around Algernon, but he is too distracted to hear it. He rushes to the parlor door and down the hallway to the foyer, pushing past guests and knocking into a flustered manservant with a tray of wine glasses. But the hall is empty. The maid is only just closing the cloak cupboard door. Algernon jerks open the front door and is just in time to see a hansom cab driving away as its driver cracks his whip over the horse. The gravel crunches under its wheels.

A light snow starts to fall and dusts Algernon's hair, his shoulders, as he stands shivering on the front landing until he can no longer see the cab.

A warm hand brings Algernon back to himself. "My dear boy, you'll catch your death if you stand out so without your hat and coat. Do come in."

Despondent, Algernon allows Dante to lead him back into the house. Dante seats him on a low couch in the foyer and hands him a glass of port. After downing it in one go, he stares morosely at the empty glass. "She's gone, Dante," he says. "She's gone." His slurred words should have been an indication of his growing inebriation; however, it is unclear to both whether his pallor, blood shot eyes and general lethargy are due to the drink or the heartbreak. As

Algernon spends much of his waking hours intoxicated anyway, Dante errs on the side of caution and hands him another glass. A few sips seem to settle him.

“There, now, dear boy. I was about to join a cribbage game with Will Morris and some other gents upstairs. I was coming to fetch you to it when I saw you turning to ice. Shall we go up?”

But Algernon is in no mood for diversion; while revived by the port, his mind lingers in its melancholia. He waves Dante off and watches as he lumbers up the stairs and out of sight. Alone, Algernon walks, rather unsteadily, through the house, first back into the parlor, where the musicians have struck up another dance. He watches swatches of brightly colored silks and organzas, laces, jewels and pearls swing and sway in the flickering light; they are dizzying rainbows. Algernon’s stomach lurches and he leaves this room for the drawing room beside it where several sit at cards. The air is thick with smoke and perfume. The next room is no room at all but a cupboard where a finely dressed man and a chamber maid are in full embrace. Algernon curses and shuts the door before stumbling on down the hallway.

Damn everyone’s gaiety, he thinks, as guests laughing and kissing and cuddling pass him in the hallway. He staggers into no few of them and is greeted with protests and hullo, but Algernon hears none of them. Grumbling in slurred English, French and a few choice Sanskrit words he has picked up from his studies, most of them detailing impossible yet intriguing configurations of anatomy, Algernon opens another door, this one to a darkened, seemingly empty room. He gropes along the wall until he finds a table with the taper and then lights it with a lucifer from his breast pocket. The taper haloes him and casts a dim light only a few meters

ahead. Algernon is in a spare sitting room. It is occupied by a low table in the center and an upholstered rococo arm chair at one end. Somewhere in the darkness there appears to be a settee, but it is an indistinct shadow amid more shadow. The walls are lined with shelves, occupied with books, the titles of which Algernon cannot see in the semi-darkness, and ornaments of a decidedly female nature—vases, dried flower arrangements, ceramic figurines, an embroidered sampler—though their colors are awash in the darkness.

Exhausted, Algernon closes the door and navigates by the taper's light to the chair. He sets down the taper on the table, and as if his legs have given out beneath him, he falls into the embrace of the chair. A small puff of dust tells him the chair has sat in disuse, or else the maid has been delinquent in her duties; as he imagines it is the same one he spied in the cupboard only a moment ago, he likewise images she has been busy elsewhere.

The room is quiet but for his own breath, drawn, he is sure, at the sharpest knife-blade, each intake a searing slash to his soul.

"Oh, Mary," he wails. He sees *her*, draped in lightest lavender, walking away from him, the Colonel's strong arm casually about her waist. She didn't even stay to hear the end of his poem. His head rests in his hands, though he is certain at any moment the weight of his grief will cause it to roll straight off his neck. "How could you leave me?"

"Women are fickle lovers, my dear poet," comes a velvety voice from the darkness.

Algernon yelps, jerks upright, and in the process kicks the low table before him, tipping the lit taper which falls and sputters and dies.

When he finally catches his breath he calls out into the now complete darkness, “Who is there?” His hands shake as he tries to retrieve another lucifer from his pocket so that he makes several attempts before he even draws one out, then several more to light it. When he does, he scans the room with the taper held over his head like a gothic heroine.

It casts a dim light in front of him, illuminating the settee opposite him. This time Algernon squeals like a small child, but he does not knock the table again.

“Really, now, Mr. Swinburne, do take hold of yourself.”

A woman reclines in the settee; in this dim light Algernon can only tell that she has dark hair which appears to be bound up in some kind of chinon that flashes in the flickering candlelight—pearls, perhaps jewels. The curves of her body are displayed at advantage in a pale silk gown, high bodiced, draped across her bosom just enough to arouse, gloves up past her elbows; one hand rests on her hip, smoothing the precious fabric in slow, sensual strokes.

Algernon gulps, struggles to compose himself. Finally he rises unsteadily and bows in the lady’s direction. “Forgive me, my lady,” he says, “I had thought the room unoccupied.”

“Indeed.” The woman smiles and though the room is cast in shadows, her lips are vibrant red and her teeth flash bright white. “You had come here to sulk and mourn in privacy for this woman, this precious Mary, who has left you. For another, no doubt.”

Algernon is taken aback. “Yes. How did you—”

The woman waves away his words and rises in one long, graceful movement, like a breeze rippling a silken curtain. She is taller than Algernon expected, and her skin seems to glow with a pale luminescence that has nothing to do with the single taper's light.

"I knew that this woman had left you for another, dear sir, because that is what a woman will do the moment she realizes she has your heart." There is a terrible flash in the woman's eyes; she appears to grow larger for just a moment—roiling, expanding, a thundering giantess—then settles back again, normal stature, calm as ever. "You told this Mary you loved her, did you not?"

*It was last year, summer, and the family was had taken its holiday back at their ancestral estates in Bonchurch, on the Isle of Wight. The morning had been crisp with the wind off the water, but had subsided into a pleasant afternoon, and Algernon had asked Mary to walk with him down to the water's edge. They strolled arm in arm; occasionally she rested her cheek on his shoulder. Though swaddled as she was in her woolen walking habit, Algernon believed he could feel her pulse beat when she walked so close; he believed that over the salt spray he could smell the fresh scent of rose water and talc on her skin.*

*They walked along the water until they came to a place familiar and beloved of both: a small crook in the shoreline where ancient stone had been exposed into a rocky grotto. There was even a bench worn away by centuries of tidal flow. Algernon removed his greatcoat and laid it on the bench for Mary. There was room enough for both and they sat side by side, watching*

*the playful wheeling of gulls and the slow traverse of the sun over the dazzling waves. Algernon took Mary's hand and kissed her palm.*

*"Our romp by the sea is nearly at an end," Algernon said, his voice wistful. "Winter's frigid fingers will soon be upon us and back to the soot-choked city we'll go." He looked out to the sea. This was his home, the city a vile necessity for the time being as it was there the brightest minds congregated and so the most stimulating and fertile ground. But one day he would come back here. He would raise his family in the same place where he had been reared. He would watch his sons ride swift little shaggy-coated ponies upon the beach as he himself had done. He would teach them to swim in the sea as his own father had taught him.*

*And he would walk upon the shore with his wife, the woman whose very smile made his heart beat.*

*"Mary, my only, we have had a splendid time here, have we not?"*

*She turned now to look at him. "Oh, yes, indeed," she said. "I do so love coming here and spending time with everyone. This is such a magical place, is Bonchurch."*

*Algernon rubbed his hands together in nervous habit. "And our time? Yours and mine?"*

*Mary took his hand and clapped it to her breast. Algernon was ecstatic. "Quite," she said. "Your poetry so moved me, Algernon, as it always has. Even in childhood, your verse had the power to put me in raptures." She paused. "I shall miss our talks, the things you and I can speak on with such freedom."*

*Though she did not say it, Algernon knew to what his cousin referred. They had only just started reading de Sade together this summer, the lovely, sensual, disturbing Justine.*

*“Exactly,” Algernon agreed. “No one else could possibly understand us, our interests. I have often been called lunatic by those who speak from ignorance.” Even Dante cautioned him about making his interests in flogging and the Marquis’s writings public knowledge.*

*But with Mary there was no need to hide.*

*Algernon reached out and tucked back a stray curl that had come loose of her straw bonnet. She signed contentedly. “Oh, cousin,” she said, again resting her head on his shoulder, “I do hope that after this spring I shall be able to return here, though it is not at all certain.”*

*Algernon was not really listening. He had closed his eyes. Now he would say it. Now he would tell her. He felt his nerves vibrating all about his body, like the rumblings of a quake even before one feels the earth move. He trembled. He shuddered.*

*“So much will change,” Mary said. “Robert and I—”*

*In one movement he took Mary’s face in his hands so they were eye to eye.*

*“Oh, my dearest angel.”*

*“—are engaged.”*

*“I love you.”*

Algernon stops when he hears the woman laughing. It is a harsh, brittle laugh like crows. “Indeed, my lady!” he yells. He gets up, or rather, gets up, loses his equilibrium and falls back into the chair, eliciting yet another small puff of dust. The woman laughs even louder. Algernon simmers in his chair. Though the room is dark, his face is fiercely red.

When the woman finally calms herself her voice is back to its original warm luxury, without a hint of rancor. “Peace, my dear poet,” she says. “I do not laugh at you, for clearly your heart has been hammered to pieces by this woman’s insensitivity. I laugh because I have seen it too often.”

Algernon’s face goes from red to white in a stroke. A soft rustling of fabric announces her movements, but the light is still dim. The woman kneels at the chair’s side, places one hand on Algernon’s own which rests in his lap. The other caresses his cheek. Her hand is cool and light. “Algernon,” she whispers, “Sweet, wounded Algernon.” He feels her lips graze his cheek. They too are cool, feather soft.

Algernon shivers at her touch. His eyes flutter. His breath comes rapidly. “What is your name, my lady?” he groans.

She is so close. Her voice is right in his ear, almost as if it were in his head. “Algernon,” she says, “poet.”

“Yes.”

There is a pause, then footsteps. Now her voice comes as if from afar. “Algernon, I—,”

“Yes.”

The door behind him clicks.

“Algernon! I say, are you in there?” Dante’s voice rings through the darkness and Algernon bolts upright in the chair.

Dante is standing in the doorframe of the now open door, his eyes squinting to see through the dim. “My boy, I’ve been searching about the house for you. It is well past one, and I haven’t money left enough to lose at cards. I am retiring and wondered if you were ready as well.”

Algernon ignores his friend. He rises, with exaggerated care, but makes it to the door. He looks about the room, but it is empty. “Did you see her, Dante?”

A glisten of sweat dapples his brow; his eyes are unfocused, his movements unsteady—though this in itself is not new. Dante rests his hand on Algernon’s shoulder, but in an awkward sweep Algernon knocks it away.

“I must find her, Dante.”

He pushes past Dante and stumbles into the hallway.

“Who, Algernon? Who?”

In the parlor the orchestra is beginning a lively mazurka. Young couples are dancing in the center of the room. Others line the walls, chatting amicably or snidely as suits their natures. Algernon, however, causes a stir amongst these small enclaves; he pushes and shoves in and out

of each of them, looking for his mystery woman. Dante huffs behind him, wheezing excuses at disgruntled party guests. Finally Algernon stops.

“I do not see her, Dante,” he says, his head spinning so he is not sure if he is still running or not. He looks down at his feet to confirm the fact. No, indeed, it is the earth that is running. He slumps against the white wainscoting of the wall and slides into a boneless pile.

Dante doubles over with his hands on his knees. “Shall we,” he gasps. “Go. Home. Please?”

Algernon squints up at the two panting images of his friend. He intends on remarking on the fact that his dear Rossetti looks rather pale. But what manages to escape his lips is a weak groan before he passes out cold against the wall.

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie knows she is in her hospice bed, but for a moment a cool, thick nothingness holds her body aloft.

*She staggered past sprawled, inebriated bodies in the back yard of the Delta Sigma Rho house. The house was sweltering and enveloped in a heavy funk of beer and vomit and warm bodies; she had to get out. And a dip in the frat’s pool sounded grand.*

*In the still stupor that enveloped the pre-dawn, she stripped off her clothes with arms that felt like lead, and waded into the deep end. Cool, thick water pulled her slowly down. Her toes and fingers melted and became the water; her legs dissolved. Her arms up to her elbows, then to her shoulders, neck, chin, slowly, quietly liquefied. The water covered her head and she blew out air, sinking deeper and deeper until she sat at the bottom of the pool.*

*She looked up.*

*Through the shifting shimmer of the water, she watched the gray-blue morning, heard only the amplified beating of her heart.*

*She did not exist.*

*For about eight seconds she lost her body in complete serenity.*

*Then her lungs burned and she sucked in a mouthful of water. Shocked, choking on the chlorinated swill that just hours earlier drunken co-eds had been humping, puking and pissing in, she tried to kick up off the pool bottom, but somehow she couldn't find the bottom. She was suspended in the water; it was heavy around her, keeping her trapped. She flailed, but it was like moving through mud. She spun in slow motion, but no way was up.*

*Then a hand grabbed her and hauled her from the water. Her head broke the surface. She gagged. Water drained from her nose and mouth.*

*"You okay?"*

*Bernie looked up into the face of the man who pulled her out.*

*“Paul!” Shaking, she flung herself into his arms and held on as if for dear life.*

*“It’s okay, B,” he said, patting her back. “I’m here.”*

Bernie sucks in a deep breath of air. Air in her mouth. Air in her nose. She drinks it. Her eyes fly open and she is in her bed. She expects to be soaking wet, but no. It must have been a dream. She knows this. Paul can’t have been the one to pull her out of the pool. She was in college at the time, didn’t even know him then. But when she tries to remember the moment as it actually was, his is the only face she sees.

“It wasn’t you,” she says. “You don’t belong there.”

Her belly throbs; her eyes are puffy, and crusty in the corners; her throat is sore and her limbs despondent. Beneath the dream she vaguely recalls the sound of wheels and—horse hooves?—crunching on gravel, but it was probably nothing more than the gardener outside with a wheelbarrow.

Bernie debates the call button on the railing of her bed. She wants—no, she needs, to get up—to be somewhere other than this bed. But she cannot feel her legs and her hands are tingling electric pulses. Didn’t the doctors say this would happen? That these episodes would come with more and more frequency as her cancer spread up from her ovaries, through her blood and up into her brain. They also told her she might experience hallucinations, both from the damage to her brain and the side-effects of her pain medication. She doesn’t think she has been

hallucinating yet, but she wonders if she would know anyway. Wasn't that the point? That they would seem real?

Bernie waits about a minute, but the tingling does not fade. She presses the call button and waits for Day Nurse to come. There is a light, cheerful knock on the door before it swooshes open. Day Nurse bustles in, a different one than yesterday and far too chipper, but Day Nurse nonetheless. "How are we feeling?"

"Shitty."

That is what she intends to say, but it doesn't quite sound right. Her mouth doesn't work like she wants it to. Whatever she had been given still lingers in her system and makes her feel like she has a hangover. Day Nurse tisks her tongue lightly in what appears to be a habit rather than any kind of overt disapproval. She doesn't remember this nurse. Maybe she is a new hire or a transfer. Or maybe she's been here the entire time and Bernie just plain doesn't remember.

"Do you want anything, dear?"

"No," Bernie says. Then as an afterthought, "Yes, I'd like some tea."

"Anything else?"

Bernie thinks for a second. She looks at the bureau. "Can you hand me that book?" It is still lying where it had been dropped, so suddenly, yesterday. Whatever day.

Day Nurse goes to the bureau and takes the book. "There is a picture here on top of it. Do you want it too?" She waves the photograph like it is a little fan. Bernie frowns as she watches.

She doesn't like the way the woman is handling it, so casually. In fact, she doesn't like it being touched at all.

"Yes," she says. "Put it in the book and give it here." She makes her hand move with a concerted effort. She pats the bed and doesn't feel good again until she has the book and the photograph in her own hands. It wasn't like Day Nurse was going to defile it in any way, but after yesterday, she just needs it close to her.

"I'll have your tea in a sec," says Day Nurse, with her hand on the doorknob.

She is halfway out the door when Bernie asks, abruptly, "Is Jeanette in her room?"

Day Nurse turns back. "Yes, she is. Do you want me to ask her to come over?"

Bernie thinks about her photograph. "No," she says. "I don't want to see her."

Day Nurse's brows tilt just a bit, but when Bernie didn't offer anything else, she leaves.

Bernie holds her book of poetry, with the photograph tucked safely inside its front cover, close to her chest until Day Nurse returns with a mug of tea. She watches the woman pull the portable tray over to the bedside and put the mug and a paper napkin down; Bernie doesn't take her eyes off of her until she leaves. When the door swings shut in a rush of air, like a long held breath, Bernie lets the book slide into her lap and reaches for her tea. It is hot, though it feels like she is touching it through gloves. Its warmth is muted in her hands. She blows on it, watching the steam coil, disperse and reform in the currents of her breath. She sets it back on the tray without drinking. She is too hot for tea anyway, but just having it there, with its fragrant, earthy steam rising, makes her feel a little better—a little clearer.

Bernie looks down at the book in her lap. The edges are worn, the spine creased, several of the pages dog-eared. It is a familiar weight. She opens the cover to the title page. She doesn't read the inscription. She doesn't need to. The dark stain of the letters in black ink, tightly scrawled, are as deeply ingrained in her mind as they are on the page: *'Turn to me, O my Sappho.'* *Let's jump the cliff together. Yours, Phaon.*

"Paul," she whispers. "Please understand."

She lets the book fall open in her lap; it settles easily on a familiar, well-creased poem.

She looks down. She knows the page.

The margin is illuminated with thumbnail sketches of a woman's face in various angles and attitudes in the same dark ink as the inscription. The face is familiar—straight nose, strong chin, clear round eyes— but at the same time like a memory from the distant past. Bernie traces the lines with her finger and feels the feathery grain of the paper with the subtle indentations of where the tip of the pen has furrowed into the surface. She smiles to herself because she knows Paul hates it when she touches his work.

*Bernie, 2007*

She tries to remember:

*It was not a large gallery and Bernie had never heard of any of the artists being exhibited; a friend of a friend in the office knew one of the up-and-coming artists opening in*

*Inglewood and since Bernie had nothing to do that night—or any night, really—she went. She met Rachel, her friend in accounts receivable, standing in an admiring pose, in front of a painting that was about as tall as she was. Bernie took a glass of wine from a roving waiter and came up beside her. “What the hell is that?” she whispered.*

*“It could be a post-modern critique of man’s animality amidst urban decay,” Rachel said, tilting her head to one side. She had an AA in art history and thought she knew what she’s talking about. Half the time it sounded like bullshit to Bernie, but Rachel was nice enough.*

*Bernie shrugged. “Is she supposed to be having sex with the lizard or is she part of the lizard?”*

*There seemed to be a tangle of human and scaled flesh, gold and green and soft, warm pink, contorted torsos and limbs, enmeshed in what looked like a chain-link fence. The only distinct body parts of both animals were the woman’s head and breasts and the lizard’s tail. Bernie pressed her lips together in a kind of grimace. She didn’t consider herself an art snob at all; she had a poster print of Sunflowers on her bedroom wall. But she didn’t see the point in paint splatters or squares of color that were supposed to mean something.*

*“Oh,” said Rachel. “There are more over here.”*

*Rachel moved to another painting a few steps away, but Bernie turned in the opposite direction. She was in a different artist’s section of the gallery, that much she could tell. This painting was not of a human-animal hybrid. It was a face, or rather, half of a face. The focus was so close that the person’s eye—she couldn’t tell if it was male or female—was the size of her hand, and the canvas cut across the landscape of the left cheek. She could see laugh lines at the*

*corner of the eye, a sense of joy in this person's life that showed through even in the wrinkles. But inside the eye, in its iris, the color of a foggy morning on a pier, Bernie almost thought she could see—what? She leaned in closer. Hidden behind the pupil, almost like a shadow, she thought she saw another world, just out of focus.*

*Bernie felt compelled to reach out and touch it.*

*"You know you're not supposed to do that," came a voice behind her.*

*She retracted her hand immediately and turned, warm cheeked, to the man standing beside her. "Sorry," she said, bowing her head slightly like a penitent school girl. "I was just curious what it felt like."*

*It was lame, even as it came out of her mouth.*

*The man smiled. He had a lazy smile, like he knew a secret that he might or might not tell you. Completely pretentious.*

*Bernie frowned. She didn't like being made fun of. "Excuse me." She pushed past him and walked the few feet to Rachel, who was pondering another giant painting. This was a bare-chested man wrestling an ox, or maybe having rough sex with it? Both were covered in thick, dark hair; both were bleeding from deep gashes on their hides. She averted her eyes and noticed the man with the lazy smile staring at her.*

*"What's that dude's problem?" she asked Rachel.*

*"Where?"*

*Bernie tried to nod nonchalantly in the man's direction without seeming obvious, but it looked like she had a nervous tick. "That guy there."*

*Rachel turned her head without any kind of pretense. "Oh, he's hot. Go talk to him."*

*He was, in fact, hot, though that was not the right word for him. Hot is for boy-toys and movie stars, she thought. He was something else, but she couldn't put her finger on it yet. His dark hair was tousled in a deliberately non-deliberate way and he had a day's growth of stubble which made him appear casual, careless. He was wearing a navy pinstripe suit jacket over a t-shirt, jeans, and a pair of Converse. Definitely going for the artsy-hipster look. Pretentious, she thought again. She sipped her wine.*

*"You go and talk to him," she said. "Say something smart about this shit."*

*"No, you go."*

*"No, you."*

*They had not devolved into pushing each other like children double-dog daring each other, but Bernie was getting close. Every time she lifted her eyes, the guy with the lazy smile was staring at her.*

*But he settled their school-yard dilemma and approached them.*

*Bernie turned back to the ox-man painting and pretended to study it. She felt the man's presence beside her though she refused to look. She turned instead to Rachel, who just at that*

*moment said, "I'm going to snag a glass of wine," and left Bernie standing alone with the something-like-hot man with the lazy smile.*

*Bernie cursed her under her breath and thought of a hundred ways to kill Rachel.*

*"You seem interested in this piece," he commented. His tone was teasing; that, along with his lazy, secretive smile, made Bernie hate him, regardless of his quasi-hotness. She took a sip of wine to buy time. It was dry and burned a little going down.*

*"Actually," she said, steeling herself even as her own body betrayed her with a quickening heartbeat and painful flush of the cheeks, "I was thinking it's a post-modern critique of the animality of man amidst urban decay."*

*The man chuckled. "I hadn't thought of that," he said. "I thought it was Animal Planet on LSD or something."*

*"Really?"*

*He shook his head. "No, not really."*

*She could tell by his eyes that he was joking with her, but she still couldn't tell if he was making fun of her. He had one hand in his jeans pocket and rubbed the back of his neck with the other. He looked so unselfconscious that Bernie is almost convinced that he was not laughing at her. Almost.*

*"Good," she said. "Because I was just talking out of my ass. I really have no idea what they're about." She blinked for one stunned second. She's not sure if the words actually came*

*out of her mouth or if she was just imagining it. This is what happens when you drink, she told herself. She pretended she didn't just stick her foot in her mouth. She waited a half-second for the guy to respond.*

*When he laughed she thought she was in the clear. "Well, at least you're honest," he said. "I know the guy. He's kind of a prick, so he probably was trying to comment on—what did you call it? The animality of man."*

*"I think he got it then," she said, snorted actually, which was another reason why she shouldn't drink in public. Mortified, she changed the subject. "So, do you come to these things often." she asked. Wow, lame, she thought. Was that the cheesiest pick-up line ever? She imagined herself in a leisure suit with gold chains around her neck asking someone at the bar what their sign was.*

*He nodded. "Yah, I try to see what other people are doing. A good way to scope out the competition." That lazy smile spread over his face again. He winked. "Kidding. Actually, I have some pieces here tonight." He offered her his hand. "I'm Paul."*

*She remembered the name plate by the painting of the face. Paul Dellmoro.*

*"That one over there is yours," she said. The one I almost defiled with the oils of my skin, or something like that. Crap.*

*He nodded. "Did you like it? You seemed interested in it."*

*She shrugged noncommittally. "Yah, it was nice." She felt his eyes on her again and she blushed. It had to be the wine. He must have noticed the flood of color to her cheeks because he added: "You have an interesting profile."*

*"What does that mean?"*

*He tilted his head a little as if contemplating her. "You have a really strong nose," he said. "It stands out on your face." He stuck both hands in his pockets but kept his eyes on her.*

*Bernie frowned. "Uh, thanks. You really know how to flatter a girl."*

*But another lazy smile crept over Paul's face. "I don't mean that in a bad way," he said. He took his hands out of his pockets and stepped forward. He smelled lightly of sweat and fabric softener. "Do you want another glass of wine?"*

*Bernie was thrown off-guard. Paul was close, so close she thought she could feel his body heat through her clothes. She glanced out of the corner of her eye to her wine glass. It was almost empty. She didn't remember drinking it all.*

*"Uh, no," she temporized. "I don't accept drinks from strangers."*

*He held up his hands and stepped back. "That's fair," he said, but the smile didn't leave his lips.*

*They are really nice lips too, she thought. Pliable, soft. Then: Careful.*

*"What I meant was," Paul began again, "you have really remarkable features. I'd like to draw you sometime."*

*Bernie snorted, this time deliberately. "Is that a line? Because it's not a really good one." She gulped the last of her wine and set it on a waiter's tray as he passed.*

*"No, I'm serious," Paul said. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. He withdrew a card from it and handed it to her. It was his business card. Dellmoro Studio, Los Angeles. "It sounds better than it is. My studio is just my apartment downtown."*

*He put his wallet back and stood with his arms crossed over his chest, contemplating. Evaluating.*

*"I'm starting a series and I've been looking for a woman with a face like yours. Strong, open."*

*"With a big nose?" she interrupted. She was still miffed about his nose comment.*

*"Sublime," he said. Paul didn't change his posture, but his voice softened just a bit.*

*Bernie blinked. She dropped the card into her clutch. "I'll think about it."*

*"May I?" Paul was already reaching out toward her face before she knew what he was doing. He took her chin between his thumb and forefinger and tilted it up just slightly. She couldn't help but look him in the face. His eyes were bright blue. Cerulean, she thought it was called. Very artistic.*

*She drew a breath through parted lips. It was getting really warm.*

*"There are some unused rooms in the back of the gallery," Paul whispered close to her ear. "We could have some privacy."*

*The spell was broken. She drew back out of his grasp.*

*Did he think he could just offer to draw her and she'd reward him with a quickie? Her heart thumped in her chest. He held her gaze for a minute, then walked past her. She turned and watched him cut through the gallery and then disappear into a dark hallway in the back.*

*She was still standing in front of the ox-man painting. Muscle and blood and sinew and hide. The impression of Paul's fingers were still on her skin. She looked around the gallery for Rachel and saw her chatting with a man and a woman, both in crisp, stylish suits. Bernie wouldn't be missed.*

*A waiter passed and she snatched another glass of wine. She looked back at the darkened hallway. She closed her eyes and imagined Paul in one of those back rooms, a single naked light bulb casting shadows on discarded crates, filing cabinets, ceramic pillars and splattered drop clothes. He probably already had his shirt off, leaning casually against one wall, a knee cocked up, his arms crossed over a wiry, muscular chest.*

*Bernie downed the wine. She turned from the ox-man painting and walked out the front door of the gallery without a backward glance. She hailed a cab, and before she got in, she tossed Paul's business card in the trash.*

*Bernie, 2007*

It didn't start like that. Bernie looks down at the book in her hand. The face of the woman in the margin is hers; she knows the line, the unmistakable curve of her jaw, the roundness of her eyes, the long slope of her nose: she's seen this face in the mirror her entire life. It couldn't have, could it?

She remembers when Paul drew the thumbnails of her in the margin. Picnic in Echo Park. No sketch pad. The light just so. It could have been just last week. Just yesterday. She flips to the front of the book. The crabbed handwriting. She knows it. Her heart aches because she knows it so well. The room is filled with the thick bulk of her memory and Bernie wants nothing more than to escape it. The book is heavy in her lap. It is a brick. A millstone. Around her neck, pulling her down. She's drowning.

She presses the call button. She presses it again and again. Again. Why isn't anyone coming? Her skin is tight and she knows that at any moment, if she doesn't get out of this room, it will tear down the middle and everything that is inside her will spill out in one bloody, lumpy mess. She presses the call button again and in that instant the door opens. Day Nurse (a man this time), rushes into the room, but stops short when he sees Bernie sitting up in bed, unbloodied, breathing and seemingly in as perfect health as a hospice patient can be.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "What's the matter?"

Seeing him at the door releases Bernie from the frantic need. She grins sheepishly. "Can you help me outside? I'd like to sit in the sun for a little bit."

Whatever he is going to say remains unsaid. Bernie can't tell whether it is annoyance at the maniacal button pushing or relief that he doesn't have to clean up after her incontinence. Day Nurse helps her into a wheelchair, adjusts all of her tubing and pushes her out into the courtyard through the sliding glass door in her room. After situating her in the shade and setting the chair's brake, Day Nurse leaves Bernie alone with a cup of water, a few twittering sparrows and a soft autumn breeze.

When Bernie closes her eyes, she almost forgets that she is sitting in a wheelchair and not a lawn chair in her back yard. It's nice to just sit and be for a minute, instead of being sick.

There is a light rapping on the sliding glass door. She doesn't open her eyes. "Come in" she calls. Then amends, "Or out."

Gravel crunches under strong decisive footsteps. "A note? You said you'd call and instead you leave a stupid goodbye note?"

Bernie's eyes shoot open and she twists around in her chair at the sound of the voice, Paul's voice. He is standing with the sun just over his shoulder, but the glare covers him in blinding, red-gold halo. She can't see his face.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?" she blurts.

"Uh, Roberto told me he brought you outside to sit in the sun."

Bernie blinks and Paul is gone. Leaning heavily on a cane, under the thin trunk of a Japanese maple is Jeannette.

“Jeanette?”

Gravel crunches under a tentative step. “Hi, Bernie. How are you?”

Bernie looks back over her shoulder. Jeanette looks bad. If it’s possible, she’s even thinner and her eyes are deeply sunken and surrounded by bruise-like purple. Her face is jaundiced against the lime green scarf she has over her head. The cane is new. The last time Bernie saw her she hadn’t had trouble walking.

Bernie frowns and Jeanette seems to interpret it as disapproval. “I’m sorry,” Jeanette says quickly, “I can go.” She turns and pushes back the glass door.

“No, don’t,” Bernie says. “Stay.”

Jeanette lets go the door and sighs a little in relief. She sits on the stone bench across from Bernie. They sit in silence for several minutes, Bernie closing her eyes again.

“I love this time of year,” Bernie says.

Jeanette makes an assenting sound. Even though she is quiet, Bernie knows Jeanette wants to say something; the air is heavy with her hesitation and the sound of her rubbing her hands together.

Just say it already, Bernie thinks. You always do this. With all of the waiting around for death, Bernie grows impatient with everything else. She doesn’t have time to pussy-foot around.

“Bernie,” Jeanette begins.

“Hmm?”

“I’m sorry about the picture.”

“It’s okay.”

Bernie isn’t sure if she really means it or not, but she doesn’t want Jeanette to feel guilty because a) it will make Jeanette feel so bad that she will get depressed and stop eating—which is probably why she looks so bad now, and b) it will make Bernie feel bad for making Jeanette feel bad. And beside the fact that her stomach dropped seeing the picture of her and Paul, she doesn’t really know why she was mad to begin with. But she does want to change the subject.

“Has Sharon been by lately?” she asks.

Jeanette’s face brightens. “Yah, she was here yesterday, and she’s coming back this evening after work. Maybe we can have dinner together.”

“Sure.”

Jeanette beams and it is almost like everything is back to normal. As normal as it ever gets here. Jeanette asks, “So, everything is okay?”

Bernie smiles what she hopes looks like reassurance.

“So, can I ask you something?”

The smile stays in place, though it wavers just a bit.

“What happened to you and Paul?”

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie's breath sticks in her throat. Though she says Paul's name to herself hundreds of times a day, to hear it aloud, spoken with someone else's voice—it catches her off guard. Jeanette is waiting for her to reply, waiting for her to somehow vocalize all that she and Paul were and why they are no longer. She doesn't know if she can do it; she knows certainly that what comes out of her mouth will not do him justice by any means, but there is a pressure within her to try. The book, the sketches, the photograph: they have made it impossible for her to forget. No matter what else the cancer eating her brain makes her forget, it won't let her forget him.

"I left him," she says. Her voice is harsh; it sounds foreign to her ears.

Jeanette lets out a sigh, an understanding, commiserating kind of sigh. It is soft and sensitive and she knows that Jeanette means well, but how could she possibly understand?

Bernie knows the next question coming: why? She licks her lips, which are dry. Carefully, with unsteady hands, she brings the cup of water up to her mouth and sips, clears her throat.

*Bernie, 2007*

Why did she leave him? What would induce her to walk away from what was perhaps the best thing in her life?

She sees him.

*Paul scooted back a little on the bed so he was angled just behind Bernie. He finished one sketch and wanted to see what she looked like with her hair up. He combed his fingers through her hair, working from the scalp back until he had the bulk of it loosely in his hands. Then he twisted it up and held it with one hand against the back of her head. The play of Paul's fingers in her hair distracted her—she loved the touch of his fingers, rough callused and yet delicate and agile—so she missed his question the first time.*

*“Hmm?”*

*“What is that?” he asked again.*

*Bernie felt his finger trace a faint pattern on her skin, just at the base of her neck. Startled, she cringed back as she recognized it.*

*“It's nothing.”*

*She turned her head so Paul lost his hold on her hair. It tumbled back in a soft cascade, covering the one hand still at her neck. But with one sweep, Paul pushed her hair over her shoulder and out of his way; he ran his thumb over soft ridges of raised, uneven skin, white and puckered with just the suggestion of dark lines underneath. “You had a tattoo?” he asked, still curious. “A name?”*

*It was. A name Bernie would rather forget, and regretted at least five times a day.*

*“Just leave it alone, okay?” she said. She twisted away from him and slid off the bed to her feet. “It was a long time ago. You know, a stupid kid mistake.” She would have sounded completely casual except that her voice broke over the last word. She swallowed it down.*

*Stupid, stupid mistake. Long time ago. Can't touch her now.*

*Paul stood beside her. "Whoever he was, I'm sorry he hurt you," he said. His voice was low, soft. The heat of his breath warmed her ear. He gathered her hair to one side and bending his head lower still, he kissed the scar. "I promise I'll never hurt you like that."*

*Maybe he meant it, she thought. Maybe he really believed he could, not erase, but paint over someone else's mistake. She wanted to believe he did. But can anyone keep such a promise? She didn't know. People hurt each other. That's just what they do.*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie touches the back of her neck. "Do you know who Sappho is?" she asks.

Jeanette nods. "Greek poet from Lesbos." She snickers a little. "Of course I'd know that one."

Bernie grins. "Of course," she says. "Well, Paul—," she stops short. She takes a breath to steady herself. "Paul was a painter and he wanted to do a series of Sappho portraits." *To discover her in the gaps, isn't that what you said?* "And he asked me to be his model."

Bernie closes her eyes. She hears his voice in her ear, as if he is right next to her:

*My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes*

*Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs*

*Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound*

*And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound.*

She feels her own lips moving, but she hears both of them speak together.

“I pray thee sigh not, speak not, draw not breath;  
Let life not burn down, and dream it is not death.”

“Bernie?” Jeanette’s voice is concerned, but it sounds far away. It takes Bernie a moment to remember where she is. She opens her eyes.

“That’s from *Anactoria*,” she says. “It’s a poem from that book you found. It was Paul’s favorite.”

**Part 2: “...for the woman who far surpassed all others”**

*Algernon, 1865*

When he wakes up he is in his shirtfront and trousers, in his own bed. He remembers being somewhere else, somewhere distant and not at all familiar, though not unpleasant, but that memory fades even as he tries to take hold of it. On the bedside table a note in the crabbed hand of Dante Rossetti informs him that he should expect his friend to call upon him after breakfast. By the slant of the painful rays of sunlight penetrating to the very depths of his brain from the open window, it is approaching eleven o'clock.

“Bugger him to the icy reaches of the betrayer's hell,” Algernon swears, in Italian because it seems apropos; he struggles to extract himself from his tangled sheets without moving his head, unsuccessfully. Every tug and every shift reverberates through his skull like a ship's horn through the London fog—fierce, enveloping, interminable. He curses again, this time quietly and less dramatically under his breath. He reaches to the nightstand for the handbell to summon Annie, his maid, but the thought of ringing a bell anywhere in the vicinity of his aching head stills his hand. With a little more effort, Algernon untangles himself and slides out of bed. He staggers over to his dresser and finds water still in the ewer and basin. With a wince, he splashes his face. It is not cold water, but cool enough to revive him somewhat. He changes his clothes and runs his fingers through the unruly mass of his hair.

He looks up into the looking glass above the bureau and for one cold moment, he sees a woman—*his* woman—standing behind him with the touch of a smirk that curls the edges of her mouth.

Then the door to the room opens. The maid announces Dante.

“Algernon!” he says, “so good to see you among the living.”

Algernon turns, startled, at the voice of his friend; when he looks back at the mirror, the woman is gone.

“Did you see her?” Algernon asks excitedly. He studies the mirror, hoping to catch a glimpse of her reflection, but she is not there.

“Who? Annie? Yes, she’s the one who let me in, dear boy,” Dante replies. His tone insinuates what Algernon himself wonders, that his brain is still swimming in port.

But Algernon waves him away. He cares nothing for the downstairs maid, though admittedly, when he thinks she is not looking, he fixates on her round little rump and imagines taking a birch switch to it. What beautiful red stripes he could raise on her white skin.

Algernon sighs wistfully, but lets the image go. “No, Dante. Never mind.”

For a moment both men stand facing one another, both at a loss in the sudden silence. Then Dante recalls the morning post rolled in his breast pocket. He withdraws it and hands it to Algernon. “Now do try not to get very worked up.”

Algernon stares at the front page, his brow clenching in puzzlement.

“What of it? ‘Railway frenzy grips the countryside.’ Are you suggesting I enter speculation? Really, Dante—,”

But Dante shakes his head rather sadly. “The society section, Algernon.”

Algernon rifles through the paper until he finds the pages that report upon the doings and goings-on of the known and striving-to-be-known. Below the list of public and private balls, suppers and fetes of the coming week is a short article reviewing the events of the last few evenings. The headline might just as well have shrieked in Algernon’s ear. His whole body jerks with shock.

‘Pervert pedant runs a drunken muck.’

Below it reads:

‘Last evening personages of esteem gathered for a spectacular evening of entertainment and discourse, and spectacle was indeed their receipt. Emboldened by his recent, though perhaps disproportionate success of *Atalanta of Calydon*, Mr. Algernon Charles Swinburne lately of Cheyne Walk abused the hospitality of his hosts to no end. Witnesses saw Mr. Swinburne staggering drunkenly down corridors, wailing wildly and incoherently. Indeed, Lady Hamilton was overcome by the scene. Said her lord husband, “A more shocking display I—,”

Algernon tries to read further down, but sudden tremors racing up and down his body cause the paper to shake. His fingers clench spasmodically; his hands twitch and for a second his eyes unfocus so the ink of the newspaper runs together in a blurred sort of wash. Though not

epileptic, his doctors assure him, he has been prone to these episodes since a small, excitable boy. Now, a still rather small, excitable man, these ‘fits of passion,’ usually caused by drinking but sometimes just the force of his imagination, often cause spells of shaking and the occasional black-out.

Blood pounds in his head. He feels he is spinning, spiraling out somewhere distant. Is a woman crying? he thinks vaguely, noting it odd that he should hear Annie from below. And why ever should she weep? But then the sound is gone. He feels Dante come around to him and put both hands on his shoulders. The pressure is reassuring; it anchors him. Slowly he returns to himself though the sunlight streaming in through the open window dances fitfully in small spirals of colored spots.

“Are you there, lad?” Dante asks.

Algernon swallows and nods. He hands the crumpled newspaper back to Dante, who stuffs the wrinkled mess back into his breast pocket.

“Let’s have some tea, shall we?” Algernon asks suddenly, and before Dante can reply, he strides out the door and down the hall, leaving his friend, as usual, to chase after him.

The two men sit in the small parlor of the house. Annie, the downstairs maid, sets up the tea things for them, while her employer sneaks fleeting glances, though more habitual than enthusiastic, at her buttocks. Once she removes from the room, Algernon and Dante have their tea and chat as if the former’s fit had not occurred. Indeed, in Algernon’s mind, now in as relative repose as it ever achieves, the last fifteen minutes might well have not happened at all.

“She really was the most intriguing creature, though she must have left just before you entered,” Algernon says, biting into a sugared biscuit. “You are certain you did not see her at Norrington’s?” He taps his leg under the table, not out of irritation, but simply the need to have some body part in constant motion. The table shudders minutely though Dante ignores it out of habit.

“No, indeed, and I should think I would remember a woman of that striking description.”

There is a flicker just outside of Algernon’s peripheral vision.

“I should like to speak with her more,” Algernon says. “There was something quite—compelling—about her.” He does not tell Dante what the mystery woman said about Mary. He does not even mention Mary’s name. “I think I shall inquire after her at one of the shops. Where does Christina go for gowns?”

Dante snorts. “You know my sister. She is all about the sackcloth and ashes. She wouldn’t spend a shilling over a burlap sack to make a dress.” He sips his tea a moment in thought. “Perhaps Lawnton’s. Fashionable women frequent it, I believe.”

Algernon nods, then looks meaningfully at the door, which is just past Dante’s rather sizeable but elegantly garbed shoulder.

Dante’s brows mount a siege of his hairline, but he says nothing. Algernon knows already what his friend will say, and he knows Dante knows this as well. Dante merely nods and saves them both the trouble. He rises from the chair. “Well, my boy, do not overtax yourself running about. I shall be at Will’s for supper. Do stop in. I’m sure Janey will be pleased to have you.”

Though William Morris is indeed a fine friend of both his and Dante's, and a substantial writer in his own regard, Algernon has little thought to dine with him and his wife; the last night he had done so had been an interminable evening with him fixated on the melodramatically heaving bosom of his friend's wife. Besides, Algernon feels certain he has a date with his destiny.

Unfortunately, his destiny is somewhat waylaid, or perhaps has forgotten the engagement all together. As soon as Dante quits the room, Algernon dons his jacket and hat and is out the door as well. He hails a hansom cab with orders to take him to Wilshire Street and Lawnton's. He waits for the shop girl to finish with a customer, then asks if she has seen any woman come in that matches the description of his mystery woman: tallish; dark, curled hair; olive skin; a foreign accent—Spanish, perhaps, or Italian, Mediterranean. The girl says no, but asks about the shop if any of the others have seen such an unusual woman. None have.

Algernon leaves his card with the girl, then quits the shop, dejected. Though it was not at all likely that Algernon would find his woman there, his hopes had been significantly raised, and now they hang about his ears. Still, there are other shops, he thinks. The day has only yet begun.

By half past three Algernon is out of calling cards and patience. Muttering epithets about this last shop girl's dubious parentage—he is certain she was laughing at him—he straightens his hat and stalks off in search of the nearest public house. His stomach is growling and he is in dire need of a drink.

He had not known until today that there were so many fabric shops, seamstresses, ribbon and oddments stores, milliners, and these just within this block of Wilshire! Who knew the dressing of women required so much work?

The sun bursts through its usual covering of cloud for just a moment, reflecting painfully in a shop window. Algernon squints and mutters a curse. In the process, he barrels into a woman coming in the opposite direction. There are cries of alarm and mock outrage. Algernon bows and apologies. "Forgive me, dear lady." He looks up. He sees his mystery woman.

Overcome with excitement, Algernon grabs the woman's hands. "Oh, my dearest madam," he says, "I have been looking about town for you."

The woman, however, jerks her hands from his grasp. "Unhand me, sir," she cries. "I dare say you are mistaken."

And he is. Algernon blinks several times in rapid succession and suddenly the woman before him is not the lithe, dark beauty of yesternight's supper party, but a rather short, round and altogether unhappy woman of middling years. Her face is red and irate beneath her felt bonnet.

Algernon drops his hands to his side and stammers an apology as the woman storms past him. He looks back, watches her go, but she fails to transform into his mystery woman. He rubs his eyes, still dazzled by the sun. Across the way and witness to the entire debacle, two young women giggle behind their hands. Algernon purses his lips with disdain, but in a blink he is not looking at two impertinent young women but his mystery woman, and, of all people, Mary. The two are thick together, arms about each others' shoulders, laughing at his incompetence.

“Mary?” he calls, stunned and hurt.

The women giggle again. Suddenly they are returned to their original forms. They shake their heads at him and hurry on their walk in order to avoid the stumbling lunatic. Sweat trickles down Algernon’s forehead and he dabs at it with his pocket handkerchief. He rubs his eyes. What in God’s name is the matter with him? Now desirous of a drink more than ever, he races down the boulevard, dodging people as they walk along. He keeps his head down, but now the calls of caution and the cries of irritation are not the myriad voices of a myriad of women—old and young and cultured and common. No, every cry sounds in Algernon’s ears in the sweet, soft voice he has known since childhood.

“Dearest gods, leave me be!” he yells, covering his ears with his hands. Now walkers part to give him berth with the alacrity of a biblical miracle. Algernon races past blurring bodies and alarmed cries until he reaches the end of the street, and then turning, he runs back to Cheyne Walk without stopping, without looking, for he knows whose face he will see in every woman he passes.

When he finally reaches number sixteen, he bangs on the door for admittance. Annie barely has time to open it and jump aside as Algernon rushes past her and up to his own apartment. Algernon flings himself onto the bed, face down. He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to listen to the rumble of the passing carriages, the calls of ‘hullo’ from the street, the splash of chamber pots being emptied in the gutters. He tries to breathe in the smoky mists from kitchen stoves, dropped manure along the cobblestones, the hyacinth bush in a pot on the front door landing. But all he hears is Mary’s high, sing-song voice telling him she is engaged to the

Colonel; all he smells is talc and sweat on her skin when she leans in to kiss his cheek and say goodbye.

“Oh, Mary,” Algernon groans. “Mary. Mary. My heart.”

*Algernon, 1865*

He refuses to leave his room. Despondent, Algernon orders Annie to bring the decanter of port and a glass to his room and to repulse all visitors, especially Mr. Rossetti. Annie bobs quickly and does as she is bid; he sees her roll her eyes heavenward before she is out the door, but he is just too depressed to reprimand her.

Below, Annie tells the others, “Master Algernon is in one of his fits again.” The cook crosses herself with a “Lord, bless me,” and scraps plans for the lamb pie, mumbling at how her last master was not so contrary, but nonetheless thankful, as less food eaten in the house means less cleaning to do and more time to pour over the love letters she has secreted from her beau, William, a doorman from down the street. The rest of the staff nod and grumble and get on about their day.

Algernon sits in bed and looks out the window. The day, to him, is bleak, though the sun shines clearly through the window. Mary, dear Mary. And now this mysterious woman. Lost. He fancies he can hear the low creak of his heart as its sinews dry and fall silently to pieces. Why could he not find love, just one love?

Annie knocks on the door and slips inside, her eyes lowered to the tops of her slippers. She sets the tray with his port and glass on the bedside table and scuttles away. Algernon glances at her backside as it sways in her gingham, but it does not excite him. He looks down at his lap, imagines swatting Annie with a birch switch, but nothing stirs. He closes the door. He returns to the bed. He pours a full glass from the decanter and drinks it as if it were water and he a man in a desert. He slumps back against the headboard, sullen.

He pours another glass and is briefly diverted from his melancholy by the sound of Dante at the front door.

“I’m sorry, sir, bu’ Master Algernon’s not to be disturbed by no one, ‘e says. If you please, I’ll say you called.”

There is the sound of huffing and stamping, and then clicking of heels on pavement. The front door closes. From downstairs the back door opens. He hears the cook say, “Yes, do come in,” but Algernon pays little attention to that.

As he finishes the glass, a warm, pleasant feeling begins to suffuse his body; the light in the room softens. He closes his eyes and leans his head against the headboard. Every now and again he rocks his head back and forth as if to a song only he can hear. He smiles a little to himself. Algernon reaches for the decanter.

Instead of glass, his fingers encounter flesh. “I see there is no glass for me.”

Algernon blinks owlishly for a moment, but the image of his mystery woman does not disappear. “How did you—?”

The lady cocks her head as if to reprimand him for rudeness. He catches himself, and instead says, "My lady, forgive me. I hadn't expected you. I can call for Annie to bring up another glass." He reaches for the handbell, but his hand is stopped.

"That is not necessary," she says. She folds herself gracefully down into sitting at his bedside. She lets him pour more port into the glass. Then, she covers his hand with hers and brings the glass to her own lips. When she is finished, she sets it aside. "That is enough for now," she says. Though her tone is rich and honeyed, Algernon hears in it a subtle reprimand and responds as one does when scolded.

"I looked all about for you today. You are difficult to discover," he pouts, crossing his arms over his chest like a child.

The lady's brow piques at his tone. She examines him for an uncomfortable moment; under her scrutiny his temper flags and he drops his arms to his side. "I wanted to see you," he says, this time quietly.

The woman, elegantly dressed as she had been when last he saw her, this time in a dove gray walking gown with a matching satin bonnet, reaches across the rumpled sheets of the bed and takes Algernon's face in both her hands. "I know," she says softly. "I am here now."

She releases him and he almost cries; the place on either cheek where her hands held him pulses lightly with his heartbeat. He would give anything for her to touch him again.

"I am here to help you, Mr. Swinburne," she says.

The woman's words slowly sink into his skull past the vague morass of his own gloom and dejection, and when they do, he lifts his head. "Help me?"

She smiles and it is brilliant. Algernon, bobbing along in that murky sea of early intoxication, is dazzled and cannot take his eyes from her. He watches her lips move in slow deliberation as if time itself has been arrested. They round and stretch over letters in a perfect ballet: lips, tongue and teeth dance together. If she had told him in that moment that she was the resurrected Christ, he would have believed her.

"Yes, my dear Algernon, help." She comes closer to him. Her skin radiates, not heat exactly, but a kind of energy that is at once cool and electric. His flesh tingles to be near it. "I can help mend your broken heart," she tells him.

"My heart," he repeats, as a child learning his lessons.

"Yes," she says, her lips taking on a small, sympathetic frown as though she shares in his sad state. "Mary has crushed your spirits."

Algernon blinks as though remembering something afar off. "Yes," he agrees vaguely.

"Yes," she repeats. "She has rejected your love as if it were rubbish, used and discarded. She chose the Colonel over you."

Tears leak from the Algernon's eyes, run down into the wiry stubble of his beard, but he does not notice. The woman's words ring sharply in his ears. "She chose *him*," he whispers.

The woman nods, commiserates. "But I can help you."

Now Algernon is hearing for the first time. His head lifts, lucid and clear. "You can help me get her back? How?" he asks. "She is married to *him*."

But the woman clucks her tongue. "No, Algernon, not get her back. Why would you want the woman who has played you for a fool, trampled your heart until it is a bloody pulp in the dust and enjoys the pleasures of another's bed? Surely she is laughing at you when she is in the Colonel's embrace." The woman's voice has grown louder, more shrill. Her breast rises and lowers in great agitation. Color rises in Algernon's face. He sees a naked Mary writhing in desire upon sweated sheets with the Colonel, his own bare torso glistening. They both pant in agony and pleasure. And they laugh to themselves how they have utterly devastated Algernon.

It is too much. Algernon claps his hands against his ears as if the couples' groans come from without. "Please, stop," he wails. "Please just make it stop."

There is a knock at the door. "Master Algernon, are you alright?" There is no response, only more cries. "Shall I call the physician, sir?" Annie calls through the door. She tries the knob, but the door is bolted. When there is no response, she creeps away from the door, muttering to herself why she of all girls should be stuck with such a queer employer.

Algernon continues wailing.

The woman with him gently takes his hands in hers and draws them away from his ears. He is bawling uncontrollably, hiccupping for breath in between each painful sob. The woman takes his head and rests it on her bosom; she pats his hair like a child. "There, there, my dear," she says. "Soon this will be but a memory. I will teach you." She coos to him, rocks him, until his crying subsides and his breath steadies.

With eyes closed and face still pressed against the woman's soft, comforting breast, he asks, "Who are you, my lady?"

She is silent for a long time, and Algernon thinks perhaps she will not answer him. But then he feels the rumble of her voice even as he hears it. "You may call me Sappho, dear Algernon."

"Sappho." He whispers it with reverence. A beautiful, perfect name. He nestles his head more comfortably against her chest. After a time, he falls into a fitful sleep borne of intoxication, grief, and yet the spark of hope.

In his dream, or perhaps in the part of his brain too disquieted to sleep, he hears Sappho say, "I will show you how to have the most exquisite revenge on them all."

*Bernie, 2007*

"I became Sappho for him," Bernie says. She shifts in her wheelchair, unable to get comfortable. Or perhaps it is not the chair.

"You totally could be a model," Jeanette says. She leans forward. Her eyes are bright.

*"Bernice Archer, corporate accounts," she said, securing the telephone receiver in place between her cheek and the dip in her shoulder. She reached for a pen from the cup on her desk.*

*"You are one hard girl to find," came a distinctly male, amused voice on the other end.*

*“Who is this?”*

*“Paul Dellmoro.”*

*Bernie frowned for a moment before she remembered the name. The bastard from the gallery.*

*“How did you get this number?” she snapped. She looked around to see if anyone in her office noticed.*

*“Your friend Rachel told me where you worked,” he said.*

*I’m going to kill her. Aloud, she asked, “What do you want?”*

*“I want to draw you,” he said. “I meant it when I said you have a striking profile.”*

*“Go to hell,” she said, and hung up.*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie blinks. No, that can’t be how it happened. She looks at Jeanette, who sits frozen and smiling like she is in a photograph. The air is still. There is no birdsong, no breeze. She tries to remember again about that call.

*“Your friend Rachel told me where you worked,” he said.*

*I’m going to kill her. Aloud, she asked, “What do you want?”*

*"I want to draw you," he said. "I meant it when I said you have a striking profile."*

*"You just wanted a quickie in the back."*

*There was a pause on the other end. "Yes," Paul said finally, "that too. I waited for you back there."*

*"Good."*

*It sounded like Paul cleared his throat. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was a jerk."*

*"Yes, you were," Bernie replied. Still, jerk that he was, it was kind of flattering that he made the effort to find her and try again. "I'm going to hang up now," she said.*

*"No, wait," Paul said. "I was a jerk, I know, but please give me another chance."*

*Bernie did not reply, so he went on. "I know you liked my work, I could tell by the look on your face."*

*Never mind. He's an asshole.*

*"I really would like to use you as a model for my next series. You have the exact look I want."*

*Right, she remembered. Striking features. Big nose. Whatever. When Bernie still did not speak, he added. "It would be in a completely professional capacity. I can give you the names of other models who have worked with me, as references."*

*Bernie considered Paul's proposition while leaving him in conversational dead air. He was a jerk, but he was right: Bernie, in some strange but palpable way, was moved by Paul's work, and it was flattering and ego-appealing to imagine herself as a part of it.*

*"Are you there?"*

*She let the silence hang there just a second longer. "I don't know," she said slowly, stretching her words in an attempt to allow an answer, yes or no or whatever, to spring to her lips.*

*"Before you decide," he said, "will you at least let me show you, explain to you, what I'm working on?"*

*Before she could respond, Paul added, "If you don't like it you can tell me to fuck off, but at least give me a chance."*

*An answer sprang to her lips: "Fine."*

*A sigh of relief answered her from the other end. "Great," said Paul. "Rachel told me you get off today at six. I'm in the downstairs lobby of your office. I'll see you in five minutes." And he hung up.*

*A few minutes later Bernie picked him out of the crowded lobby: he was the only one not in a suit. He looked, in fact, as if he was wearing the same clothes as that night, T-shirt, jeans and sneakers. He had a black messenger bag slung over one shoulder.*

*He smiled when he saw her.*

*"I saw your name in the directory. M. Bernice Archer, huh?"*

*Great, first he made fun of her nose, and now her name.*

*"What does the M. stand for?"*

*Her eyes narrowed on him. "Mary," she said bluntly.*

*"You don't look like a Mary to me. I think Bernie suits you better."*

*She glared and he held up his bag to shield himself, though the smile was still planted firmly on his lips.*

*"Whatever," she said, rolling her eyes. "Let's just do this."*

*He nodded and rather gallantly opened the lobby door and waited for her to precede him before sweeping out himself.*

*He flagged down a cab and opened the door for her. "After you."*

*But she crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not getting in until I know where we're going." The cab driver grumbled something that sounds like: 'c'mon lady,' but she stood her ground. He could be some kind of predator who pretended to be an artist but secretly kidnapped women and did all kinds of crazy, crime-drama stuff to them.*

*"Well," Paul said, rubbing the back of his neck, "I thought I could explain my concept to you over dinner. My treat, of course."*

*What was it with this guy? He was self-assured, that's for sure. Bernie didn't know if she liked that or not. On the other hand, a free meal was a free meal and all she had waiting for her back at her apartment was hamburger helper.*

*She stepped down off the curb and ducked into the cab. Paul followed.*

*"Water Grill," he told the cabby.*

*They arrived and Paul held open the door for her. Inside, he walked confidently to the hostess' station. A few minutes later they were seated. As they were led away, Bernie glanced over her shoulder. There was already a line in the restaurant foyer. Inside, most of the tables they passed were filled.*

*Paul pulled out Bernie's chair for her.*

*"It's amazing we got a table so quickly," Bernie said, laying her napkin across her lap. "I would think you would need reservations at a place like this, even on a weekday."*

*Paul shrugged and played with his own napkin. "Well, I called them up Friday night after the show."*

*Even with the reservations, they were placed at a table in the back near the kitchen. Still, Bernie was pretty impressed: exposed, mahogany beams; clean, modern décor; warm, hazy light from wall sconces and tea lights on tables. She'd been inside once for a lunch-time conference with a client, but here the soft glow of evening was almost magical.*

*"What if I had said no?" she asked.*

*"I don't know," he said. "But I'm glad you didn't."*

*A waiter came by to take their order.*

*"As I recall, you prefer white?" Paul asked, skimming down the restaurant's wine list.*

*"I do," Bernie said, but she made a mental note to limit herself to one glass. She had suffered dearly for those hastily gulped glasses at the gallery, and she didn't doubt this artist-Romeo would try to get into her pants again if she wasn't careful.*

*While they waited for their meals, Paul handed her a few books from his bag.*

*"What is this?" Bernie asked.*

*"They are poems, fragments really. Turn to number sixteen."*

*Bernie flipped to the page.*

Some an army of horses, some an army on foot  
 and some say a fleet of ships is the loveliest sight on this dark earth.  
 But I say it is  
     what you love.

    easy to make this understood by all.

For she who overcame everyone  
 in beauty, Helen,  
 left her fine husband—

behind and went sailing to Troy. She did not spare

a single thought for her children or her dear parents

no—

led her astray

for

lightly

reminds me now of Anactoria

who is gone.

I would rather see her lovely step  
and the motion of light on her face  
than chariots of Lydians or ranks  
of foot soldiers in arms.

not possible to happen  
to pray for a share

toward

out of the unexpected.

*“It’s also called ‘To an Army Wife, in Sardis.’ It’s by Sappho,” Paul said.*

*Bernie turned to the next page and then back again. “It sounds like something’s missing.  
What happened to it?”*

*Paul nodded. "Sappho was a Greek poet writing around 600 BC. The legend goes that just after her death, most of her poems, almost nine volumes of them, had been written down and housed in the library at Alexandria, in Egypt. It was like the greatest collection of literature and knowledge in the known world. And then it was destroyed when the city was conquered. All of it up in smoke and flames. Those little fragments are all that's left of her work."*

*Bernie held the slim book in her hands. From nine volumes to about a hundred pages.*  
*"That's kind of sad."*

*"And almost nothing is known about her. There are some myths, but some of them contradict each other, so there is no real way of knowing who she was. I even read one essay that thinks she wasn't even a real person at all."*

*He reached into his bag and pulled out two more books.*

*"More poetry?" Bernie felt like this was some kind of English lesson.*

*He smiled his quirky half-smile. "Sorry. This one," he said, holding up a thin paperback, "is Swinburne. Algernon Charles Swinburne. He was a Victorian poet. He wrote a couple of poems using Sappho's voice. The one I'm really interested is Anactoria."*

*Bernie found the poem. The corner was dog-eared and the pages worn. There were pencil marks all over it, notes in the margin.*

*"It's long," she said.*

*"I'll spare you the reading, though I think you'd like it. It's about Sappho's relationship with her lover, Anactoria. It's pretty intense, very graphic."*

*"I bet that's why you like it," Bernie said. "A little girl-on-girl action."*

*"Hey, I won't lie. But I actually like it for another reason too. Sappho feels betrayed by Anactoria, and she exacts her revenge by writing. She tells Anactoria that when she is long dead, people will still read Sappho's work. She'll live forever and Anactoria will fade away."*

*"Ouch."*

*Paul nodded. "She's severe." Paul picked up the other book, an old, cloth-bound hard back. "This is Ovid, a Roman poet. He wrote almost five hundred years after Sappho lived. Pretty much he has Sappho jump off of a cliff out of despair because she was having an affair with a boatman named Phaon, and he rejected her."*

*"Is that true?" Bernie asked. "I thought she was, you know, a lesbian."*

*Paul shrugged. "I mean, she is literally because she was from the island of Lesbos, but otherwise, I don't know. That's the thing. There are all of these myths about Sappho, that she was a kind of female gigolo with all of these male and female lovers, or that she was married and had a daughter. And who knows if any of them are true. Or all of them. But what gets me is how Sappho can go from a tender, longing lover in her own work, to a desperate suicide—for a man, no less—to a raging homicidal bitch? Who was she in the gaps, in everything that was lost? Don't you want to know?"*

*Paul leaned forward; his eyes glittered with intensity, bright blue like she imagined the Mediterranean. Before she had to answer, their food arrived. Paul took back the books.*

*It was good food. Great food. Since Paul was paying, Bernie ordered the most expensive item on the menu. Maybe it was cruel to tap the finances of a 'starving artist' but Bernie was going to make him work for everything he got out of her.*

*When the waiter cleared their plates, Paul sat back in his chair, his face softened with satisfaction. "Well," he said. "What do you think?"*

*"It was good," she said. "I think I'm going to have the crème brûlée for dessert."*

*"You know that's not what I meant."*

*"I know."*

*A pause.*

*"Well?"*

*It sounded interesting, this whole story about Sappho the mysterious poet Lesbian lesbian. Bernie thought too about the painting of the face that she had seen in the gallery. It was like he could tell the inner life of a person, like he saw it. She wondered if he could see into her like that.*

*"Are you going to make me wear a toga?"*

*Paul smiled. "Does that mean you'll do it?"*

*The waiter brought Bernie her crème brûlée. She cracked the caramelized top with her spoon and took a bite.*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie smiles as she remembers. Even if it didn't happen exactly like that, which she is beginning to doubt, the feeling is right.

"That's so romantic," Jeanette says.

Bernie is startled. She hadn't realized she'd been speaking aloud. She covers by taking a sip of water. Her mouth is thick and gummy, but she doesn't know if it is from talking or just the meds.

"It wasn't," she says, swallowing hard.

*Bernie, 2007*

*Paul had not been lying when he said his studio was not that impressive. Bernie took the Metro downtown and walked to the Disney Music Center, its satellite-dish metal siding, like a giant steel fruit bowl stuck to the side of the concert hall, harnessing the noonday sun in sharp beams right into her eyes. She groped blindly down the sidewalk until she was just past it, then turned down a side street and looked up. On either side, luxury condominium complexes and high-rises blocked the sun and muffled the city sounds. Lush leafy bougainvillea enveloped*

*wrought-iron terraces; stone work plazas peeked out from behind privacy hedges; water twinkled from marble fountains in courtyards. She pulled a card out of her purse and double-checked the address—she had had to ask for another card. Paul laughed when she told him what she had done with the first one.*

*Bernie walked another block in this tree-lined oasis shrouded in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, counting numbers down: 2564, 2562, 2560, 2558. Then suddenly the peaceful sylvan walk ended and Bernie was thrust back into the harsh sun and car exhaust. Twenty-five fifty-six Hope Street was the last complex in a cul-de-sac that overlooked the interstate. Its metal block of aluminum siding and Plexiglas squatted in a patch of white gravel and shed palm-fronds. She half expected to see a couple of red-capped garden gnomes camped in the front. It was an obvious interloper on the street of buildings with doormen and canopied entrances and seemed, on its isolated little perch hovering over I-110, to be exiled in a corner like a naughty child in a room full of grown-ups.*

*The front door had no buzzer, but it was unlocked. She took the lobby elevator to the fifth floor as indicated by the card.*

*She knocked on the fourth door and waited. Something clanked on the other side of the door; someone cursed. Then a deadbolt clicked and the door opened.*

*“Come in.”*

*No, Paul had definitely not lied about his apartment. The room smelled of turpentine and paint thinner, sharp and acidic. It was a one room studio with a kitchenette and a bathroom, which Bernie discovered later, was literally a converted closet. A double bed was tucked in one*

*corner by a window, along with a metal clothes rack like in a discount department store. A portable stereo was plugged into the wall and sitting atop a wooden stool next to the bed.*

*All the rest of the room was taken up by his work. Two-by-twos, some single, some already nailed into frames, leaned in bundles against one wall; beside them was a roll of raw canvas duck and stacks, some six and seven deep, of paintings. Instead of an area rug, a wrinkled drop cloth covered most of the wood floor. Easels of various heights and sizes were pitched like tents around the room. All of them were empty at the moment, but on one a rectangle of canvas was already primed. Another wooden stool, serving as a table, held glass Mason jars of brushes, and a third beside it had a palette and an array of oil paint tubes. A drafting table, covered in sheets of newspaper print and haphazardly stacked books, stood beside the bed before another window. The walls were covered in a collage of sketches and photographs, postcards, magazine cut-outs, scraps of paper. As Bernie got closer, she saw that the prevailing images were Mediterranean seascapes, pillared ruins and sculptures, cliff-faces. There were also Xerox copies of what looked like stone tablets, others of yellowed, almost disintegrated paper.*

*“It’s papyrus,” Paul said, coming up behind her. He was wearing jeans, a pale green t-shirt, and Converse. Big surprise.*

*“These are some of the only historical documents left that mention Sappho.” He reached around her and pulled one off of the wall. “This one is actually a tax record that has her in Sicily around 610 BC. It looks like she was exiled there after some kind of failed coup attempt on the ruler of Lesbos.”*

*“Did she ever make it back?” Bernie asked. She couldn’t imagine what it would be like to have to leave home and never return.*

*“I don’t know. If she did, there is very little documentation, though I’d like to think that she did. That she had a nice life after all of that. Like I said, there are a lot of myths.”*

*Bernie shifted her attention to the stack of books. They were a variety: histories of Ancient Greece, catalogues of fashion through the ages, poetry. One name she recognized from their dinner conversation.*

*“Poems and Ballads by Algernon Charles Swinburne,” she said, picking it from the pile and flipping through.*

*He took the book from her and turned to the already-marked page. “I think you’d like it,” he said, handing the book back to her. “It’s my favorite.”*

*“Anactoria,” she read.*

*“My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes  
Blind me, thy tresses burn me, thy sharp sighs  
Divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound”*

*“Jeez, what kind of lover is that?” Bernie’s eyes narrowed, then a second later. “I’m not doing any S and M stuff.”*

*Paul considered her for a moment. "That's too bad," he said, with a half-smile. "But don't worry. That's not what I was planning."*

*"What are you planning?" Bernie asked.*

*Paul extended his hand to Bernie, who reluctantly took it, and guided her toward the bed. Bernie jerked her hand out of his. "I thought we agreed this was strictly professional."*

*"We did," Paul said, moving an empty easel in front of the bed. He went to the drafting table, grabbed a pad of newspaper print twice the width of his shoulders and set it on the easel. "The window by the bed gives the best natural light," he said. "Have a seat and I'll position you in a minute." Without pausing he went back to the drafting table and grabbed a tool box full of charcoal sticks and putty erasers, and a chamois. Bernie, struck by the brusqueness of his tone, did as she was told, perching on the edge of the bed. Once his easel was set, Paul seemed to remember Bernie.*

*"Scoot closer to the window and turn your legs left, away from the light."*

*Bernie tried to move according to his directions and found herself suddenly shy in front of him.*

*"No, more left," he said. He came around the easel toward her and without pausing for permission, he put one hand on either side of her thighs and pushed them to the side until she was where he wanted her.*

*“Good, now turn your face toward the light. Up, like this.” A bit more tenderly, but still efficient and business-like, Paul palmed both of her cheeks and positioned her face so she was in three-quarter profile. “Good.”*

*He stepped back behind the easel. His body was at an angle so he could see her and his paper, but Bernie’s view of it and most of his body were blocked by the back of the newspaper print. She heard the rattle of charcoal sticks in the toolbox as Paul selected one, and then the feather-soft whisper of charcoal strokes on paper.*

*“Keep still,” Paul said.*

*“I am,” Bernie replied automatically.*

*“No, you’re scrunching your brow. And now you’re pursing your lips too.”*

*“No, I’m not.”*

*Paul sighed heavily on the other side of the easel. “Just relax your face and don’t move.” Then as an afterthought: “Please.”*

*Bernie didn’t reply, but she endeavored to keep still. She knew, in fact, that he was right. She had a habit of frowning when she was thinking, and just then she had been thinking about Paul.*

*Out of the corner of her eye she watched him, and though she could not see what he was doing, his face burned with rapt attention, his eyes narrow and scrutinizing. His right hand moved in sure strokes over the paper while his left reached out and took her measure against his*

*thumb. Every now and then he paused and simply looked at her. The afternoon sun streaming in through the window caught Paul in the face and made his eyes sparkle. They're like the water in the Mediterranean, she thought.*

*"Please don't move," he said again.*

*His voice startled her and she shuddered just slightly.*

*"Sorry."*

*Paul ripped the sheet off of the pad and let it fall behind him. Bernie tried to follow it with her eyes, but suddenly Paul was in front of her again. "Now look down."*

*He went back to his pad and sketched again. A few minutes later he ripped that page from the pad and let it fall by the other one.*

*"Look up."*

*Another page was ripped off and dropped. Soon nearly twenty sheets of paper were in a pile on the floor. Bernie had been sitting for nearly an hour in the same position, with her only changes being in the angles of her head and neck. Her back ached and her butt was asleep.*

*"Okay," Paul said, tearing away another piece of newsprint, "now, stand up with your back to me, and look over your shoulder. Eyes down."*

*This was definitely not glamorous, she thought.*

“I seriously sat for him for a freaking month just doing sketches and experimenting with lighting.”

Jeanette leans in closer. “Were you nude?”

The question is so sudden that Bernie actually laughs. It hurts her belly a little, but the actual laughing, the act of being happy, even if for just a moment, feels good, and she ignores the pain. “Not then,” she says. “He was mainly working on close-ups of my head, my facial expressions.”

Jeanette giggles at the ‘not then’ response but does not say anything. Bernie ignores it, though she smiles knowingly. “I mean, come on,” she says, “I had only just met him.”

“But you already wanted him,” Jeanette says. “You said you did.” Jeanette shivers a little, which is not unusual, but Bernie notices a sheen of sweat on her forehead. When Day Nurse comes out to check on them, Bernie says that she’s tired and asks for help back inside. The air is cool in Bernie’s room, as always because of her hot flashes, but Jeanette is still sweating. When she lifts her hand to wipe her brow, she is shaking.

“You okay?” Bernie asks. Okay, here, is relative, which both of them understand.

“Uh huh,” Jeanette replies. “You know, bad day.” She smiles weakly. “I’ll see you tonight. Remember, dinner with Sharon.”

Bernie nods and watches her go. A moment later, Day Nurse is helping her back into her own bed and readjusting her tubes: IV hanging, oxygen reattached to the tank by the bed,

catheter to the hook at the foot of it. When he leaves, Bernie shifts under the sheets and tries to get comfortable.

*“But you already wanted him,” Jeanette says. “You said you did.”*

Yes, she did. But Bernie wonders now if what she wanted from Paul was Paul or something else—something that looked and felt like Paul, touched her the way he did, spoke to her with his voice, but wasn’t quite him.

Bernie’s head begins to throb; she closes her eyes and tries to not think. Don’t think. Don’t think. Isn’t there something about not thinking about a pink elephant? Paul. Don’t think about Paul. Pink. Paul. Something not there.

Bernie closes her eyes, though it is only a small relief. What does it matter anyway? I mean, really. Paul is gone. I’m gone. Maybe I never was.

### *Sappho, 590 BC*

She has been gone for so long that the coastline is no longer familiar. It is as if she were never here. As the barge that had taken her from the merchant ship to the pier nears the shore, Sappho looks up to see if she can find the little dimple in the cliff face that had for so long been her secret refuge—a cave she had discovered as a child, hidden from view by a grove of olive trees. But there is no dimple, no grove of trees. The terraced orchard is gone. Boulders that had slid down the cliff cut ruts and craters into the earth. The cliff is naked and destitute.

The barge trembles and grinds to a stop as it slides into the sand. “Here we are, mistress,” the ferryman says. She thanks him, retrieves her travel sack, and lets him help her off. Her sandaled feet sink into the wet sand.

Home.

But twelve years is a long time, and this place is alien. Even the ferryman is different. She had looked, just to see if she would recognize that kind face from so many years ago, but it was not him. It is even possible that the young man who was so kind to her that sad, gray day of her departure is dead. Only the gods know if he was conscripted to fight the colonist at Sigeum. So many had, and so many were lost.

Sappho breathes deep the briny air of her homeland. This, at least, smells the same. She does not know in what state she will find her home, but it has been granted back to her by the new ruling house of Lesbos. The tyrant Myrsilus is finally dead, and his successor, Alyattes, has forgiven the faction that stood against him.

Forgiven, yes. But what is left of her home? Her friends? Her school is no more, of that she is certain—and after such hardship she does not know if she is capable of starting again.

She turns her face south, past the inlet where she has landed, past Mytilene her home city, and looks inland. Sardis. Her thoughts have never left that far distant city. It was not only home she lost twelve years ago.

“Beloved,” she whispers.

A gust of offshore wind whips the folds of her chiton around her body like a shroud. She clutches the fabric to her tightly and lifts her bag over her shoulder. She still has a long walk to the remains of her estate.

*Bernie, 2007*

Sharon arrives around seven, but neither Bernie nor Jeanette has any real appetite. They sit in Jeanette's room, with Sharon in the chair beside the bed, holding Jeanette's hand. Bernie is in her wheelchair, parked opposite them both. The room has green walls, like her own. A framed print of Monet's *The Artist's Garden at Giverny* hangs on the wall opposite the window.

Didn't he kill himself? Bernie wonders.

No, that was Van Gogh. He also cut off his ear, she recalls. Artists are crazy like that. Paul once asked her if she would love him any less if he went berserk and cut off his ear too.

*"I love you with or without your ears," she said. She leaned in and nipped his earlobe with her teeth. "Your sanity though, that's another story." He laughed, ran his tongue down the side of her neck.*

Both Jeanette and Sharon are staring at her, so she guesses she missed something.

"Sorry," she says, "I was thinking about Van Gogh."

Sharon shifts in her chair. Her lips crinkle upward in an approximation of a smile. She is a lean woman with straight black hair pulled back in a ponytail, no make-up. She wears a sleek pantsuit in dark gray. "I was just asking you and Nette if you wanted me to bring you by anything. CDs, DVDs, anything to, uh, eat." She looks over at the bedside which has two full plates. "I can stop in tomorrow after the deposition."

Bernie shakes her head. There is nothing that she really wants.

"Baby, can you bring my *Gypsy Kings*? I'm just dying for something upbeat." Sharon flinches momentarily but recovers with a smile. "Sure thing." She lets go of Jeanette's hand and reaches for her bag under the chair. "I have to go over some things before tomorrow." She leans over and kisses Jeanette quickly on the lips. "Night, honey," she says.

"I love you," says Jeanette.

Sharon glances over her shoulder, half-way out the door. She waves back. "You too," she says, then is gone.

Bernie and Jeanette sit together for a moment. Jeanette's eyes are closed; she is breathing deeply, heavily and Bernie thinks she is asleep, but then she says, "Okay, so then what happened?"

"Go back to sleep."

Jeanette opens one eye, squints at Bernie. "I'm serious."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Bernie says. "I'm going back to my room."

Now both of Jeanette's eyes are open and pleading. She tries to sit up in bed, but her arms are shaking and she can only just lift her head from the pillow.

"Tell you what," Bernie says. "If we're both still alive tomorrow, I'll tell you more."

"Promise?"

Bernie rolls her eyes. "I can't promise I won't die in my sleep, just to piss you off."

Jeanette snorts and mutters something that is too quiet but sounds like it could be nasty.

"Night," she says.

"Night."

Bernie wheels herself out of the room, but she only makes it half way into the hall before she is breathing hard. Night Nurse helps her back to her room and into bed. She hits the PCA for a little morphine, just a little, to help her sleep. Voices from the hallway, traffic outside, it all evens out, blends together into a nice soft hum, so low, so soft, like a calm night on the shore. A wave of cool washes over Bernie.

*Bernie, 2007*

*The water was starting to cool, but neither of them seemed inclined to get out of the tub. They were sitting, facing each other, their legs bent up at the knees to fit into the tiny, claw-foot tub in the far corner of Paul's apartment. Remnants of suds floated on the surface. Bernie felt the hairs on Paul's legs wave casually back and forth in the water, like seaweed or the little hairs on*

*cilia. They tickled a little, but she resisted the urge to move, or to touch him with her hands. Only their thighs and calves touched where their legs overlapped.*

*“You’re her, you know,” Paul said. “You could be Sappho. She could be you. When I’m drawing, it’s all the same.”*

*Bernie tried to sink down deeper into the water, her shoulders were cold. “Right,” she said, “Sappho was an accountant counting on her Greek abacus.” She shook her head. “No, wait, that’s Japanese.”*

*“Actually, it’s Chinese.”*

*“Whatever. Her Greek scales. She calculates the annual net disbursement of the local fishmonger. Maybe gets him to start a Roth IRA.” Bernie flicked water at Paul, watched it hit his cheek, get lost in the maze of his two-day’s growth and drip off the end of his chin. She smirked, but he didn’t retaliate.*

*“Seriously, you could be her.”*

*“I don’t sing and I got a B- in English in college.”*

*Paul shook his head. “Not what she actually did, but herself.”*

*“How do you know who she was?” Bernie had been around Paul long enough to know all the facts there were about Sappho, which was chiefly that there were no facts. Myths, stories, yes. But facts, not so much.*

*Paul leaned in, as was his habit when he was excited about something. The water sloshed around their naked limbs. “That’s it,” he said. “We don’t know. We have scraps and pieces, but who was she in the gaps? That’s who you could be. The woman that she might have been.”*

Bernie shivers and turns over in bed. The world is foggy, swaying, cooling. She pulls her covers up around her head and feels herself sinking back down into water.

*The water was starting to cool, but neither of them seemed inclined to get out of the tub. They were sitting, facing each other, their legs bent up at the knees to fit into the tiny, claw-foot tub in the far corner of Paul’s apartment. Remnants of suds floated on the surface. Bernie tried to sink down deeper into the water, her shoulders were cold. Paul rubbed her calf with his hand, back and forth. The water sloshed against the side of the tub and a little spilled over the rim and splashed on the floor. His eyes were on her.*

*Bernie didn’t move, not in encouragement or rebuff and she thought that Paul was waiting for her. He was fully erect, but that and his touch were the only indications of his desire.*

*Bernie imagined Sappho soaking in some steaming, public bath, naked, with her lover—it doesn’t matter which one—Atthis, Anactoria, Phaon—all of these names that she had read about. She imagined that Sappho leaned over on her hands and knees, stalking animal-like, straddling the legs of her lover, her breasts skimming the water. Did she take him into her mouth, her eyes on him, watching his pleasure? Did she rake her nails on his bare chest, raising*

*fiery streaks over his skin? Did she grip handfuls of his hair, pull his head back to expose the tender skin of his neck and bite so hard she drew blood?*

*Bernie pushed herself up onto her knees. The force of her movement sent more water splashing over the edge. She reached just over Paul's shoulders on either side and gripped the edge of the tub, using it to pull herself on top of him. Their movement sent water spilling all over the floor until the tub was nearly empty. Paul dug his hands into her thighs; he breathed hard. He called her name, but she wanted to hear him call her Sappho.*

*Say it. Say my name. Bernie closed her eyes and pretended the lip of the tub was marble; she felt the heaviness of steam condense on her skin; she smelled thick, musky incense. When she came, she called him Phaon.*

Bernie opens her eyes. She is in her bed. Tubes are in her nose and an IV in her hand. She is breathing hard, barely able to catch her breath. Was that a memory or a dream? Did she really call him Phaon? Maybe. Or maybe she didn't. Maybe she only thought she wanted to, or maybe she did in her head, but not aloud. She is not even sure they ever had sex in a bathtub at all. Did Paul have a bathtub? But she could feel him, there, just now. She feels the air in her lungs vibrate on her vocal chords as she pants and then her lips and teeth touch, air seeps through, mouth opens on the vowels and closes as her tongue presses the soft pallet of her mouth. Phaon. It is more of a cry than a word.

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon awakes with a start. He has slept away most of the day. His pocket watch tells quarter past one. He lays upon his bed, fully clothed, shoes and all, though the sheets are askew beneath and the second pillow still bears the cratered indenture of what appears to have been someone's head. At the door, the key is in the lock. He opens the door enough to peep out.

"Annie!" he yells. Then he slams the door closed again. He waits impatiently before it, tapping his foot, until he hears the soft patter that announces her arrival. There is a timid knock.

"You called me, Master Algernon?"

He cracks open the door only enough again to poke his nose out, which is just level with Annie's own rather discomfited face. Her eyes are wide and dart nervously about. His are bloodshot.

"Yes, I did," he answers gruffly. "And you took your precious time to get here. If I didn't know you better, I'd say you were rather negligent in your duties."

Annie bites her bottom lip on the comment that would have surely gotten her sacked, and without a decent reference too. She waits for him to calm himself. As with most things, Algernon speeds quickly on.

"Did you see a woman leave my room last night? Did she give you her direction?"

Annie blushes. "Well, I shouldn't know, Master Algernon. I'm not one to take note of women's comings or goings."

“Come, come, let’s not be coy, girl,” he says. “Did she leave a card?”

Annie shakes her head. Lord, if only she had taken her aunt’s advice and taken on as a seamstress instead. True, her eyes would be squinty and weak by now, what with the fancy needlework by candlelight, but shouldn’t it be a better situation than to work for a master who stares at her bum all the day long, and then invites every kind of dubious woman into the house? And to his private rooms, no less.

“I don’t recall no such woman, sir,” Annie says.

Angry, but impotent, Algernon sends his maid back downstairs to fetch his luncheon. He tells her to leave it at the door, and not to disturb him. She gladly takes her leave.

What shall he do with himself? Algernon paces for a few minutes before deciding to make a fresh day of it and see if he cannot get some writing done. After a good splash of water and change of clothes, Algernon settles at his writing desk. It is as he has left it. Indeed, it is *never* to be touched by anyone but himself for fear of certain death or at the very least immediate discharge, without proper reference. It is in its usual state: the ink pot uncorked, careless of the drying air; sheaves of paper laying willy-nilly about the desk so that no wood is visible; a blotter crumpled and stained; quills and pinion shavings scattered as if several angry pigeons had fought across the tabletop; and two stacks of books, some cloth-bound, some of heartier materials, rising like Samson’s pillars waiting to topple upon each other and so bring an end to the agony.

Algernon clears a space and digs through the piles until he finds a relatively blank sheet of paper. It is daunting, this paper. It holds in it the potential for deep and enduring art, or

rubbish. Algernon scribbles in the corner of the page for several moments, producing a rather charming likeness of the three-legged cat that haunts his neighbor's doorstep, but no poetry.

He pounds his fist on the desk. "*Spes omnes relinquite, o vos intrantes!*" he cries. It is loud. It is cathartic. It terrifies Annie, Cook and the poor girl who comes over once a week to do scullery work. Yet, it produces nothing tangible on the page. Abandon all hope, indeed. Algernon rises and paces. His steps are regular and thunderous, accompanied now and again by blood-chilling screams and bellowing curses, in various languages.

Downstairs, the scullery maid threatens to leave if she is to be subjected to such impropriety. "I'm a good girl, me." She washes her red, chapped hands on a rag and makes for the door, but Cook tempts her to stay with a bit of fruit tart she has just pulled from the oven. "He don' mean no harm," Cook tells her. "You'll get used to it." If she leaves, the scullery maid will be the second they've lost to Master Algernon's ways in the last month, in addition to the upstairs maid who quit when her bum became a too tempting target for Master's swat. Annie now does all the housekeeping duties.

The girl agrees to stay, at least to finish the afternoon work. She pops the tart in her mouth and returns to the pot she has been scrubbing.

"Oh, Lord bless me," Cook sighs, before turning back to the tarts.

Algernon throws himself on his bed. Hours of pacing, screaming, jumping, washing and rewashing of his face, have yielded a single line: *My life is bitter with thy love.*

*Thy* love.

He means Mary. Though he hadn't thought so before the mysterious foreign woman had mentioned it, Algernon cannot help but indict her, his dear Mary, as the butcheress of his bloody, beating heart. Of course, the woman is right. He sees now how Mary manipulated him into confessing his love when she knew right well she was engaged to the Colonel. She only wanted to toy with his affections. She probably even waited until they were alone in that special little cove, *their* special little cove, to tell him. Bitter, indeed.

Suddenly the room is stifling.

"Annie!"

When the poor girl slogs up to the door, she is nearly battered in the head with it as Algernon swings it open to shout her name again. She dodges, fortunately. She has become accustomed to always being alert for the unexpected in this house.

When he sees her he says, "Tell Cook I shall be out this evening and not to bother with supper. I'm for the club. And I'll want my dinner jacket brushed. Have it ready for me." He closes the door on her, neglecting the fact that his jacket is in his bureau, in his room. He berates her when she knocks again and informs him of the fact, but he does let her in to ready the jacket.

From below, a vehement "Oh, Lord bless me!" and then a slamming of the back door accompanies Annie's relay of the master's order to the kitchen.

*Algernon, 1865*

The cool evening air of early winter does much to refresh Algernon as he strolls down the street. He is headed for one of his usual haunts, a gentleman's club called the Ambassador, which is always full of talk and smoke and good cheer. He is known there and when the need arises, left alone there to ponder in privacy with only the dark-paneled walls and ambient voices of idle men as company. He swings his walking cane jauntily, much to the consternation of passersby who must dodge the nefarious stick. There is much grumbling, and a rather colorful oath from a broad, bearded fellow whose bloodied apron gives him away as a butcher, but Algernon continues down the boulevard through the Physic Garden. The sun is low, and though the gas lamps have not yet been lit, to Algernon the world has taken on a crispness that he has not noticed until now. The trees are bare; their branches are sepia stains against the gray-gold evening. The wind bites where his scarf has left his neck exposed, but it is not unpleasant. Algernon feels as though he has awakened from a long sleep.

Inside the park, Algernon meanders down the lane en route to his club; this is a short cut. The lane is empty of fellow walkers, though here and there a bench is occupied. The young men are Ganymedes awaiting trysts; the young women prostitutes doing the same. A few of both sexes raise their eyes hopefully as he passes, but are disappointed and return to the nursing of their own miseries, desires, cold hands. Algernon walks along on a cloud.

“Algernon.”

He stops and turns back at the voice. Sappho sits on a bench, delicately wrapped in long white sable, her hands buried in the warmth of a muffler. Her bonnet is pearl, satin perhaps, with

a tissue-thin veil that falls just to her brow. Perched atop the bonnet is the likeness of a bird, a little white bunting in a snow of gauze. Or a pale nightingale.

“Lady,” he says, tipping his hat.

“Please, sit, Algernon,” Sappho says.

He does. They sit facing front for several moments. The wind picks up debris and swirls it in a miniature cyclone about their feet. Algernon kicks at it. Sappho is still.

Finally Algernon turns in his seat to face her.

“Yours is a truly remarkable name,” he says.

Sappho does not face him; her face does not change from its mask of bland civility. “Is it indeed, dear Algernon?”

“Of course, my lady. Have you not heard of *the* Sappho? The great poetess of Lesbos?”

She turns to him and he is again dazzled. Her eyes, he finds especially, are deep and penetrating. “I am she,” Sappho says.

Algernon smiles. “A fine jest, my lady. But that cannot be.”

She cocks her head as if amused. “And why not? How is it that you, of all people, should not know me? Am I not the second of your heart?”

Hearing his own words back at him startles him, but he shrugs them off. He can play along. “How could I, my lady? As you know there are no likenesses of you but stamped rudely

on coins and carved on urns. They certainly do not do justice to your beauty. If I may say, your nose is quite a bit smaller in person. And not withstanding—”

“Yes?”

He licks his lips. “Well, there is the matter of your, um, your jump, my lady. Off the cliffs of Leucadia.”

Now she looks at him and her eyes are soft and almost, perhaps, sad.

“The news of my demise has been greatly exaggerated,” she says.

Algernon straightens his hat, his jacket. “Um, yes, of course. To think you would toss aside all for the love of a *man*.” He chuckles to himself. “But there is the matter of time, Lady Sappho. How can you be here, in the year of our Lord—,”

Sappho rises from the bench and looks down at him. “Ours is not to question why, poet.” She begins walking down the lane.

Algernon scrambles up from the bench after her, muttering. “Yes, yes, all that rubbish: do and die. Tennyson’s a pompous prick if ever there was one.” Well, if she is insistent upon this fantasy, he will play his part. When he finally catches up to her, he asks, “Where are you headed, my lady?”

A prostitute on a bench calls out, “I’m for Eastcheap, dearie. You game?”

Algernon ignores her. He offers Sappho his arm and she takes it. They walk together for several paces. The fur of her coat brushes gently against his exposed wrist between jacket sleeve

and glove; it is soft and cold. He resists the desire to stroke it. Finally she says, "That depends on you, Algernon."

"I was going to the Ambassador, but alas, it is not a place for the fairer sex." He peers out of the corner of his eye at her. "But, if you would care to, we might have supper together."

They stop at the edge of the Garden. "I have already supped," she tells him. Algernon deflates just a little, but is quickly revived when she suggests, if it is convenient for him and his household, that she accompany him back home. "You can surely dine there whilst we converse."

Algernon heartily agrees. "Shall we walk or hire a cab?" he asks. His hands, though gloved, are chilled through, though Sappho does not appear to feel it.

"As you will," she says.

Algernon hails a hansom, though the cabbie neither doffs his hat to Sappho nor descends the perch to open the door. Algernon forebears to beat the man with his walking stick, though he cannot help but curse the man under his breath, in Aeolian Greek, for Sappho's benefit. He is gratified by the slight upturn on her lips.

When both are securely in the cab, Algernon calls out his address to the driver and the cab lurches on.

Algernon reaches into the breast pocket and retrieves a flask of port. "It would never do to leave home without a way to warm oneself on such a chilly evening," he tells her. He offers it to Sappho first. Instead of taking it herself, she leans in and parts her lips just a little. Algernon's hands shake, with cold and the jolt of the cab, he tells himself, but he tips the flask into her

mouth. She sips delicately, but her eyes never stray from Algernon. When she pulls back, a stream of port spills down the corner of her mouth and drips from her chin. It is a bloody spot on her otherwise white coat.

Algernon clenches his jaw; his groin tightens.

He takes a long pull from the flask before tucking it back into his jacket.

When they arrive at Algernon's apartment, the cabbie does descend to open the door, though he helps neither one out of the cab. Algernon himself does the duty, taking Sappho's hand and easing her down. Then Algernon flings several bills at the cabbie. "You, sir, should learn how to care for a lady."

The cabbie tips his hat. "Go bugger y'self, gov," he says mildly, then jumps back onto the perch and snaps the reins. The cab ambles off.

Algernon escorts Sappho up the front steps, then fumbles around in his pocket for his key.

Inside, there is no one to be seen, though this is expected as Algernon had dismissed his cook, and often spent all night at the club, which means Annie has already gone home. He takes Sappho's coat and hangs it in the foyer cupboard. Then they both go to the kitchen.

"My apologies for the barbarous accommodations, dear lady," he says. Not really knowing where anything is, Algernon rummages around the cupboards and the larder until he manages to put together a plate of cold ham, some thick Irish cheese, the heel of a loaf of bread, an apple that has gone bad on one side, and what appears to have been some lovely fruit tarts that

met with some rather unfortunate pummeling from a rolling pin. He shoves one in his mouth.

“They are still tasty,” he says. He also grabs another bottle of port and two glasses. He leaves the mess for Annie and Cook to clean in the morning.

Algernon and Sappho move to the downstairs sitting room, a tiny corner room with a single window looking out behind the apartment into a pleasant little plot with an herb garden, rain barrel and a rose bush that refuses to blossom. He pours her a glass and then digs into his own meal. He feels her eyes on him, though every time he glances up she seems to be looking elsewhere. When he finishes his paltry meal—he must remind himself to chide Cook for not having anything prepared for him in cases of emergency—he sips amicably at his port.

“Well, it was not beef Wellington, but it was sufficient,” he says. He leans in a bit. “I am so glad I found you, Lady Sappho. I admit to being rather disappointed at your absence this morning.”

“I had an engagement elsewhere,” she says. “And I do not care for mornings.”

“No, indeed,” Algernon says. “I find I am at my best just as the sun is setting. A creature of the night, no doubt.”

Sappho sips her glass slowly. Her lips part just slightly, and Algernon catches a flash of white. A droplet of port beads on her lip before she licks it away. Algernon bites his own lip.

“Is there something the matter, Algernon?” she asks. There is something of amusement in her voice.

Algernon sits back suddenly in his chair. “Oh, um, no.” The entire cab ride Algernon imagined all of his witty discourse, how he would impress her with his conversation and adroitness, but now that they are here, his brain has dried as the vast African plain and his tongue sticks in his mouth.

“A poet at a loss for words?”

Algernon blinks, and true to Sappho’s word, is at a loss for how to respond. He stumbles and stutters and finally falls silent.

Sappho cocks her head, waits for Algernon to collect himself, and when it becomes clear that he cannot, she rises and goes to him.

“Algernon,” she coos, “whatever is the problem?” She strokes his cheek tenderly. “Where has your glib and nimble tongue gone?”

What can he say? That all day, try as he might to invoke the spirit of poetry and inspiration, his thoughts turned again and again to Mary, so that his once quick and virile pen proves ineffectual. *My life is bitter with thy love.*

His breath catches. “I just cannot do it.”

“Do what?”

“All I can think about is her. Every face I see is hers.”

Sappho snorts, but Algernon feels that the derision is not aimed at him. Sappho knows his plight. She is sympathetic. She is the one, after all, who clarified the situation for him at the Norrington's supper party.

Sappho takes his face in her hands; he cannot look away. Her eyes are the depths of a raging sea. "Are you so weak that you would let this harlot leave your manhood limp and shriveled?"

Algernon recoils as if slapped. No, no, no, no. Sappho cannot mean this.

"My lady! With all respect, watch your tongue. Mary is a respectable, honorable, beautiful—,"

"Is she?" Sappho cries. She recaptures his face, holds it like a vice grip. Her nails dig into the sides of Algernon's face. Her voice lowers to a rumble that Algernon feels more than hears. "Is she so honorable, Algernon? Did she choose your pure and devoted love above all other loves? Or did she use you for her own pleasures and then take the bed of another? Did she not abandon you and the world of art and sublimity that was yours to offer, and choose to be the safe, respectable wife of an oaf?"

A slick, warm stream drips down the side of Algernon's face, but he does not know if it is sweat or blood. He trembles; his vision flickers. Sappho leans in. Her breath is strangely cool on his cheek. In his ear she whispers, "Be free of her, Algernon. Let me show you how to be free of her, forever." She licks the side of Algernon's face, a long, slow stroke. Algernon's breath catches. He feels his manhood stir.

“Sappho.”

“What is it, Algernon?” She bites the lobe of his ear and pulls. Algernon’s heart quickens.

“Help me forget her,” he whispers.

It sounds like a growl more than a moan coming from deep within her throat; Sappho grabs Algernon around the neck with one hand and shoves him against the high back of the chair. Her other hand grabs his nearest wrist and pins it against the armrest. Algernon tries to pull her to himself, but he is blocked by the side table where his supper tray and dirtied dishes rest. With a wild, flinging gesture, Algernon sweeps the table and tray away with the back of his hand. It catches on the sharp metal edge of the tray. His skin tears. The table and tray fall and crash and scatter over the floor. Now unencumbered, Algernon grabs Sappho about the waist and draws her in. She straddles him. She squeezes her grip on his throat and starbursts explode before his eyes; they halo Sappho like a glorious crown. She leans in, this sparkling, gleaming goddess. Algernon feels her teeth scrape his skin. She bites his neck. He groans. She whispers something in his ear: *My life is bitter with thy love.*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie whimpers when she wakes up the next morning. Her skin itches and the after effects of the morphine make her stomach heave. She is not in pain, but just empty, drained. She is not hungry, so when Day Nurse comes in, she just asks for tea. The idea of tea seems to make everything better. It is a slow, hazy morning. Fragments of dream filter into her waking thoughts

and run together. More and more of her days feel like this, and if she lets herself think about it, she'd—so she just didn't think about it.

There is a soft, efficient knock on her door, and Day Nurse comes in with her tea. It steams on the side table. Someone rattles past the door with a gurney. She cannot see if it is empty—on its way to pick up a resident who has just died—or which way it is headed—to the resident or to the morgue—but the rattling, clanking of metal and squeaking wheels is a constant backbeat in the hospice.

Day Nurse tells Bernie that Jeanette cannot get out of bed, but if she's feeling up to it, she's like her to come over. Bernie stretches her limbs cautiously and finds that she is not in such bad shape after all. Day Nurse bundles her into a robe and helps her into her wheelchair.

The first thing Bernie notices is that the temperature in the room is up. While she is sweating in her robe, Jeanette is huddled in her comforter. Day Nurse wheels her to a spot by the glass door so she is facing the bed, and parks her there. She tells them both to buzz if they need anything. They know the drill.

"I'm glad you're not dead," Jeanette tells her. "Now you can spill it about Paul."

Bernie smirks. "You got me out of bed to tell you a story? You must be pretty desperate."

Jeanette twitches her shoulders a little. "What can I say? It's crazy boring here and there is nothing good on TV."

"What do you want to know?"

Jeanette thinks for a few minutes. “Okay, how long were you together?”

“About two years.”

“You met at the gallery?”

“Yes.”

“And you modeled for him?”

“Yes.”

“What was it like?”

“Fun, sometimes. Mostly just sitting still.”

“You really suck at this.”

“What?”

“Telling stories.”

Bernie shrugs. “Shit, sorry. What do you want?”

Jeanette snuggles down into the bed, drawing the comforter up closer around her face and still she shivers a little. “Tell me what you think of when you think of him.”

*Pain. I think of my skin being torn into little shreds, my ribs begin cracked open one at a time and someone reaching into my chest and just ripping my heart out.*

“Fine, when I think of Paul, I think of—”

*Bernie, 2007*

*“A vampire?” Bernie asked. She sat on his bed, turned away from him, her naked back exposed to the waist, her auburn hair draped over her shoulder. Paul drew her. It was early evening and the sun from the window cut a thick stripe aslant her body, from left shoulder to the curve of her right hip.*

*“Totally a vampire,” Paul answered. “I think Swinburne had some kind of kinky fetish. He liked to be spanked and all that by the prostitutes he went to, and there is even this letter that one of them sent to a friend of his that he wouldn’t stop biting her.”*

*“So what does that have to do with vampires?” Bernie wanted to turn around all the way and look at him, but with her back to him and her chin just resting on her shoulder, she only had a blurry kind of sliver of him in her periphery. He disappeared altogether when he stepped behind the easel, and she could really only see him when he moved. Even so, he was shadow at the edge of her vision.*

*“Okay, so after his cousin, who he had this giant crush on, married another man, he started writing Anactoria.”*

*Bernie nodded, realized she had moved, and tried to freeze in place. But Paul didn’t say anything. Paul had given her the book of Swinburne’s poems. She read Anactoria. Crazy shit. Biting breasts and drinking blood like honey. Swinburne sounded like he had a lot of problems.*

*“So he turned Sappho into a vampire?”*

*“It kind of makes sense, you know? One lover rips your heart out by marrying another guy and then you write a poem where a lover who betrayed you gets her blood drunk and her skin gnawed off. It’s revenge.”*

*It sounded good, but a little simplistic. Love, revenge, it was never clear cut.*

*“He just sounds pathetic to me.”*

*“That’s kind of harsh, B.” There were steps behind her and then hands on her shoulder.*

*Instinctively Bernie crossed her arms over her chest. They hadn’t yet crossed that line. A second later the silk of a robe slipped over her shoulders and she grabbed it like a drowning man to a life raft, hugging it close.*

*“I mean, we don’t really know what it was like for him. Maybe he really cared for his cousin. Maybe it tore him up really bad. I don’t think any of us know what we’ll do when we lose someone.”*

*Bernie 2007*

Jeanette seems to be asleep; her eyes are closed and she gnaws her bottom lip with a kind of unconscious worry. Bernie takes a sip of her tea, which is tepid and weak. She should ask Day Nurse for another cup, with a little honey in it.

“He asked me out, on a real date, after that. He was kind of nervous suddenly, dropping his charcoal and then fumbling with the paper. It was cute. He was always so confident when he was behind the easel, but then when it was just me and him, he got kind of—”

Bernie shrugs her shoulders and lets it hang there.

“Kind of what?” Jeanette asks. So, she isn’t asleep after all.

Bernie shrugs again even though Jeanette’s eyes are still closed. “I don’t know. Kind of real, I guess.”

“Real like?”

“Like not a chic painter who is deep and brooding every waking moment. Like, a guy who likes to laugh and eat take-out from a cheap Thai place down the street, or go to the boardwalk and just hang out.”

Jeanette shifts over in her bed so she is closer to the edge. She reaches out and puts her hand on Bernie’s shoulder. It is so light Bernie hardly feels it. “Like that picture of you both in front of the Ferris wheel?”

“We were at Santa Monica. It wasn’t even that nice of a day, but that meant that it was less crowded.”

*Paul wound his arm around her waist and they walked on down the pier. It was the first time he’d held her like that. He liked to touch—holding hands, an arm around her shoulder at*

*the movies, a soft caress with the back of his hand—but he seemed equally aware of her hesitation. It was different when he was drawing her, his touch was professional, to arrange her. But here, he always let go when he felt her pull away or freeze up.*

*“Wanna go up?” he asked, pointing his chin in the direction of the Ferris wheel that was the apex of the pier and its iconic feature.*

*Bernie knew where he meant, but she squinted up nonetheless. She didn’t especially like heights, but she heard desire in Paul’s voice and didn’t want to disappoint him.*

*“Yah, that sounds fun,” she said. She leaned into him as a kind of reassurance, hoping he was convinced.*

*He was. He bought their tickets and in less than ten minutes the attendant was locking the door and telling them not to throw anything out of the car or to dangle body parts over the edge in the droned monotone of frequent and mindless repetition. Then the car was released and swung backward under its purple and yellow metal canopy. With the slow grinding of gears and grating of metal, they were drawn back and up. Paul wrapped his arm around her shoulders and this time she leaned into him with complete sincerity.*

*The pier and people below grew smaller, the scope widened even as it blurred. The steel gray of the afternoon sky melted into the gray of the Pacific, streaked only now and again by the white lines of foam that washed ashore and broke apart. Above, other white lines, distant, hazy clouds were mirror reflections of those below. An occasional white spot broke away and wheeled and dove and then returned. Seagulls.*

*Paul leaned over to watch the particularly agile aeronautics of one of them. The car tilted.*

*Bernie clutched him. "Don't," she cried.*

*Paul didn't lean back. "Don't worry," he said. "We're sturdy."*

*"Still. Don't." She pulled him back, then leaned her full body into him, as if to keep him there by her sheer weight. She tried to pull him away from the edge, but he did not comply. The car rocked with their struggle.*

*"It's okay, B. It's not like we're going to fall." He leaned over and then sat back, rocking the car even more; he pounded the metal door as if to prove his point. "Solid."*

*But Bernie refused to be mollified and sank back into the car as far from the edge as she could. Though she still had hold of Paul's arm, she refused to look at him. The hold turned from fear to defiance. They rode the wheel's upward route, paused briefly when their car reached the pinnacle. Paul pointed out the seagulls as they dropped from the cover of the clouds, dove into the sea and then burst out of it again. Some splashed in the water and were content to remain, bobbing with the wave swell. Bernie looked but only muttered a reply.*

*"Don't be mad," Paul said, leaning in and whispering it into her ear. He pushed back the strands of hair that fell over her neck and kissed her lightly. "I would never let you fall."*

*Their car slowly descended back to earth. After they cleared the line of those waiting to get on, Paul guided Bernie in front of the wheel. "Hang on a second," he said, then approached a couple leaning on the guard rail that keeps the unwary from dropping off the sides of the pier.*

*He reached into his pocket and took out a camera, handed it to the man and mimed how to snap the shot. Then he trotted back to Bernie. Bernie prepared her smile and tilted her head toward Paul in the universal pose, but Paul reached around her and pulled her so she was facing him. "I love you, B," he said. Then he leaned in and kissed her.*

*Bernie forgot about the camera. Forgot about the Ferris wheel and the rocking. Her lips curled up in a smile even as Paul's own lips tugged playfully. He pulled back, retrieved the camera and thanked the couple. When he returned, he showed her the picture. It had snapped just as their lips touched, their eyes only on each other, the Ferris wheel behind them in a curve of tiny bulbs that looked like blurry little starbursts.*

"Even though we didn't say it, I think that changed things for us," Bernie says. "We went out and I still modeled for him, but even that turned more, I don't know, like being together." Bernie bites her bottom lip, trying to get the words right. "I think he finally started to see me."

**Part 3. “*she did not spare/ a single thought...*”**

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon cannot see.

A woman screams somewhere above, and Algernon is jolted awake.

“Mary?” he calls, dazed still with sleep and the fresh infusion of adrenaline evoked by the shrill cry of terror. His heart pounds and he wonders briefly if he is dreaming. He is sprawled on the floor in the small sitting room. He rolls over; glass crunches beneath him.

“Oh, Master Algernon,” Annie cries, “Are you well? You have been robbed, sure. Shall I call the constable?”

Algernon waves the suggestion away, and with Annie’s help, he gets to his feet. He is barefoot. His shirt is torn open at the chest; one button hangs on its thread. One sleeve is ripped from the shoulder. His trousers are unbuttoned and hang about his waist. The back of his hand is cut and covered with a thin skin of dried blood. Annie runs to the kitchen pump and returns with a basin of water and a rag cloth. She dabs at his forehead and at another wound at his neck.

“You are late, this morning, Annie,” Algernon says. By his pocket watch it is a quarter past noon. He has slept most of the day away.

“Beggin’ yer pardon, Master Algernon. It’s a Saturday.”

Algernon blinks. "Of course. I must have forgotten." A half day.

"Here. Y'must 'a cut yerself when the robbers handled you," she says. The water in the basin flushes pink as Annie rinses the cloth. She reaches up to his face again, but Algernon snatches the cloth from her hands and finishes the job himself.

"There was no robber," he says. "It was just—," he looks down at the shattered china and upended tray. *He did that, he remembers.* The side table itself with a gouge rather like a bite mark. *He did that too. Sappho had him pinned to the chair when she straddled him, rode him so exquisitely, and when he climaxed he struck the table. Or maybe those are her teeth marks? They tumbled to the floor at one point, he dug his fingers into the soft flesh of her buttocks. She bit down on something to keep from crying out.* Beside the tray an empty bottle of port. *No, she bit his shoulder. It still smarted.* Several sheets of paper, crumpled and bleeding with ink and port. *He must have gotten those, though he does not remember. His fingertips are ink-stained.* "It was just an accident," Algernon tells Annie. "I'm fine."

Annie, however, is not convinced, not the least because Algernon is a poor liar, but also because she has served him a long time. Or at least longer than any other servant, which, in retrospect, is really not quite so long. Though a respectable man, God save him, Annie knows the sorts of undesirables with whom he often colludes. Any number of the dollymops he frequents, or their ponces, knowing Algernon's resources, would no doubt find his flat an appealing mark. "You sure, sir?"

Algernon grits his teeth as he hits a rather tender spot on his temple. He must have hit his head when they rolled about the floor. Perhaps into the upturned side table. "Yes, yes, my dear."

His voice softens. He hopes it is convincing. “Thank you for your concern.” He hands her back the sopping cloth and holds her hand in both of his for a moment. Tepid, bloody water leaks between their fingers. “I do not think I tell you often enough how much I appreciate your dedication. Why don’t you take the day as a holiday? I can handle the mess here.”

Annie’s eyes widen until they are white marbles in their sockets. There must be something truly the matter with him to make such a sudden declaration. Annie slides her hand and the wet cloth from Algernon’s hold. She curtsies quickly and scampers back to the kitchen. She wonders briefly if he is going to off himself. She has heard that men in despair often show these drastic changes of heart just before they go the way of all flesh. The poor man. She really should try to stop him, comfort him. After she tosses the bloodied water out of the kitchen window, she grabs her bonnet and coat.

“You sure, Master Algernon?” she calls. “I’m off again Sunday, y’know.”

“Yes, yes, go on, my girl. Enjoy the day.”

She bolts out the back door before he finishes speaking.

*Bernie, 2007*

*It really was a beautiful day, one of the rare L.A. days when the sun was shining but not brutal, and the sky was impossibly blue, clear of the perpetual brown haze.*

*Bernie sat cross-legged on Paul's bed and stared out the window, her chin in one hand and her elbow resting on her folded legs. She was draped in a sheet that covered only her front; her legs, back, the curve of her buttocks, were bare. Her hair was braided and fell over one shoulder.*

*"What are you thinking about?" Paul asked.*

*Bernie blinked. "What?"*

*"No, you've lost it," he said. He put down his charcoal and came out from behind the easel. "That look on your face," he said. "What were you thinking about?"*

*She shrugged. "I don't know. I was just looking out the window."*

*Paul sat down beside her and peered out the window.*

*"Are you hungry?" he asked suddenly.*

*It was past noon, and she had only had a bowl of cereal before coming over to Paul's apartment, but she hadn't realized she was hungry until he asked. Paul got up and went to the refrigerator and began pulling things out and tossing them into his duffle bag.*

*"Get dressed," he said, calling over his shoulder.*

*"Where are we going?"*

*"You'll see," he said. Bernie heard the smile in his voice, and it made her smile too.*

*They took the Gold Line Metro north from Paul's apartment and watched the steel and glass high rises give way to squat single family bungalows with bars on the windows and chain link fences around small square front yards. Then the Metro curved and they got out.*

*A patch of green in the middle of the city.*

*Paul slung his duffle bag over his shoulder and they walked through Echo Park, past the water fountain and the lotus pond and found a shady spot under a collection of palms. Paul pulled a plaid blanket from the bag and spread it out over the lawn. They kicked off their shoes and sat.*

*"What else do you have in there?"*

*Paul grinned and commenced to pull out a picnic lunch with turkey and cheese sandwiches, chips, and two bottles of beer. "Sorry, no white wine."*

*She took the bottle and clicked his before taking a deep drink. "We better not let the cops see us," she said.*

*"Are you scared of getting caught?"*

*Bernie tossed her head. "No." She tipped the bottle against her lips to emphasize the fact, though secretly she wondered what her work would say if she was fined for public intoxication.*

*They ate in peace. The only others about were the occasional rollerbladers lapping the lake and a few birds nattering overhead in the palms. Bernie and Paul threw their crusts in the*

*water and watched the ducks scurry after them. They finished their beers and Bernie tucked the empty bottles back in the duffle bag. If Paul saw it, he didn't say anything.*

*He stretched out the length of the blanket, belly down, his head on folded arms. Bernie sat facing him, and beyond him, the fountain. She closed her eyes and listened to the sound of the water, the distant cry of traffic on the freeway, the call of birds in flight. She wondered why every day couldn't be like this.*

*"There's that look again," Paul said. "What are you think about?"*

*Bernie opened her eyes and looked at him. He had his book of poems out, and was drawing something in the margins with an ink pen.*

*"Keep your eyes closed," he said. "Just tell me what you're thinking."*

*"I don't know. Um—,"*

*"Don't think about it, B." She felt his hand on hers. He turned her hand over. Then the bristles of his day old stubble brushed her palm. Then his lips. "Don't think about it. Just whatever comes to mind."*

*He let go her hand and she heard the rustle of paper again.*

*"I'm sorry for all those people stuck in their cars right now. Or their cubicles."*

*Paul chuckled. Pen scraped on paper.*

*“There was a fountain in the city square where I grew up. In the summer, kids would run through it, splash each other. Mexican vendors would sell shaved ice and play mariachi music on portable cassette recorders tied to their carts. Being here reminds me of home.”*

*Sappho, 590 BC*

She stands in the doorway of what was once her sanctum. Her belongings are gone, looted perhaps, but whoever had been living here was careful with the place; there appears to be little damage to the structure itself, though the walls could use another whitewashing. Sappho sets her bag in the corner and slumps into the cushioned bench that lines the wall. Her bones ache from travel. She is no longer young, and though always plain, exile has told upon her: sun and wind burned skin, swollen joints that no longer move with ease across the lyre strings, a voice strained and cracked, without song.

Sappho’s head falls into her hands and she weeps. Gone, gone. All of it gone. What hope has she here? Were it not better to remain in Sicily and die in exile? Her shoulders sag and she leans against the wall, boneless, weak. She tries to recall a time when she was happy. She strains her ear for a song, but the wind only moans faintly.

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon leaves the mess in the sitting room and goes upstairs to his own apartment. Now that his heart has settled and the excitement has died down, Algernon is exhausted. He is

certain that if he looks down, irons will be wrapped around his wrists and ankles. With some effort he drags himself into his room. He doesn't mean to, but as he passes the looking glass atop his bureau, he stops and looks and is appalled.

His face has always been narrow, a little sharp in the chin, pale with a smattering of freckles over his nose to compliment his ginger hair. But now his skin is drained of all color to the point of translucence. The right side of his face is a latticework of scratches, from either Sappho's nails, teeth, or the shards of china over which he had, through the course of the night, come to rest. Two cuts glower angry red on his neck. They are sore when he prods them. Beneath the cuts are faint traces of bruising, a match for the dull circles under his eyes. In sum, he looks absolutely wretched. He runs a trembling hand through his hair. Fragments of china fall and twinkle as they hit the bureau.

Algernon stumbles to his bed and flops down. Sun, newly risen, streams into the bedroom from the bare window. He winces and turns away. Even this hurts. He is tired, drained, and yet sleep does not come. His mind races, even faster than is normal. And though he lies still upon the bed, it is as though the minute fibers that make up his being twitch and vibrate at a most outrageous speed. He is—he knows not how to describe it—except perhaps, thirsty. Not for water, of course, but there is an abiding thirst, a craving, for something which has not yet a name. It is really rather disconcerting. When he closes his eyes he feels the bits and bobbles of himself fly off in sundry directions in search of this thing, as grains of sand fly under the power of a fierce wind. He wiggles a finger to make sure it is still there.

“What have you done to me?” he asks. There is a part of Algernon that hopes Sappho will answer, that when he looks she will be there beside him and he can reach out and touch her again. And there is the other part that rebukes the idea as utterly ridiculous seeing as she was clearly absent when he awoke—she dislikes mornings, he remembers, and she was not there lying with him in broken pottery and furniture when Annie stumbled upon him this afternoon—and it is not as if she can simply materialize on a whim. Though he refuses to acknowledge it to himself, Algernon desires the former. He cracks an eye open. She is not there, and he is disappointed.

Because he has not the energy for anything else, Algernon closes his eyes again and recalls last night. How dreadful and perfect their lovemaking. Even the memory of it begins to stir his manhood, though spent as he is he can do nothing about it but lie inert.

*She gripped his neck. Such strong hands for so beautiful a woman. He pulled her to him, knocking away the table and tray.*

My life is bitter with thy love.

*China shattered. It was music.*

Thine eyes blind me.

*Yes, that was when he ripped the bodice of her dress, exposing taut nipples. He pinched them and she convulsed with pleasure, and her hair whipped him like a lash.*

Thy tresses burn me.

*Her mouth on his, biting, sucking.*

Thy sharp sighs divide my flesh and spirit with soft sound,

*The pounding of their hearts together as they pressed flesh to flesh.*

And my blood strengthens, and my veins abound.

Of course. He had whispered that in her ear. Yes, he remembers that. And when they lie panting in the aftermath of their passion, Algernon had grabbed the nearest paper and ink well and had added to his poem.

With the memory comes an infusion of energy. *His poem.* He jumps off the bed, or rather slides off of it, sits in a pile for a moment until he can feel his legs, then uses the bed to pull himself to standing. Then he gingerly makes his way down stairs, leaning heavily on the balustrade for support. Once in the sitting room, Algernon gathers the crumpled sheets of paper. He glances around surreptitiously, as if he suspects someone is watching him, then casually—or as close an approximation as he can manage—climbs the stairs back to his room. He bolts the door behind him.

At his desk, Algernon flattens out the pages and lays them out. Two of them are devoid of words but full of ink and port. The third one though, has the stanza, written in his own jittery scratch, though at an odd angle, as if he wrote with his opposite hand. Nonetheless, it is his own.

He clutches it to his chest, hears the paper tear just a bit with the force and puts it back on the desk. Hastily, while his mind is swimming with its words, he grabs a pen, dips it in the ink pot and—

—writes absolutely nothing.

He reads the stanza over again, once, twice, and lets the pen hover over the page, ready to write when the next stanza will so fluidly follow its mate, as per his usual writing habit. But still nothing comes.

Below there is the sound of the back door opening, closing, a moment of quiet and then a shrill scream followed by a fervent, “Lord bless me!”

Algernon goes to the door, unlocks it, sticks his head out and yells, “It’s alright. Annie will clean it up in the morning. I’ll take supper upstairs,” then closes the door. When he returns to his desk there is no sudden burst of inspiration. Only the single stanza. He tosses the pen and slumps back in his chair.

*Algernon, 1865*

He is still in that chair, still slumped, when he hears rustling outside his door. His stomach growls. His head pounds. He has not eaten all day and he is rather lightheaded. “I’ll want a glass of port, Cook,” he says, opening the door to receive his food.

“I’m afraid I haven’t any with me, dear Algernon,” Sappho says.

Algernon stares in amazement.

“Won’t you invite me in?” she asks.

Algernon stutters for a moment but moves hastily aside. Sappho takes this as an invitation and enters the room. She pauses in front of him and touches his cheek with one hand. Algernon is feverish, or perhaps it is just that her hand is so very cold. “But you do look dreadful,” she says. She touches the cuts on his face, on his neck.

“They are completely worth it,” he says. He reaches up to take her by the wrist, but she evades him.

“Come, let us sit. You look on the verge of collapse.” She glides to the bed and sits. She pats the spot next to her and Algernon follows. She takes his hand in hers, the cut hand that is still flecked with dried blood and now the ridge of a scab. “It was rough.”

The edge of Algernon’s lip curls up. “I liked it.”

“That is not what I meant.”

His cheeks color.

“I mean your love for Mary.”

Algernon jerks his hand from her grasp. “Why must we speak of her?”

He tries to rise from the bed, but even before he has shifted his weight, as if she anticipates his move, Sappho recaptures his hand and holds it. Pain shoots from his wound, from his crushed fingers in her grip. He cries in shock.

“Be still.”

He is.

“Look at me.”

He does.

It is like falling into the sea in the middle of winter. He shakes uncontrollably. He cannot breathe. A breaker pounds down on him from above, gray water and gray sky collide in a sudden wash, sucking him down into the depths, throwing him against a rocky promontory. He tries to scream as his back shatters against the cliff face, but the sea chokes out his cry and his lungs fill with fire.

“Algernon.”

She has released his hand. He sputters and chokes until he realizes it is air and not water. Spittle and snot run down his nose, his chin.

“Algernon,” she says again. Sappho hands him a handkerchief and he wipes his face.  
“You see, then, why we must speak of Mary.”

He does not, of course. Still reeling from his near-drowning, Algernon only nods his head. He hands her back her handkerchief but when she refuses to take it, he tucks it into his shirt pocket. He is still in his ripped clothes and the handkerchief flops sadly over the pocket’s torn hem.

“What was that?” he asks, almost afraid of the answer.

“A sad ending.”

When she refuses to elaborate they fall into a heavy silence. Algernon becomes aware of his thirst again. The feeling of shaking-not-shaking begins again in his feet. He taps his toes on the hardwood until Sappho places a hand on his knee. He cannot quite account for this feeling of restlessness.

“It is because you will not let go,” Sappho says, as if she can read his thoughts. “You hang there on the cusp, unsure whether to move or not and so you war within yourself.”

Algernon knows she is speaking of Mary, that they have returned to her, but he chooses not to acknowledge this. He is beginning to weary of Sappho’s choice of topic.

“I think I will call up Cook for some port with supper,” he says. “Would you join me in a glass, my lady?”

She does not answer, nor does she hinder him when he goes to the door and shouts for Cook to bring up his supper with not one but *two* bottles of port. “I’m just a bit thirsty,” he tells her, laughing, rather awkwardly. It withers under Sappho’s stare.

Several rather long, uncomfortable moments later, Cook delivers Algernon’s supper, with the requested port, tells him there is still more in the pot and a kettle on the hearth should he like tea, and that she is off and will return again after the Sabbath. She does not acknowledge Sappho, and neither does Sappho speak to her. Algernon takes his supper, a rich, steaming bowl of beef stew with several thick slices of bread and cheese. Though a moment ago he was faint with hunger, the odor unsettles his stomach. He deposits the tray at the far end of the room and to

further shield his senses, plucks Sappho's handkerchief from his pocket and covers his mouth and nose. He brings the port with him and drinks down a hasty glass. He turns the chair at his writing desk around to face Sappho still sitting on his bed, and collapses into it.

"I apologize, Lady Sappho. I seem to have lost my appetite. Perhaps I should look about for a new cook."

"It is not the meal that ails you."

Algernon senses that Mary's name hangs in the air and his sudden feeling of nausea is replaced by anger. Really, this repetition is proving irksome, and in a fit of relative bravery, or perhaps just borne of his fatigue, he tells her so.

"You are angry because you refuse to acknowledge the truth, Algernon. You will remain impotent and staid as long as you cling to this ridiculous shadow of devotion to a woman who clearly has abandoned you."

"Enough!" Algernon yells. He rises, slowly, deliberately so as not to topple over, containing by the thinnest thread an effusion of nerves and rage. "My lady, I have endured all I can this evening. I am rather tired now and cannot abide company. I will show you out and hail a cab." He opens the door to his apartment and waits for Sappho to exit.

On her way out she says, "There is no need. I know my own way." She pauses just on the threshold. "You will see, my poet. It will not be long before you call again for me."

Though it is ungentlemanly of him, Algernon does not accompany her downstairs, but rather shuts his door upon her. Foregoing the glass altogether, Algernon swigs from the open

bottle. “I shall not, I say, call upon you, my lady,” he tells the air. “I find I have little need for you after all.”

He settles his chair back at his writing desk, snatches his poem and a pen.

*Let my—* he writes.

He scratches it out and begins again.

*Let my ~~spirit~~ soul ~~smoulder to ash~~*

He dips the pen again, reviews his line.

*Let my ~~soul catch fire~~ life burn down ~~fuck~~*

*Let my ~~fuck~~ life burn ~~to bloody~~ ~~fuck~~ ~~hell~~ down, and*

*~~And what? Fuck fuck bloody fuck~~ ~~hell~~*

Algernon throws the pen out the open window. He pounds his fist against the desk until his clenched fingers tingle. The force rattles the inkwell; it tips, spilling ink over the page and into his lap. He tries to staunch the flow with Sappho’s handkerchief, but it soaks through quickly and stains his hands black.

*Bernie, 2007*

Night Nurse comes in with a brown grocery bag for Jeanette. She tells her that Sharon had come by and dropped it off, but couldn't stay. Jeanette is clearly disappointed, her narrow face pinched, but she shrugs it off and she and Bernie spend the evening in her room with *Gypsy Kings* playing in the background.

"My first date with Sharon was at their concert, at the Greek. A friend of ours set us up. I thought she was so pretty. Straight black hair, really intense dark eyes. But she was so serious."

"Was?"

Jeanette smirks. "She probably thought I was a lush, but I had two beers in the first twenty minutes we were there just to relax. After that I just danced in the stands like everyone else. I grabbed her hand and twirled her around and did this little salsa kind of dance that made her laugh. When she smiles her eyes really light up."

Bernie tries to imagine Jeanette and Sharon just getting to know each other, tentative lovers, accommodating, exploring, hungry yet cautious. "I bet you were cute," she says.

Jeanette smiles a little. "Yah," she says wistfully. "I hope—," she stops. "You know, after I'm gone."

They both know what she means. The track finishes, leaves them in silence for a heartbeat, and then begins again with the deep thumping rhythm of the djembe, piercing, and yet slightly hollow.

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon dreams he is standing atop the flat roof a gray stone edifice, like a country manor; he has never seen it, but in that peculiar way of dreams, it is familiar somehow. He is perched upon the edge, the tips of his shoes overhanging the lip. He looks down, and it is a dizzying height. Much higher than he thought would be typical of an estate home. His hands are outstretched before him. His palms are turned up to the sky. Blood wells up from two neat puncture wounds at each wrist, pools in his palms and slips between his fingers. It falls in droplets and then streams like a heavy rain and splatters on his shoes.

*Bernie, 2007*

*“If I asked you to stay the night, would you?” Paul asked her.*

*Bernie paused in the motion of buttoning up her blouse, her hands together, almost prayer-like. She had been lying on his bed, belly down, her legs cocked up at the knees and crossed at the ankles. Paul had not had her posed for very long when he announced that he was finished and she could get dressed.*

*“I don’t know,” she said, resuming the buttoning. She didn’t look up, but she could see him just on the edge of her vision. He was standing at his easel, but he was looking at her.*

*“What don’t you know?” When she did finally look up, he dropped his head and began organizing his charcoals, folding the chamois, refolding it.*

*Bernie stood and started gathering her things. “I don’t know if I should. I don’t know what staying the night will mean.”*

*Paper rustled and cracked as Paul gathered up his discarded sheets. He still tore them off one by one as he sketched. Bernie didn’t know what he did with them—there must be hundreds by now?—and when she asked once, he just smirked and shrugged his shoulders. Paul straightened up with the sheets draped over one arm like an old-fashioned maître d’. “What do you want it to mean?” He rolled the sketches into a single roll and slid them into a cylinder, then leaned it against the wall. “It can mean we’ll have dinner here, maybe order Thai, watch a DVD or something, have some wine, have sex until neither of us can speak and then fall asleep until we feel like waking up. Maybe have some more sex. Then I’ll put a pot of coffee on. You’ll sit for me in the morning light, and then you’ll go home.”*

*“Is that what you want?” Bernie asked.*

*Paul cocked his head to one side in the way he often did when he sketched her. He looked long, like he was calculating the intensity of sun on her face, or the angle of her chin. “Or it could mean that I really, really want to know what it feels like to wake up with you like I’ve been doing it my whole life.” He reached out and took one of her hands in both of his, but there was a moment’s hesitation, like he wasn’t sure if she would let him take it.*

*“What would you do if I say no?”*

*He shook his head. “I don’t know. But I hope you don’t.”*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie sleeps late, and it is a deep and restful sleep, like she has not felt in years. She dreamed, of that she is sure, but she cannot remember its specifics, only its feel. It felt like warm arms wrapped around her, holding her secure. Holding and not letting go.

With Day Nurse’s help she gets into her robe, her wheelchair. She is rolled to Jeanette’s room; the door is open and from inside Bernie hears the end of a phone conversation:

“Yah, I got it. Thanks.”

“Are you sure?”

“No, it’s only—”

“No, I understand.”

“Yah, I’m sure. I love you.”

Bernie knocks just as Jeanette hangs up. Jeanette’s lips press together in an approximation of a smile and she nods. Day Nurse parks Bernie by the window, in the sun, adjusts the blanket over her lap and then leaves the two with a promise to return with breakfast. Bernie is already sweating, hit by another hot flash. She throws the blanket on the floor.

Bernie nods toward the phone. “Who was that?”

“No one. Sharon. She said to say hi.”

Bernie doesn’t press. She watches Jeanette struggle to get comfortable in her bed, moving, removing and replacing pillows, and finally giving up. Bernie unlocks the brake on her wheelchair and manages to scoot herself close enough to the bed to reach her. She fluffs a pillow and tucks it behind Jeanette’s head, then pulls the bed sheets up to her chin. Jeanette presses her cheek to Bernie’s hand in thanks and settles back into the bed.

“Distract me,” Jeanette says.

This time Bernie is ready. “Okay,” she says. “Once upon a time—”

*Bernie, 2007*

*Bernie slept late, a deep and restful sleep, like she had not felt in a long time. She dreamed, of that she was sure, but she could not remember its specifics, only its feel. It felt like warm arms wrapped around her, holding her secure. Holding and not letting go. She was half on her side and half on her stomach; one arm hung over the edge of the bed. Behind her, Paul was a solid presence along the length of her body. His breath came slow and steady. She had wondered if he was a snorer, if she’d be able to sleep in someone else’s bed. Thankfully Paul was a heavy sleeper—brick heavy, and still. No shifting and kicking and snatching of covers. His back was to her, his face to the wall.*

*She slipped out of bed and into the silk robe Paul had bought her for modeling. She padded softly to the window and peeked through the blinds. The sun was already bright, traffic was already locked in futility on the highway below them, a few brave seagulls spun in the air, white dots against a murky gray-brown backdrop. It was a typical Los Angeles day.*

*The window was open because the apartment did not have air conditioning; this high up there was always a good breeze going. There was no screen on the window, but what had once been a Juliet balcony, now without the railing. They called it The Balcony, in the mocking sort of way that someone might call Spam pate or boxed wine Champaign. Bernie rolled the blinds up as quietly as she could, and pushed the window up. She perched on the ledge and let her legs dangle over, though she kept a good grip on the window frame inside the apartment.*

*Paul's apartment was the last in the cul-de-sac, which itself was at the top of a hill. It had once been a larger plateau, but developers had cut half of it away to make room for the I-110, which cloverleafed right beneath them. Though only five stories, because of its position, Paul's apartment had a view that looked out over downtown L.A., and dropped down into the interstate. Most of the time the smog layer occluded everything past a few feet in any direction, and even now, brown haze spread over the valley like a dirty mist in a fantasy movie. The seagulls could be fairy sprites, barely visible balls of light, struggling in a forest that had been enchanted by an evil sorcerer.*

*And what did that make her? Bernie could be the princess in a tall tower, waiting for a charming prince to rescue her. But as soon as she thought it, she rejected that image. She was no*

*princess, Paul—though sometimes charming, she had to admit—was no prince. And as for rescue—*

*What did she need rescuing from?*

*A gust of wind tossed her robe; she shivered, pulled it closed. She watched one of the seagulls plummet through the smog and disappear somewhere below her.*

*“Was it really that bad last night?”*

*Bernie looked over her shoulder at Paul, who was out of bed, standing naked as a jaybird, his hands crossed over his chest. “Don’t jump, B. I swear I can do better.”*

*He bent down and wrapped his arms around her waist; his chin rested in the dip between her neck and shoulder. For a moment they looked out over the city together.*

*“I don’t know,” she said. “I think you’re going to have to prove it to me.”*

*“That’s fair.”*

*Paul helped her out of the window. “I woke up and you were gone,” he said. “I didn’t have a chance to wake up with you there. I think we’ll have to try this again.”*

Day Nurse knocks softly and enters with their food. Bernie’s throat is dry and she gratefully takes the steaming mug of tea. It is just cool enough to drink, but still burns a little on the way down. With the food in front of her, Bernie finds that she is, in fact, hungry. In a reversal, Jeanette lets her oatmeal and fruit sit idle; she does not even pretend to poke at it.

“You need a toke to get your appetite?” Bernie asks. “You’re usually Godzilla on a rampage.”

Jeanette shrugs, but it is more of a half-hearted twitch. “Don’t feel like eating.”

“Hey, maybe we can all have dinner together tonight? You, me and Sharon,” Bernie suggests. “I bet she has some interesting stories from some of her cases—”

“Sharon’s not coming,” Jeanette says. Her voice is flat. “She has a lot of work to do. Too much to come over.”

“Oh.”

“It’s okay, though,” Jeanette says. “It’s probably really dull here for her anyway. Not a lot to do except sit around, you know.”

“Yah,” Bernie says. “I’m sure she’ll come when she can.”

“Yah.”

They sit together until Jeanette’s head sags against her pillow. Not even Day Nurse bringing lunch awakens her, so Bernie has Day Nurse wheel her back to her own room. She grabs her book. “Can you park me outside?”

Even in the shade, beads of sweat speckle Bernie’s forehead. She unties her robe and flaps it a few times to generate a breeze. After a few moments, the flood of heat just under her

skin subsides. She sits under a Japanese maple and listens to the sparrows and a few mockingbirds go about their day. She closes her eyes.

*Bernie, 2007*

She hears the soft swoosh of the sliding glass door. Heavy footfalls crunch on the gravel. A chair is dragged in the dirt, pulled close and settled. She feels the book slide out of her hands.

“Let me read to you,” Paul says.

*“Anactoria.”*

Pages crinkle and turn. “Of course.”

*I am sick with time as these with ebb and flow,  
And by the yearning in my veins I know  
The yearning sound of waters; and mine eyes  
Burn as that beamless fire which fills the skies  
With troubled stars and travailing things of flame*

*Bernie, 2007*

*They walked just short of the tidal line, watched the water come up, reach for their bare feet and then retreat. Bernie skipped ahead of Paul, waited and scampered back to meet him. She giggled and tugged at his hand like a child, like she used to when she was a girl and her parents took her to the beach. Paul smiled his half-smile that was a quirk at the edge of his lips. He*

*pointed to the sky and her eyes followed. A dark gray cloud rolled in over the sun and blotted it out. From deep in the horizon, thunder rumbled. She felt it in her feet, in her belly. It rattled the glass panes of the sky like the slamming of a great door. Overhead, seagulls wheeled and dove. One of them fell into the ocean with a scream.*

*Algernon, 1865*

No one answers the bedroom door when the Annie knocks with breakfast. It is Monday, and she quite enjoyed the two day holiday, though she sees that the mess in the downstairs sitting room has yet to be tidied. When she speaks with Sarah, the cook, this morning, she is fit to be tied. The pot of stew that she had left for Master Algernon had sat out all night Saturday and all day Sunday. Fat black horseflies buzz over the rancid meat. Sarah swears she will find a new position if Master does not mend his ways right quick. She probably will not, but it does not stop her from threatening it every now and again.

Annie knocks again. “Master Algernon? ‘Tis, Annie, sir. You’ll be wantin’ your tea, sir?” There is no answer. She pushes the door with her toe and opens it a crack. There have been far too many times when she’s intruded upon her master naked as the Lord made him—a sight she truly has no wish to repeat. She peeps her head in. “Master Algernon?”

She has a full view of the bed, and it is blessedly empty. The linens are undisturbed. She eases into the room a bit further, noting that there is no one by the bureau or the window. She has hopes that her master is toiling away at his desk and has been unmindful of the need to eat, though this no doubt means he will have been unmindful of other necessities and will no doubt

require the copper tub and buckets of hot water when he comes back to himself. And she'll have to toss out a full chamber pot. A quick sniff in the air turns Annie's nose.

Annie enters the room and sets the food on the bureau. The open door blocks the desk. She draws it shut and with lowered eyes addresses the floor before the desk. "Master Algernon, I have your breakfast for you, sir. You'd best not let it cool."

She looks up when there is no response. And shrieks like a banshee when she sees her master slumped over his desk, eyes half-closed and blank, one arm dangling over the side. After several shrill and lusty screams both Sarah, the cook, and William the doorman from two doors down who is not so secretly courting Sarah, rush in together, out of breath from both the hasty jog up the stairs and from the vigorous groping which Annie's screams have interrupted. Sarah crosses herself. "Oh, Lord bless me, he's dead!"

William, a little more intrepid than the two females, approaches the body and pokes rather unceremoniously at its shoulder. The body groans. Annie screams. Sarah crosses herself again.

Having determined that Master Algernon is not, in fact, dead, but still only semi-conscious—all fully conscious parties present attributing said unconscious state to overindulgence—they agree to summon Mr. Rossetti, as he has ample experience with the after effects of Master Algernon's vice. William volunteers to go, leaving Annie and Sarah to stand in the door frame of their master's apartment, as neither is sure that Master Algernon will survive the time before Mr. Rossetti arrives, and neither especially relishes being in the room with a dead body. Sarah, slightly more sensible than the younger girl, slyly buttons the upper-most buttons of

her blouse, having missed them in her hurried dressing, and thinks to ask William upon his return if the Sir Theodore Maybrys will soon be in need of a cook.

Both girls jump when the front door slams and the pounding footsteps of Dante Rossetti declare his arrival. They step aside to let him pass into the room, at which he crouches down beside Algernon.

“Swinburne, I say. Do wake up, lad.” He shakes the man’s shoulders, with rather more gentleness than William before him, but receives the same response. He turns to Annie and sends her off to fetch smelling salts. When the girl returns, Dante takes Algernon in hand and lifts the man into a sitting position.

Now Sarah shrieks. “Oh, Lord bless me,” she says, crossing herself yet again. “He’s taken the plague.” She points at Algernon’s face.

Dante follows her finger. The left side of Algernon’s face is black and mottled, starting from just the corner of his eye and blossoming out along the ridge of his cheek. The skin appears dry and flaky.

“Don’t be daft, woman,” Dante snaps. He licks his thumb and rubs it in a small agitated circle on Algernon’s cheek. Beneath the black smudge, pale skin emerges, though it is scratched from some previous wounds. Dante indicates the crumpled sheet of paper on the desk, molded into the shape of Algernon’s face where it was pressed against the desk. The ink of the page is smeared and the paper is warped, as from dried water. Algernon’s hands are stained black as is a discarded handkerchief on the floor. Dante grabs the salts from Annie and sends both her and

Sarah, who is not entirely convinced that her master does not have the plague, out of the room, one to prepare a hot compress, the other to summon a physician.

By the time Doctor McManus arrives, Dante has managed to rouse Algernon with the salts, and clean his face and hands of the dried ink. He had to lift his friend bodily to the bed, where he commenced, with the deft skill borne of repetition, to strip him down, re-dress him in clean bedclothes, and tuck him in. Now, Algernon lies, partially propped by pillows, dwarfed by the down comforter drawn up to his chin as if he were a child in his parents' bed. He manages to answer the good doctor's questions to some satisfaction, though in a voice only barely audible, and certainly colored with a depletion of spirits so severe that both Doctor McManus and Dante peruse the room as to locate and remove any sharp objects. They seize the two empty bottles of port and quietly stow them away. After a good, hearty tea which the doctor insists Algernon drink down to the dregs, and which has been laced with laudanum, Doctor McManus takes Dante aside.

"Sir, it is clear we have a case of shattered nerves induced by personal neglect and overindulgence in drink."

Dante agrees and explains the events of the previous week, leaving out Algernon's running stark mad through the Norrington's supper party, though he needn't have bothered as the doctor had read of the event in the dailies and the empty bottles indicated the situation well enough.

“Is there not a place, away from the tumult of the city, where Mr. Swinburne can be at leisure? Has he friends or family in the country, perhaps? Or may he not take a medicinal by the sea? I dare say the sea air will do him good.”

*Bernie, 2007*

*Bernie reached up to tuck a lock of her hair back over her ear, a nervous tick, but there was no hair—or, there were only short wisps beginning to grow back. Not enough to tuck behind her ear. Radiation and chemo were over, she was recovered from her surgery to remove her ovaries, and she and Paul waited in her oncologist’s office to find out if the tumors had shrunk at all. Her hand fell to her lap. Somewhere down there, right where her hand rested, tumors collected like little lead balls, hard and heavy.*

*Paul leaned over, and though they were alone in the room, he whispered. “No matter what, I’ll be here for you.”*

*The door opened, a soft whoosh on the carpet.*

*Paul stood immediately, shook the doctor’s hand. Bernie flinched, remained seated.*

*The doctor steepled his fingers together and held them in front of his mouth. She knew, even without the doctor saying a word.*

*“I’m afraid—,” he began.*

*Bernie wasn't listening. She watched his mouth move, his lips form words like 'refactory,' 'incurable' and 'metastasized.'*

*Paul reached for her hand and squeezed it, never taking his eyes from the doctor.*

*"What does this mean?" Paul asked.*

*The doctor pressed his steepled fingers to his lips and then placed his hands on his desk. "There are a few clinical trials that look promising, and that could greatly improve her quality of life. We can also continue to debulk the tumors as they recur. There is also the option of second-line chemotherapy. Doxil looks rather effective for tumor reduction, and with Hycamtin patients have lived almost a year after the start of trials."*

*A year.*

*Bernie shivered and suddenly she couldn't stand to be in the room. She pulled her hand out of Paul's hold and got up.*

*"Would you like me to give you a few moments alone?" the doctor asked.*

*With her back to him, Bernie could not see Paul, but he must have nodded to the doctor because a moment later the two of them were alone, the doctor offering a stiff pat on the shoulder as he walked past her and out the door.*

*"B." He just said it, just her name, but she heard the weight of it. "What do you want to do?"*

I don't know, I don't know. *She shook her head. She reached out and turned the door knob.* I just can't be here.

*Algernon, 1865*

A fortnight later, Algernon finds himself trussed from head to foot in greatcoat, scarf, muffler, mittens and shawl, like some country pheasant for the spit, so he tells himself, and in the back carriage with Dante, his quiet, yet fiercely intense sister Christina, and their mutual friend William Bell Scott, all on their way to Will's seaside home in Tynemouth and the cool, salty sprays of the northern coast.

The first week is sheer agony as every eye upon him is intrusive, every inquiry heavy with none too subtle evaluation, as if he were not only physically diminished but senile as well. 'How are we feeling this morning?' is translated to mean: have you intentions of doing yourself in, perhaps with the toasting fork or the half-knit winter underwear in the work basket? 'Shall we not all take a lovely stroll down to the shore after luncheon?' means: we daren't leave you in the house alone with the cutlery.

At last, during an insufferable tea with Will reading aloud a particularly bombastic latter Tennyson, Algernon can stand it no longer.

"Oh, for the love of Zeus! If I had wanted to off myself it would have been easy enough to choke on the wadded pages of our most noble laureate. If I swear not to throw myself

headlong in the ocean, will you all desist in your mission of espionage and let me convalesce in peace?”

Since this is the first time Algernon has shown the least spark of animation, by silent assent the rest of the party permits him to sit and read, wander the grounds or otherwise occupy himself as he sees fit, as long as he promises to attend to meals and the occasional group outing into the village. Having secured his release from incarceration, Algernon finds he does, in fact, enjoy Tynemouth. The tiny coastal village, with its smoky white cliffs jutting up out of the churning gray mouth of the sea reminds him of his beloved Isle of Wight in the Channel and the dazzling, rambunctious days of his youth at Bonchurch in the south. Oh, how he and Mary used to—

He stops himself before his mind is overcome with scenes of their childhood play in the sere, windswept moors. Of that one beautiful summer when they lay naked together and recited poetry in the shadow of the tumbled rock wall, his hands cupping her just sprouting breasts—

Algernon thrusts his hands into the pockets of his greatcoat and buries his chin in his chest against the wind off the cliffs, endeavoring, but failing, to think of nothing. He walks along the rocky shore, slow and steady even as the coming tide soaks the soles of his walking boots. Mrs. Matthison, Will’s stout, matronly housekeeper will have his head, cracked or not, if he tracks mud on her floors. Even so, the threat of her rolling pin against his pate does not detour him. The sea is a persistent pulse like an accompanying harmony in some great sonata, but Algernon cannot yet make out the melody, though he senses it there, just out of hearing. He feels

acutely his inability, the page with only struck lines. Sappho's promise returns to him: *You will see, my poet. It will not be long before you call again for me.*

Like bloody hell, he will.

He has not spoken of Sappho to anyone, not even Dante. He has always suspected that his friend truly believes him mad, or at the least perverse, but that their shared devotion to art makes the relationship tolerable. Perhaps that is unfair. Dante has, after all, always been there to clean him off and pick him up after whatever derangement has seized him. But that must grow tiresome after a while. Is that not why Mary wed the dear, stolid, predictable Colonel? He saw it in her eyes during their talk on the shore, when she announced her engagement.

*"Is that not wonderful, cousin? Dear Robert has earned a permanent posting in Bristol, at a thousand per annum. We shall be quite happy, I am sure. And he was so gentle when he asked me. He had settled with Father first, of course. He is such a gentleman and had not wanted to be forward."*

*Algernon sees not the woman before him in her high-necked collar and shawl, but a soft-skinned girl enfolded in the tissue of her nightgown, holding its hem up around her waist to expose white thighs and buttocks, shivering in delight as he runs the tip of the birch switch over her skin.*

*When their eyes meet, Mary blushes so fiercely it is like purpled bruises on her cheeks, as if she has read his mind.*

Algernon wonders briefly if perhaps he can confide in Christina. The Rossetti sister is more inclined to the fantastic, though as he considers it, she is more a religious mystic with her smoldering dark eyes that seem to see through people into their inner most being. She is a Saint Theresa in ecstasy. With his luck, she would convince the house he is possessed of the devil and lead them in an exorcism.

Maybe he is possessed.

He stops, thinking he hears steps behind him, but when he turns there is not a soul to be seen along the stretch of rocky shore, and surely he would not have been able to hear any approach save that of a marching army over the tumult of the sea. No, of course not. For though he left a letter with his direction for the mistress Sappho should she call upon Cheyne Walk in search of him, he does not expect her. He longs for her desperately, but does not expect her.

And what is worse, he has not written a word since his arrival in Tynemouth. The evening before last he had sat down at a writing desk in his apartment, determined to write *something*, but the paper in question had only ended in holding his tears. He had sobbed like a child before laying aside his pen, stoppering his ink well, and crawling into bed. He has not tried to write since.

Algernon looks out over the vast plane of the North Sea, gray and empty. Dejected and cold in the blistering wind, he walks back to the house.

*Algernon, 1865*

When Algernon foregoes company with an excuse of fatigue, it is not a ruse. He is brutally exhausted, as if he had walked several miles into town and back. Dante lets him go though he is worried. He endeavors to watch Algernon more closely.

Up in his bedchamber, Algernon loosens his cravat and removes his jacket and vest. Though chilled through from the walk out of doors, Algernon is feverish. His brow is dappled with sweat. He sits in the plush upholstered chair in the corner of the room, across from the plain little writing desk Will had brought in for him, which rests under the eastern facing window—the best for light. The empty desk mocks him. The lavishly appointed room with a canopied bed and damask curtains mocks him, as does the whole bloody estate looking over the whole bloody sea.

“Perhaps it would be best if I died here once for all,” Algernon tells the empty room. “If I cannot write there is no point.” Let Dante and Will carry on free of his foibles. Let Mary live in peace with her Colonel.

“You would let her get away with betraying you? Perhaps you are not the man I thought you were.”

Algernon turns, and though he should be surprised to see Sappho standing by the door, he is not.

“I see you received my directions,” he says, though the flatness of his voice leaves no question of his actual conviction. Sappho does not deign a reply. “And of course you stopped to inquire of my health with Dante and Will before you came up to my room. You probably asked

one of the girls to send up some tea as well.” He rises shakily to his feet. He is not sure if they will hold him, but they do. “And you opened and shut the door without my notice, so quiet are your steps.”

He searches her, looking for—what? “Are you truly she?” he asks. “Are you a ghost?” He shakes his head. “Of course it would be completely fitting if I were haunted.”

Sappho shakes her head. “No, dear Algernon. You are not haunted. At least, not by a ghost.”

“It makes sense, now that I stop to think on it,” he says. He presses his palms into his eyes. His voice breaks with exhaustion. “But I didn’t think on it. I just wanted—”

Sappho glides to his side, and though she is not real, and Algernon knows she is not real, she wraps her arms about his shoulders, and he feels them.

“What do you want, my poet?”

“What I have always wanted,” he tells her. “To write. To love. I—thought, maybe.” He knows he is speaking to a woman who is not there. Who could not possibly be there. Who is some two thousand years dead and gone. And yet. “You were right, Lady Sappho. I would call on you if I could.”

Sappho’s hand caresses his cheek. It lingers on the slight remains of the scratches that thatch his face. “And what is to stop you?”

His eyes fly open and he grabs Sappho by the wrists, even while he knows it is not her wrists in his hands. Algernon had read Doctor Maudsley's treatise on the criminally lunatic; the word psychosis is not new to him. He laughs even as he says it. "You are not real."

Sappho leans forward, kisses the back of his hand that is holding her wrist. Her lips are cold. Or, her lips that are not there are not cold, though he feels they are. Her free hand reaches for his shirt, looses the top buttons and slides her hand in. Algernon groans as her fingers sweep his chest, her nails rake over his skin. Red welts rise up. "Is this real?" she asks.

"No. It cannot be. You are dead."

She pulls him in closer to him, kisses the ridge of bone above his chest, the dip where his neck and shoulder meet. "Is this real?"

He shakes his head when his voice fails. He begins to tremble, but not because she is arousing him, which she is. He feels himself growing erect. No, he trembles because he fears he is going mad, and he is caring less and less.

"Algernon," Sappho whispers. "I can give you everything you have ever wanted. I know you have not written since you left London."

He does not deny it.

"I can give you back your words."

His poem.

"I can restore your heart from that woman's grip."

Mary. Oh, his precious Mary. He will never be whole until he is free of her.

“What do you want?” he asks. He releases her wrist, and his own hands hang at his side.

Instead of answering, she takes his face in her hands, and seems to study him for several long seconds. Then she rises up on her toes and leans in so her lips brush his ear.

“Surrender.”

*Bernie, 2007*

“Keep reading,” Bernie prompts. Next door she hears banging like muffled thunder. Her eyes flicker open; she is alone on the patio. Her book has slipped from her lap and lies sprawled in the gravel. She bends as low as she can in her wheelchair, but the book is too low and her body has forgotten its agility. She slips one foot out of its stirrup and manages to prod the spine of the book with the tip of her toe, but manages only to press the pages deeper into the gravel.

She unlocks the brakes of the chair and with the freed foot, pushes herself closer to the sliding glass door, which Day Nurse has left open. She is too weak to make it over the door frame’s bottom track, so she calls out. With her neck craned over her shoulder, she catches a glimpse of a slender, dark-haired woman in a navy pants suit walk past her open door and head, presumably, for the nurse’s desk and the front door. The profile is familiar.

Day Nurse blocks the rest of the view as she comes in and hoists the wheelchair over the track and back inside.

“Can you wheel me to Jeanette?” Bernie asks.

The door is ajar just a sliver. Jeanette is crying. Bernie pries the door open enough to poke her head in. “Jeanette?” she calls.

No answer.

“Jeanette?” Bernie calls again. “What’s wrong? Can I come in?”

She takes the continued lack of answer as an affirmative and has Day Nurse forge ahead into the room, park her bedside and go to get tea. For some reason tea always seems like a good idea. She reaches out and rubs small circles on Jeanette’s shoulder. “Honey, what’s wrong?”

Jeanette is curled on her side, head buried in her pillow and folded arms like she were warding off blows. Her body heaves quietly.

Bernie reaches into her robe pocket to retrieve a tissue, but they are all used. She should have had Day Nurse get a box too. “Jeanette?”

The heaving stops for a moment and Jeanette lifts her head from her under her arms. Her face is splotchy and wet with tears and snot; she is not a pretty crier. “What happened?” Bernie asks.

“Sharon.”

The dark-haired woman. “I just saw her leave. Is she okay?”

Jeanette snuffles, blinks in rapid succession. “She’s leaving me.”

*It is better this way.*

“She’s leaving me.”

*I’ll call you when I get there.*

“She, she said she met someone at the support group. A woman who lost her partner a few months ago. She said Nikki, that’s, that’s her name—she said Nikki understands. She said she just can’t stand to watch me die. She just can’t take it.” Tears have started to stream down her face again; they slide down to the point of her chin and drip onto her arms and the front of her shirt. Against the pink fabric they are dark like blood spatter. Jeanette shudders and coughs, chokes on her own desolation. When she catches her breath she says, “Th-this is what I wanted. I don’t want her to be alone when I, when I die.” Her whole body heaves in one sharp convulsive wave. Her head drops back onto her arms as if she no longer has the strength to hold it up. “This is what I wanted,” she whispers.

*Bernie, 2007*

They sit together in silence. The drifting steam from two mugs of tea tells time as it wafts, then thins, then dies.

#### **Part 4. “...of Anactoria/ who is gone”**

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie unlocks her wheelchair’s brakes and tries to push herself toward the door. Her arms are weak and tremble as she tries to gain momentum; bearing the weight of someone else’s grief is exhausting. She makes it to the foot of the bed.

“Why did you leave Paul?” Jeanette asks.

Her eyes are closed, her cheek scarred with the impression of her arms, the fold of the fabric of her pillow. She shakes and can barely depress her PCA pump. There is no expression on her face. Bernie cannot see her chest rise and fall beneath the jumbled shroud of her blankets.

“I-I didn’t want him to have to watch me, you know,” she says. “I wanted to protect him.”

“That’s a lie,” Jeanette says. Her face remains expressionless. “You did it to protect yourself.”

What could she say? Yes. She did it so she would not have to look at Paul every day, to have him make her soup and watch her tremble to bring the spoon up to her own lips, have him dab her brow with a cool cloth, wipe vomit from her mouth, change her diaper when she soiled herself. Watch him watch as the thing he thought he loved turned to a burden, turned to something he hated and would be relieved when it died and left him free.

“Sharon loves you,” Bernie says. “She always will.”

Jeanette flinches at the name. “What about Paul? Did you love him?”

Bernie hesitates. “I want to tell you something,” she says. She grabs the footboard of Jeanette’s bed and uses it to lever herself so she is facing her.

“Okay.”

*Bernie, 2007*

“Turn to me, O my Sappho,” Algernon whispers, and taking another swig to fortify himself—

“What is that?” Jeanette asks. “You sound like a Jane Austen BBC special.”

“It’s a story. Shut up and let me tell it my way,” Bernie says.

Jeanette shrugs beneath her blankets. Bernie continues.

*Algernon, 1865*

“Surrender.”

The word echoes in his ear.

When he comes to, Algernon is sitting at the breakfast table the next morning, dressed and groomed immaculately—crisp gray day coat and linen shirt sleeves; matching trousers, pressed; damasked vest, complete with fob watch and chain in the front pocket; dapper cravat at his neck; hair combed and parted to a pin. It is more than he has managed in the whole of his stay at Tynemouth thus far, and to the utter surprise but delight of Dante and Will. Christina seems rather preoccupied in her own thoughts and takes no notice. Occasionally her lips move and she whispers something about a fruit market.

Algernon's mouth is engaged in conversation with Will concerning the repeal of the Corn Laws when his mind catches up and seems to settle back into place; he suddenly becomes aware of the sound of his own speech and the bodily weight of his presence in the cushioned seat at the table. How he arrived there and in his present laundered and combed condition he cannot recall. It is disconcerting—this independence of mouth and brain, yet even as his thoughts puzzle through the past several minutes, his mouth blithely agrees with Will that yes, Britain is headed to hell in the proverbial handbasket now that the tariffs have been rescinded and an ignorant Siberian peasant can import grain at a fraction of the price it costs good, sturdy Englishmen to grow it. They'll be joining those surly potato eaters in recession in no time at all.

Even as he speaks, Algernon is conscious of Dante's appraising glances though he pretends to be in deep consideration of the Queen's politics. And, as if this were a day bent on topping surprise after surprise, Algernon sees in Dante's eyes, not the familiar ill ease and worry—directed so oft at himself—but a visible relaxation.

As Carroll's little Alice would say, curiouser and curiouser. For indeed, there is a marked difference in the Algernon sitting here, sober and alert, hands un-trembling, speech un-slurred, than the one who arrived barely capable of wiping his own arse let alone conduct a competent tête-à-tête with his friend. To anyone keeping track, which is still everyone in the house except for perhaps Christina, Algernon would appear to have taken a complete recovery of his nerves from the unfortunate stress and overindulgence that one of his sensitive constitution is like to suffer in the thrall of London's mean environs. Truly miraculous.

Algernon tries not to over analyze this sudden turn of the tide, since he does indeed feel refreshed and in command of his faculties in a way he has not in quite some time. He pours a half glass of watered port from the waiting decanter—he cannot, after all, give the stuff up completely, not after so long a habit, but moderation has become course for the day here in Tynemouth—and takes a sip. The liquor is sweet and fiery and runs as if it were lifeblood down his throat. He smiles to himself.

“Well, my dear boy, you are looking hale this morning,” Dante says. He lifts his tea cup as if in salute. “The sea air indeed.”

“It is at that, Dante. I cannot recall when I've felt more of the vigor of nature. Not since my youth at Bonchurch.” He sips his port. Normally the mention of his boyhood would be haunted by the bittersweet tenders of his dear Mary, and though he thinks of her, his heart is curiously void of that crushing sadness that so often accompanies his memories. He sips again. Perhaps it is just a sign of his convalescence.

“To see you does my heart good, lad.”

“It is all to the due of my dear friends,” Algernon replies, making a toast to each one, even Christina and the good Mrs. Matthison. They all, except Christina, who has not noticed the toast, and Mrs. Matthison, who is busy ordering the maids about and not present at the table, return the toast with good cheer. “What have you planned for the morning, Dante?”

Dante tells him that he, Will and Christina are to take a walk down to the village should the weather hold, which it looked likely to do. He and Will are particularly interested in picking up a conversation on the subject of predestination they had begun with the village parson, while Christina is anxious to pursue the acquaintance of two sisters whom she’d met the previous day. He asks if Algernon would care to join them.

He is about to answer in the affirmative, as he has no plans for the day, but suddenly the roar of breakers upon the cliffs fills his ears and he is so overcome with the longing for the sea that tears collect in the corners of his eyes. It is all and gone in a moment and Algernon is in no small doubt that he had heard anything at all. But curious, he informs Dante that he has a mind to walk along the shore and commune with that nature which has so invigorated his spirits. As soon as Dante and the party are headed to town, Algernon dons his greatcoat, wraps a scarf doubly about his neck and chin, and all but runs to where the land gives way to the great gray waves of sea.

It is not a pleasant day for a stroll along the shore. Though inland, toward Tynemouth village, the sky is bright and gay with nothing fiercer than a breeze to shiver the bare branches of early winter, here by the water the air is sharp with the sting of salt and cold. It pierces easily through Algernon’s coat and raises goose pimples over his flesh.

“I have been waiting for you,” Sappho says.

Though she was not before him a second ago, she is now, draped in ivory silk, in the Grecian style, over one shoulder. She is barefooted. Her hair flows freely but for a laurel crown. Not a single midnight hair strays though the wind whips so hard around them both that Algernon’s cheeks burn. It is a change from when he saw her last, but not an unexpected one.

“My lady?” he asks, shivering now violently as every moment exposed to windshear peels back a layer of his skin and plunges daggers of icicles into pulsing nerve endings. Razors scrape the tender tissue of his eyeballs.

“I have come to inspire you.”

Though her ample bosom would indeed inspire an army of men to upright attention, the blistering wind keeps him quietly in place.

“Is it possible to inspire me in a more comfortable locale, my lady?” he manages.

A particularly violent blast of wind strikes him in the face. Sand and small rocks are whipped up and flung at him; he shields his face with his arm, yet the tiny missiles penetrate and pierce him. The wind twists into a whirlwind with him and his muse in its eye, but she is untouched, still and serene. He yells across to Sappho, but the screaming wind steals his voice, and into his open mouth the grit of the shore is shot. He chokes. His eyes tear. He tries to clear them with the palms of his hands.

And now he and Sappho are no longer by the sea but alone in his bedroom. He is seated at his writing desk and she is standing by his side.

“Was that very necessary?” he asks, the petulant child creeping into his voice. His body has not yet begun to forget to shiver.

“I wanted to remind you of what you were so you may appreciate what you will become.”

There is promise in the last word, so he closes his mouth on whatever else he was going to say. He rifles through the desk until he has laid out several sheets of paper, a blotter, his inkwell and pen. He picks up the pen, dips it, and waits with it poised over the paper. His fingers tremble in anticipation and a fat droplet of ink shakes free and explodes upon the page. Algernon’s eyes glisten with need.

Sappho takes the pen from him and sets it down gently. “So hasty,” she says, her voice at once soothing and maddening. “It would not do for us to come to our conclusion—prematurely.”

Algernon sighs deeply, but yields himself. It is a pleasant sensation, yielding. Surrender. That is what she wanted. And now that he has come to terms with her—she who is not there and yet so very real—well, he is ready. He will do whatever she asks: bite her, spank her, let her spank him, bind him to the bed. He cannot wait.

“Now,” she says, “I am going to tell you a story.”

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*Sappho heard Anactoria before she saw her. She was singing one of the master musician Hesiod Marcaeus' epithalamions, a marriage hymn. It was a small public concert, not one that drew senators or merchants, but it was well attended, though the noticeable lack of young men in attendance was yet another reminder of the growing military trouble abroad. The chorus had just ended their description of the wedding chamber, and the timid new bride stepped forward to sing of her fear and joy. Anactoria's voice was not light and airy as was conventional to play the bride, but her voice wrapped the song in the richest velvet as if it were a pearl. The effect was startling, and Sappho leaned in to better glimpse this singer. At once knowing and yet pure and innocent, her voice carried the hymn up through the amphitheater as if on wings.*

*After the concert and the giving of laurels, Anactoria and a few other girls, all Hesiod's students, stood about. Sappho had qualms about approaching, but the haunting voice would not give her rest. If she could, she would speak with this young singer. Sappho waited until their conversation lulled. When the students saw her, they all bowed. "Honored teacher," Anactoria said. "It is our pleasure that you attended our concert."*

*Sappho smiled. Up close, the girl was attractive, though not what some would consider handsome. She was of average height, small breasted and slim of waist. Her skin was dusky and her eyes dark. Her fingers, Sappho noticed, were long, good for playing the lyre. Sappho smiled to herself. How often had she been described in such a fashion: short and dark of eye and hair? Not even particularly handsome. It was her voice and skill on the lyre that had saved her from being a burden to her family.*

*"It was an enjoyable evening," Sappho said. "I was particularly impressed by our bride." Sappho reached into her purse tied at her belt and retrieved a gold coin stamped with laurels on one side and a woman's profile on the other. The face was Sappho's. Her musical ability had won her highest honors so that Myrsilus, the head of Lesbos' ruling family, rewarded her with such trophies. He was a tyrant, but he recognized the value of esteeming his city's accomplished artists. Sappho handed the coin to Anactoria.*

*"Oh, mistress," she said, "I cannot take such a prize. I am scarcely worth it." She dropped her head. A hard flush colored her tanned cheeks.*

*Sappho took Anactoria's hand, opened the palm, and placed the coin in it, closing the girl's fingers around it. She held Anactoria's hand in her own even after she had deposited the coin. "I think I am judge enough to know talent when I hear it."*

*Still holding the girl's hand, Sappho drew Anactoria away from the other students, who had stepped back a polite distance. Anactoria still would not lift her head. "Anactoria," said Sappho. "I wonder if you might consider coming to my sanctum and becoming one of my students. I see a great deal of potential in you that I think is being wasted here."*

*Hesiod Marcaeus was good, most of Lesbos acknowledged this; but Sappho was the best, which the known world acknowledged. Anactoria seemed to tremble under the weight of the offer.*

*"Mistress," she whispered, "I would not have you waste your time with me. Surely there is nothing I have that is equal to this gift you offer."*

*Sappho lifted the girl's chin, forcing her to look her directly in the eyes. "I am not so sure, little one." She smiled, then kissed the girl on either cheek in farewell. "Attend me tomorrow and we will begin our lessons."*

*The lessons did not begin the next day, as there was the requisite negotiations between Sappho and Anactoria's father, and Anactoria's father and Hesiod. To transfer Anactoria's tuition from one master to another meant a forfeiture of Hesiod's contract and therefore a fee. Anactoria's father, though honored by Sappho's attention to his daughter, was not likely to pay an extra fine of ten silver pieces on top of Sappho's more expensive tuition, even if it meant his daughter would study under the Sappho of Lesbos. Sappho considered this. How much did she want this little bride as her own pupil? Would the investment pay off?*

*Sappho closed her eyes and returned to the amphitheater: Anactoria dressed in long nuptial robes dyed rose, golden bangles on her wrists and ankles, a wreath of olive like a diadem around her head. The young girl lifting her hands in supplication to the goddess for a blessing upon her marriage bed, that the pain of consummation would soon be turned to pleasure and finally result in a legacy of children to bear their father's name. Her voice had been tentative at first, unsupported because of weak breath, wavered when it should have been steady and strong, but these were skills that came with practice and good instruction. What she already had was more important: a voice with the texture as soft as felted wool, and heart. Her emotions bled through the song, carried away her listener. You cannot teach that.*

*Sappho paid the forfeiture fine and agreed to take Anactoria at the same tuition as Hesiod had charged. In the end, Anactoria's father could not pass up the bargain and quickly surrendered his daughter into Sappho's care.*

*Sappho was writing a composition with her stylus on a wax tablet when a slave announced Anactoria's arrival. She set it down and greeted the young woman who seemed to hesitate in the door way. Sappho gestured toward a cushioned bench and had her sit.*

*"How old are you, Anactoria?" Sappho asked.*

*"Sixteen," she said. Her head was bowed and she clasped her hands in her lap. She still did not seem able to look Sappho in the eye.*

*"My dear, how is it that you can face an entire theatre of strangers, but you cannot look one pitiful woman in the face?" Sappho laughed as she said it, but Anactoria's face flushed.*

*"I just—," Anactoria groped for words. "I do not want to—disappoint you, mistress."*

*"Sappho," she said.*

*"What?" Anactoria looked up, clearly confused.*

*"Here, in my sanctum, my name is Sappho."*

*"But—Master Hesiod would never have allowed such insolence," Anactoria said, not realizing her very rebuke for indecorum was in itself insolence. Sappho waved it away.*

*“I am your teacher and you my pupil, but we are women both, and if we cannot be at ease in each other’s company then we will never get on with music.”*

*Anactoria cocked her head as if considering, a habit she was to repeat again and again in Sappho’s presence.*

*“Then we are agreed?”*

*Anactoria nodded. The ends of her lips curled up. “We are, Sappho.”*

*Algernon, 1865*

“I beg your pardon?” Algernon asks. “A story?” This, indeed, is not what he expected.

“You will understand, poet,” Sappho says. “Now it is yours to listen.”

Algernon acquiesces, though still confused.

“I heard Anactoria before I saw her,” Sappho tells him. Her voice is low and resonant and takes the lulling cadence of a song oft told. “She was singing one of Hesiod Marcaeus’ marriage hymns—the composition was, as you would say, piss poor—but her voice wrapped it in the richest velvet as if it were a pearl. In that only was she honest; when she sang, all masks fell away, and she stood as one naked before you. Naked and pure.

“She recognized me, of course, when I approached after the concert. I was known throughout Mytilene, even all of Lesbos and beyond into Lydia. Solon of Athens had wept when he heard my songs. Anactoria and a few other girls, all Hesiod’s students—the poor creatures

could afford no better—were standing about. She saw me out of the corner of her eye, blushed, but pretended not to notice me. She thought to arouse my interest with her indifference. I would put her in her place later, but right then I took the time to appraise her.

“From afar, she was average, slim but not willowy, neither tall nor short. Her hair was bound back beneath a modest scarf, but errant curls escaped at her temples. When I was closer I saw that the curls were tight coils as I have seen on those of the dark peoples of Cush; she was probably of mixed blood somewhere. Her skin was clear, her eyes dark and pleasant under heavy lids. I have seen others whose beauty surpassed hers, but the memory of her voice made her worth pursuing. The girls’ conversation ceased when I neared and a few of them bowed demurely.

“‘Honored teacher,’ Anactoria said, nodding in deference. Her speaking voice was lower than I had expected, but rich. The gods had blessed her with a natural gift for song, for certainly she could not have learned such from Hesiod.

“I did not nod. I did not need to.

“‘The other singers pained me to hear, but your song was palatable,’ I told her. Two of the girls standing beside her turned a hard scarlet and slunk away. I kept Anactoria’s gaze. She could only hold mine a few seconds, and then she dropped her eyes. I smiled. ‘You are good, but you can be better.’

“Anactoria blinked in rapid succession. I could see her thoughts behind her eyes—she was calculating, I am sure: What does Sappho want of me? What should I say? Wisely, she said nothing.

“‘I can make you better,’ I said. ‘Attend me and I will make you great.’

“I turned and left before she could answer me. I knew she would come.

“And she did, but not when I expected her. At first this galled me to no end. If you were offered the chance of a thousand lifetimes to study with one of the greatest singers in the civilized world, one who had singled you out of a crowd of many, would you not race to throw yourself down at her feet and thank the gods for the blessing?

“When Anactoria did not come to my school the next day, or the day after, I began to plan how I should humiliate the presumptuous bitch at my next recital; I began writing a song of how a distasteful, dark little slave girl presumes to know how she may tame a lion for profit and ends being rent to pieces by the majestic animal. I thought of how lovely her screams of terror would ride up and down the scales of the lyre.

“I will admit that my pride was wounded. I do not deny that I am proud, though rightfully so. I have received the accolades of emperors, senators, kings. Entire coliseums have sat in rapt attention of my words, have wept when I desired weeping, have swooned when I desired passion. My image was stamped upon the coin of my native land, as you have seen, my poet. If these are not reason for pride, then no such reason exists.

“Yet, a part of me was also captivated by Anactoria’s refusal. I have had men and women throw themselves before me, begging to be my lovers, my students, my slaves. I knew at any moment I could find such a one if that is what I truly desired. And so this girl, whose voice

touched a tenderness in my belly, who did not do as so many others had done—this, well, this was something novel, and worth my time. I resolved that if she did not come by the following morning I would keep my eye upon her and see if I could not entice her to my side. I'd make her pay for my efforts, of course, but that would heighten my pleasure in the pursuit and triumph.

“Luckily, for her that is, she was waiting in the salon of my school after I had returned from the midday meal. I walked past her and into my sanctum without a glance; when my door slave entered to inform me of my visitor I told the boy to make her wait. I said it loud enough that she could hear me through the corridor and I smiled when I heard her feet shuffle anxiously on the hard swept floor. But she waited.

“When I felt my point had been sufficiently made I beckoned my slave and told him to bring her in. I was at my table, stylus in hand, contemplating some verse I had written into the wax tablet before me. These were notes only, nothing of special import, but she did not know this. I did not look up, but I gestured to one of the cushioned benches along the wall. She sat. I let a long moment of uncomfortable silence pass, uncomfortable for her, before I finally put my stylus down and looked up. She was sitting as if to make herself small: hands folded in her lap, legs crossed at the ankles, head and back bowed. It was a pleasing sight.

“I cleared my throat—and laughed inwardly when she jumped at the sound—and modulated my voice as a skilled singer may, so as not to betray my amusement.

““I am pleased to see you here, Anactoria. How may I be of service?”

She hesitated, to still her nerves I am certain. She was no doubt overwhelmed to be here before me. I could almost pity her.

“‘Honored teacher,’ she said, finally. Her voice was just as I remembered it, low and full rather than reedy like some girls. I would be able to do much with a voice like hers. ‘Honored teacher, I have come because of an offer you made me.’

“I kept my face a pleasant mask of neutrality. I wanted her to labor for the prize. ‘What offer was this, my dear?’

“She finally mustered the courage to lift up her head, just slightly, and under lowered lids, her eyes met mine. I remember them dark, like churned soil, almost as black as her pupils so that when you looked her in the eyes it was like being swallowed by night. Yes, I recall how easy it was to fall into them. If only I had known their true depths.

“She swallowed. It seemed to me, at that moment, she began to doubt that she had heard me correctly at all. How easily she is moved to my whim, I thought. My slightest question drives her confidence away; what could my praise, judiciously applied, cause her to think and feel and do? My mind ran a moment with fantasy and I considered recording a few of my ideas in wax so as to recall them later, when I had her, but there would be plenty of time for that. So much time, I thought, to please myself with her.

“Her voice broke through my reverie. ‘Mistress,’ she said. Good. Already she spoke of herself as mine. ‘Did you not say that you would take me as your pupil?’ I saw a tremor run though her slight body. ‘I have already informed Master Hesiod of my leaving his school. I had to secure his release and the consent of my father. That is why I have only now come to you.’ There was a flicker of something across her face. At first I thought it was fear, that being as

unskilled as she was, she would not have the kind of control over herself that a practiced performer would. Now, I do believe it was something else.

“But she gathered herself with an outward effort. ‘If I am mistaken, I will find another to take me,’ she said. She did not meet my eye, but there was something of bravado in her tone that sent a wave of heat through me. Even as she sat there, something warred within her, and it was this that aroused me. She was at once defiant, to challenge me thus, but at the same time, that mask cracked ever so slightly and I perceived desire, fear, longing.

“I forced myself to remain still, but this was just as I had desired: she would pose a challenge, and thus the more satisfying victory. The urge to crow bubbled at my lips. Oh, my sweet child, I thought. You have done well. You will not be disappointed.

“No, indeed. In the end it was not she, but I who was. I have heard tales of the power of the oracles to predict the future. Did not our great and pitiable ancestor fulfill even the most unlikely prophecy that he would murder his own sire and wed his mother? If only I had had such an oracle to whisper caution into my ear. I would have seen past those lovely dark eyes and seen the pit beneath. I would have sent her from my sight, barred the outer door. I would have steeled my heart.

“‘Do you not want me?’ she whispered.

“I beckoned her from the bench. She stood before me, her hands clasped, head bowed as the virgin votaries of Artemis. I reached up and put one hand on either side of her face.

“‘Perhaps,’ I said, ‘you will be worth my time.’”

*Algernon, 1865*

A knock at the door startles Algernon, and when he looks around, he is alone in the room.

“I say, Algernon, won’t you come down to tea? We are all back from the village. I hope your walk by the sea was pleasant.” Dante cracks the door open. They had removed the lock from the bedroom door.

Algernon waves him in, and Dante pulls up the chair. “I thought I heard you talking, Algernon. Is everything alright?” He takes a long, hard stare at the younger man. Algernon freezes for a moment under the absurd weight of that question. He swallows visibly.

“Of course, I’m fine, Dante. I have only been writing. You know how I am.”

Dante cocks his head, trying to affect belief, though his honest face too often gives him away.

“Well, it is just that you haven’t written a jot since coming here.” He leans in as if to inspect the desk and the empty paper that sits on it.

Algernon panics and holds up a hand to forestall him. “Well, I mean—that is to say—”

Dante squints for a moment, then leans back in his chair. “Sappho and Anactoria, eh? I can’t say that I know that one. I look forward to your finishing. Maybe we can have a reading one evening.”

Algernon looks down at the paper. Two neat stanzas cover its face in his own handwriting, though at the same odd slant as before. Algernon's fingertips are ink stained.

Dante gets up and opens the door. "Well, I'll not interrupt you further, my boy, though do be sure to come down and have a bite. You are looking rather peaky."

Then he quits the room, leaving Algernon stunned, staring at the page, and his poem.

*Algernon, 1865*

A moment later Algernon does descend for some tea, too baffled by the whole incident. "Indeed, sir," Will calls, hearing Algernon's footsteps on the stairs, "you missed quite a trek to the village. Mr. Jessup, the parson, was all afire with Calvin, Lord bless his predestined soul, and his dear wife insisted we take this basket full home, picked from her own garden. Feed the poor damned pagans, eh, Dante?"

Will hands said basket to the doorman with instruction to have the cook make something of it for supper. His burden unloaded, he gets a full look at Algernon.

"Dear God, my boy! What happened to you?"

Algernon shrugs his shoulders.

"You look like the dead," Will says. "Truly the walking dead, Algernon. Were you out by the sea all this while? You'll catch your death, I am sure. Do come and have a seat in the

parlor. We'll have someone build up the fire and have a cup of tea. That always does the trick. My God, but you are pale. Paler than usual, at any rate."

Algernon looks in the glass on the wall by the coat cupboard, but sees nothing amiss. His face is a bit peaky, perhaps, and there is a bright, glassiness to his eyes that was not there before, but Algernon accounts it as excitement from the discovery of his poem. Not that he will tell his friends about Sappho. Even he recognizes the peril of such a confession, though he feels as right in the head as ever. Perhaps more so. Yes, Sappho may be the product of his mind, but that does not make her any less real or any less valuable to him.

"Algernon, are you coming? Your tea will chill," Dante calls, from inside.

Algernon hurries to join them. In the parlor, he does not tell them about Sappho. He speaks instead of the sudden storm which assailed him by the sea—of which the others noticed nothing on their own stroll to the village; of how jingoistic is Tennyson's latest poem in praise of her majesty the Queen and her empire; of the Punjabs and their threat of rebellion—yet again—against the rajas; of art free and clear of any purpose but its own exultation. He speaks of everything except the one thing he is most desirous of telling. But they will see soon enough. He can be patient.

He sips his tea with only a slight tremor in his hands, but he does not think the others notice. After time by the fire and a hearty cup of black-leaf, languor suffuses Algernon's body and his excitement subsides into a kind of contentment.

"My boy, what are you grinning about?"

Algernon looks up over the lip of his tea cup, which has been hovering expectantly but inertly at his mouth for several minutes. Dante is looking at him curiously. “All is right in the world, dear Rossetti,” he replies.

Dante smiles, but it is one not utterly convinced. His friend had been making marked progress in health, seemingly calm, certainly less erratic than before. This could be attributed to the moderation of his drinking habit, the clean sea air, the wholesome activities of the country, the absence of Algernon’s detractors—and public opportunity for said detractors to witness any of Algernon’s more eccentric, though he is convinced completely innocent, proclivities.

But something in his manner this afternoon, and the noticeable regression in appearance, awaken a spark of concern that had until now been suitably quenched. As both men acknowledge, Algernon is naturally pallid, certainly unlike Dante’s own ruddy *fronte italiano*, but today, his pallor is tinged with gray, his eyes bloodshot, and his hands trembling, though Dante pretends not to see it. He could almost accuse Algernon of binging upon spirits again if he had not had the staff already monitoring the levels of each decanter so as to measure Algernon’s drink. All he can do is resolve to watch Algernon more closely. He sips thoughtfully at his tea and watches Algernon close his eyes and nestle comfortably into the back of his chair, a mysterious smile playing at the edge of his lips.

*Bernie, 2007*

“Then Algernon closes his eyes and nestles comfortably into the back of his chair, a mysterious smile playing at the edge of his lips,” Bernie says.

She looks up: Jeanette's mouth is open, she is breathing shallowly, raggedly. Her eyes flutter as if in REM sleep. She whimpers.

The door looks at least a mile away and Bernie does not want to make noise and wake up Jeanette. The wheelchair is not terribly uncomfortable, and Bernie is in one of the rare moments without surging hot flashes or roiling nausea. She sits. She'll wait.

*Bernie, 2007*

When Day Nurse comes in to check on them, she spends too much time looking over Jeanette, who is apparently still asleep. She takes her pulse, then checks her heart with a stethoscope. She removes the PCA pump line, and replaces it with a direct intravenous line—morphine straight in, constant drip. She makes sure it is properly connected, then gathers up the extra articles. Jeanette stops whimpering. Her eyes flutter, the eyeballs rolling, roving, beneath her lids.

Day Nurse puts her hand on Bernie's shoulder. "Honey, you may want to go back to your room."

"Why?" she asks. "What's happening?"

They both look at Jeanette, as if she has the answers. "She's in a coma," Day Nurse finally says. "It won't be very long."

Bernie shakes her head. “No, I’d like to stay if I can.” Jeanette is her friend, granted only of three weeks, but they have shared more in that time than Bernie has with any other person.

“Can you bring me my book?” she asks Day Nurse. “I think it is still outside on the patio.”

Day Nurse retreats, and they are left alone.

“Well,” she tells Jeanette, “The sound of birds awakens Algernon.”

### *Algernon, 1865*

The sound of birds awakens Algernon. He is tired. He did not sleep well, though he recalls no dreams. Rather, his body aches as though he had run across the moors as he and Mary used to do in their youth. It is a deep, bone abiding ache that infects his entire body.

He hears a rustling of fabric beside him and turns his head to find his muse sitting opposite him on the edge of the bed. “It is time to get up,” Sappho tells him.

“I thought you detested mornings,” Algernon complains. He can barely turn over, let alone get up.

“So I do,” she says. “But it is not morning.”

Algernon looks to the windows, but they are curtained in heavy velvet damask so that whether the sun shone or no, light would scarce penetrate. Even so, there is no light coming from the thin ribbon of space where the curtains hang above the floor.

Algernon groans and closes his eyes. “I thought I heard birdsong.”

Sappho shrugs. “Perhaps it was the nightingale, poet. Whatever the bird, it is time to rise. We have much to do and little time.”

Algernon is about to question her haste, but before he can open his mouth Sappho rips the linens from over him. A shock of cold air pricks the hairs of his naked legs.

“Come. Now.” She pulls the chair at the desk for him, and obediently he sits.

*Algernon, 1865*

“It was a testament to Anactoria’s natural ability that she sang as well as she did that night I first heard her,” Sappho says, “for her technique was appalling and there was much to unlearn. It was rather a pleasure to correct her, however, as I disciplined all of my students with a flexible switch of olive wood that stung and left thin welts across the skin. I never struck the players on the hands, of course, but across the shoulders and upper arms. It would not do to cripple a promising student and waste the effort of my instruction.

“I flicked Anactoria on the shoulder for an errant pluck of the lyre, and she winced, but continued playing. This was a private lesson; only my favored students received this privilege. The novice girls, and those whom I knew were only biding their time until marriage—I took them because their parents paid well and many were daughters of senators, silk and silver merchants, and the like—I trained in chorus. It was mutually beneficial as the value of the girls rose with me as their teacher so their fathers could demand higher dowries, and I grew in esteem and coin.

“I struck Anactoria again. I don’t recall why. Perhaps there was no reason. “‘Enough, Anactoria,’ I said, sighing dramatically, though in truth I was less exasperated than I sounded. ‘Would you have me regret my offer to take you with so little effort? Is it just perversity that makes you disappoint me so?’

“She had been my student for some weeks now, and though I berated and chastised, this was perhaps the sternest I had yet been. I had been taking her measure all the while, seeing how I could push her, how she would push back. Most days my insults seemed to elicit minimal response—a quiver, a sigh—but nary a dent in her mask.

“But now her face fell. With any other student I would have merely walked out of the room and let her sulk, but for some reason I could not with Anactoria. A stone plummeted in my belly.

“My voice softened, almost without my consent. ‘My dear, I am only harsh because I know you have it in you to be great.’

“She lifted her eyes and a single fat tear slipped from her eye and down her cheek. I had to suppress a groan of longing, but I could not stop myself from reaching out with my finger and wiping it away. I touched that finger to my lips and tasted her. Her lips turned in the slightest whisper of a smile even as her eyes glistened with as yet unfallen tears.

“The true fool is the one who does not know she is a fool. To this day I am still unsure of how it was that such an unremarkable girl was able to overtake me so completely, but I trace it to

that moment in my sanctum, Anactoria seated on a low stool, lyre cradled in her lap, and that solitary, pitiful, perfect tear. In the spell she had woven around me, I thought I had orchestrated that moment. I thought I was seducing her, that my words could bring her to the brink of despair, and my touch could bring her out again. The more fool I.

“I put my hand under her chin and lifted it so she could not but look me in the face. And I fell into the dark abyss of her eyes.

“She rose and I found her lips with mine. Somewhere I heard the lyre slide to the floor with a sad twang. It was broken, but I would not have noticed if the earth beneath me quaked and the whole of my island crumbled into the sea.

“I grabbed a fist full of her hair and pulled. She gasped. I bit her bottom lip.

“Then I pushed her away.

“It required all of my will to do so. I panted. She trembled. If she had reached for me in that moment I would have taken her right then, but she did not move and soon, though my heart pounded in my breast, I regained control of myself.

““We will continue your lesson tomorrow,’ I said.”

*Algernon, 1865*

This time when Algernon awakens light is peering from under the curtains. It is early yet; no one else but the kitchen staff has arisen. The scent of fried bacon and pudding drifts upstairs. He is lying back in bed. His legs and bed sheets are slick with semen.

Algernon is weary, as if he has again walked a long way, or taken a vigorous ride through the woods in the back of the estate, but he is also strangely alert. His blood hums in his ears and he whistles a sharp little tune.

Algernon cleans himself off, though he will have to contend with the rather embarrassing necessity of handing over stained sheets to the upstairs maid. There is already a rumor flying about amongst the household staff that Master Algernon, in addition to his intemperance, has a penchant for self abuse, as the talking, moaning and heavy breathing emanating from his apartment at various hours of the day—sometimes the broad day, mind you, as if he canna but wait na frig hi'self 'til nightfall like a decent body—attest.

He tosses the washing cloth into the basin on the bureau, and steps into his trousers. On his desk, as he had expected, as he had hoped, is another stanza of his poem in his strange, not-quite-his-own handwriting. He scans it quickly and then sets it aside; he plans to return to savor it word by word, but right now he must present himself for breakfast or people will begin to talk—more than they already do.

*“Do make sure you attend to meals, Algernon,” Sappho had said last night, just before she—did whatever it was that she did to him.*

*“I am not hungry,” he had said. For in fact, since Sappho had been with him, he found his appetite strangely lacking. Of late even the very odor of food made his stomach turn unpleasantly, though this did not alarm him in the least. His poem was all the sustenance he required.*

*“That does not signify, poet. You must eat, and do it with good will else your cohorts will grow suspicious.”*

*“Let them!” he cried. He was growing tired of her orders, and these in the middle of the night. “I have nothing to hide.”*

*Her eyes lowered on him. “Do you not? And what, pray, will you tell them when they find you collapsed upon the floor again, half-starved and insisting your muse, whom you know right well they can neither see nor hear, has been assisting your composition? They will lock you away in a sanitarium for the remainder of your days, a lunatic.”*

*Algernon swallowed hard, but still persisted though he knew it was futile. “I can show them the poem. They will have to believe me then.”*

*Sappho rose up from the bed. And though she did not physically increase in the least, her presence filled the room with such an overwhelming weight that Algernon found it difficult to breathe. He slumped back, pressing himself into the chair back so that there might be as much distance between Sappho and himself as possible.*

*“Algernon.” His name on her lips was a sword thrust into his gut. “Should you expose me, I will leave and never return. I will break you until you are but a pitiful shade of a man.” Though there was no light in the room but a small stub of candle, Sappho’s teeth flashed brilliant, painful white. He had not noticed how very sharp they were.*

*“Now come,” she said. “We have work to do.”*

Algernon is the first in the sunroom. The breakfast table is set, a fire blazing in the hearth grate. Still abuzz from his latest encounter with Sappho, Algernon paces about the room, though this interferes with the maids trucking dishes of bacon, pudding, toasted bread, and pots of tea to the table. After the third near miss with a rather flustered scullery maid and a bowl of steaming sausages, Algernon steps out into the foyer to await the others. On the side table by the door is the silver tray upon which callers leave their cards, and mail from the post is set. Bored, fidgety and not at all adverse to rummaging through the correspondence of others, Algernon shuffles through yesterday’s letters. Most of them are addressed to the master of the house, Mr. William Bell Scott, but there are no few to the Rossetti siblings. Two are from their brother, Michael, back in London, who is also their editor.

But Algernon’s hand stops over one particular letter. He knows the hand, small and round and fluid, as much as he knows his own. He snatches it from the tray and runs into the sunroom.

“Who received this!” he yells. The two maids in the room freeze in their places. They exchange frightened glances but say nothing. They have been warned by Mrs. Matthison not to engage Master Algernon in conversation as he is, in her words, a bit off in the head.

Algernon slams the letter down on the table, causing water from several of the drinking goblets to spill over their rims, and a tinkling chorus from the silver cutlery. Neither maid dares lift her eyes, but they do clutch one another's hands for a semblance of domestic solidarity and safety.

"I demand an answer, you conniving whores! Who received this letter?"

"Really now, Algernon, what's the call for all of this bellowing?" Will stands just in the doorway of the sunroom, called down from his apartment by the noise, even before finishing his toilette. There is shaving soap still along the edge of his chin and a bib is tucked into his collar. Dante is not far behind him; his heavy footfalls are like cannon fire on the stairs.

Algernon spins, brandishing the crumpled letter in his fist. "Someone received this letter yesterday and did not hand it over. I demand to know who dared keep this from me." His eyes are wild and blazing and not wholly sane.

"My boy," pants Dante, "do be calm. The letter came only just last night with the pony post. The girl, Jenny here, knocked on your door and received no answer. We thought you had retired early. After all, you were quite out of spirits."

Though his friend is speaking English, a language which Algernon comprehends quite clearly, his words are meaningless. "You knew," he screams. "You knew it was from *her*!" He shakes the mangled letter in front of Dante's face and stabs one finger at the name on the return address: Mrs. RW Disney Leith.

He turns back to face the maids, who had been shifting closer and closer to the kitchen door in an attempt to escape the mad ravings of their master's troubled friend, but Algernon's rage arrests their movement. They are still as hares under the sights of a hawk.

With his free hand Algernon strikes the girl closest him, who is not Jenny, but rather her sister, Margaret. She cries out in shock and pain and the two girls, without waiting for leave, bolt through the kitchen door. Their sobs are audible through the wall.

"Sir!" cries Will, "that is quite uncalled for!" He chases after the maids.

Dante gapes in astonishment. "Algernon, what is come over you? This is even beyond the mark for you."

Algernon's face is red and mottled. Though he is not aware of them, tears stream in rivulets down his face. Waves of cold and heat strike him from head to foot in succession. He holds the letter out toward Dante and shakes it once with each word. "You. Know."

Then Algernon tears the letter in half, and then four, and then a multitude of pieces and throws them into the hearth. The fire exhales a tiny black puff of smoke and then consumes the pieces.

Algernon trembles so hard he can barely speak. The world dances madly before him and it is as though the room is suddenly devoid of air. He pushes past Dante, who stands in stunned silence.

Without conscious thought of his steps, Algernon soon finds himself outside looking out over the sea; he is too close to the water, and the incoming tide washes over his shoes and soaks

his trouser legs. He is without his overcoat; his body shivers with cold, but his mind does not register the fact.

How dare they think they can keep what is rightfully his from him. And how dare *she* intrude upon him here.

Over the flat canvas of the sea, Algernon sees Mary. They are together in some room. There is a table. It could be his own apartment; he is not sure. It feels familiar though. He tries to remember the occasion, but cannot.

He says something to her.

Mary is seated with a piece of embroidery in her hands. She purposefully ignores him. In fact, she has not been heeding him this entire time, and though he does not recall his exact words, he knows they are important. But that is her way. Yes, she is petulant, petty. Always has been, he remembers now.

He raises his voice. Her hands stop their work. She sniffles softly, but he knows this is part of her design. When she looks up at him a single tear slides down her cheek and into her lap, leaving a trail that glistens like crystal in the morning sun. Her face is a perfect mask of hurt—wilted and fearful and betrayed.

But her eyes tell him differently. These cannot lie regardless of her art, and in their dark depths he sees her calculation.

Does she think he can be so easily fooled? That she can stitch the pattern of her desires upon him as easily as upon the broadcloth in her hands?

He seizes her arm and hauls her to her feet. Her embroidery slides to the floor in a whisper at their feet and she reaches to retrieve it, but he holds her firmly upright. His other hand grabs her under her chin and forces her head up, though she tries to avoid his gaze with downcast lids. Her pulse beats against his palm. He hears Sappho's voice in his ear.

*I feel thy blood against my blood: my pain  
Pains thee, and lips bruise lips, and vein sting vein.*

Algernon grabs a fist full of her hair and pulls. Mary gasps. He bites her bottom lip, draws blood. She struggles against him, but he holds her securely, crushing her against him.

*Let fruit be crushed on fruit, let flower on flower,  
Breast kindle breast, and either burn one hour.*

She will not have her way with him. He will not be her fool.

*Why wilt thou follow lesser loves? Are thine  
Too weak to bear these hands and lips of mine?  
I charge thee for thy life's sake*

He pushes her away.

*I charge thee keep thy lips from hers or his*

He leaves her, shuddering and panting in the room. Yes, he thinks, turning away from the sea and back toward the house. That is the way it happened.

Algernon returns to the house at dusk. He is cold and wet and windblown, and he shivers, though not from cold alone. His body courses with a vague and inarticulate sense of rage—at Mary, at Dante and Will, at—everyone. He crosses through the dining room where the maids are clearing the dishes and extinguishing the candles. Jenny and Margaret flinch visibly.

Algernon comes up short when he enters the sitting room and finds Dante, Will and Christina at their various leisure employments. Dante with a volume of his namesake in his lap, Will at a writing desk composing a letter to his solicitor, Christina lost in her mystic's contemplation. They have been waiting for him. Dante and Will look up when his heavy treads announce him to the room.

“Algernon—,” Dante begins.

But Algernon collects himself, and without a word, stomps out of the room and up the stairs to his apartment, where the banging of the door declares his intent.

*Algernon, 1865*

The world shakes for a moment, then Algernon collapses on the floor. On his side, he draws his knees to his chest and wraps his arms around his cold, muddy legs, and he sobs.

He cannot breathe. He is drowning. He wants to drown.

“There, my poet,” Sappho says. She is there with him. She draws him gently to her and cradles his head in her lap. She pets his hair in soft, slow strokes as if he were a child. “Shh. We will not let her get the best of us.”

*Bernie 2007*

Day Nurse interrupts them again with Bernie’s book, then leaves quickly; she probably has important arrangements to make. Bernie’s throat is dry from all of the talking. She should have asked Day Nurse for a cup of water.

The door opens. “I waited for you, you know,” Paul tells her.

“Shh. Don’t wake her up.” Bernie can’t look at him. She buries her chin in her chest and shakes her head. “I can’t talk about this now.”

“When will you? When will you have time to talk to me?” he asks.

“Please, just not right now.”

There is a pause. She knows he is rubbing the back of his neck, shaking his head. He makes a kind of snorting sound, like he is clearing his throat. “Fine.”

Bernie looks up and he is gone.

The room is quiet. Bernie's own breath is loud in her ears, but she can't hear Jeannette, except for a light catch of breath, like she is clearing her throat. Then there is silence again.

"Jeanette."

Bernie reaches out and shakes Jeanette's leg.

"Jeanette." She says it a little louder.

Jeanette's mouth is still open, her eyes half-closed so that the whites peek through the bottom. Bernie uses the bedrail to pull her wheelchair up to the head of the bed. She touches the back of her hand against Jeanette's cheek. It is still warm, almost room temperature. Her lips are gray. She shakes Jeanette's shoulder. Her back and the back of her arm are dark, bruise-like against the sheet. Blood settling in the body. Bernie pulls her hand back. She knows what happens to the body at death: the release of bowels, the rattle of air escaping the lungs, the slow stiffening of limbs. She has imagined it a hundred times, only with a different face.

She swallows several times in succession, almost convulsively.

The room is quiet.

She tries to take a breath, but the air has been sucked from the room.

Bernie reaches again, hesitates. "I'm sorry," she says, though she does not know to whom. "I should have told you." She rests her head on the bed, not touching the body, but she feels Jeanette's arm beneath the bed sheets.

She waits almost half an hour before she depresses the nurse's call button.

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie remembers:

*They were in her doctor's office.*

*"What do you want to do?"*

I don't know, I don't know. *Bernie shook her head. She reached out and turned the door knob. I just can't be here.*

*"I have to go," she said. "Just, just give me a minute."*

*"Okay," Paul said. "I'll just wait here for you."*

*Bernie, 2007*

Day Nurse sets her up in her own room and then hurries off with scuttling, padded nurse-shoe feet. Bernie can hear people coming and going next door; she hears the rattle of metal wheels and bars and crossbars—a gurney. They are going to take Jeanette away, store her somewhere until a coroner can be called. Bernie wonders if anyone will contact Sharon, if Jeanette left instructions.

Bernie kicks her comforter off. The day is especially warm, or maybe it is the room, or maybe it is just her. She can't get a full breath. Her belly is heavy, hard. The tumor has grown,

she knows that. It fills with fluid, poison, that leaks into her blood. She presses the PCA pump; more liquid in her veins, but it leaves a soft trail in its wake.

*Bernie, 2007*

*Bernie sat in the apartment window, her back against the frame, one leg stretched out along the base and the other cocked up. Paul and his easel were in front of her. Charcoal on paper made a soft whoosh whoosh.*

*“You could be Sappho, you know,” Paul said. “When I see you, I see her. When I’m drawing, it’s all the same.”*

*Bernie snorted without moving the rest of her body. “What? Like a past life thing? I don’t believe in that kind of stuff.”*

*He set his charcoal down, cleaned his hands on a chamois and came toward her. Her body was silhouetted by the setting sun; the backlight cast a shadow across her face. “That’s not what I mean,” he said. “You fill the gaps of her. All the things that we don’t know, can only guess at. You make her real to me. You are the woman that she might have been.”*

*Paul stooped down and kissed her, first on the cheek, then the lips. She reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck; he pulled her up and to himself. In the softness of his lips, the gentle scrape of his stubbled chin, she felt herself filled with the belief, for a second, that he was right.*

Yes. This is right. This is the way it was.

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*“Sappho?” asked Anactoria. They were sitting together in the courtyard of Sappho’s city estate. Anactoria was on a low stool with her lyre in her lap, plucking out a series of notes to warm up her fingers; Sappho was sitting opposite her, her stylus in her hand, tapping out a steady tempo on her thigh. Over the month that Anactoria had been her student, they found a comfortable rhythm of their own, and now it felt as if they had always known each other. A mild breeze blew in from the coast and tussled the curls of Anactoria’s hair. She tucked it hastily behind her ear and proceeded again.*

*“Yes?”*

*“What shall it be like to marry?”*

*Sappho laughed. “What makes you think I have any knowledge of such a subject, my dear?”*

*Anactoria’s head popped up and she stopped playing. “I know you are not married now. But haven’t you been married? You are over twenty, aren’t you?”*

*Sappho stopped her tapping. “I am twenty-four this year, but no, to answer you, I have never been married.”*

*Anactoria let the lyre drop in her lap. Fortunately it did not fall.*

*“Careful, Anactoria.”*

*She retrieved the instrument quickly, and took better note of it, but still could not hide her astonishment. “How is that possible?” she asked. “What did your father say?”*

*Sappho set the stylus down. “My father was wise enough to know that I was better suited to songs of matrimony than the actual act. My income has far exceeded any advantage he could get with a match.” She frowned for a moment. Then, “Why do you ask?”*

*Anactoria shrugged. “I hear talk. My father was sending messengers to some of his associates. I think he is searching for a husband for me.” She picked up her lyre and strummed absently. “I am almost seventeen.”*

*“Do you want to marry?”*

*Anactoria continued playing. “I don’t know. But it hardly matters, does it?”*

*Sappho did not reply, and soon, they fell back to practicing. When they were both warm, Sappho handed Anactoria a wax tablet.*

*“I have been working on this, and I’d like to hear you try it.”*

*Anactoria studied the tablet a moment, her brow pinched in concentration. Her head bobbed minutely in time, and then she looked up and nodded to Sappho. “I think I have it.”*

*Sappho reclined, her arms crossed over her chest. She waited.*

*Anactoria's long, nimble fingers flew over the strings at first following the notation on the tablet, but then she spiraled off into descending chord progressions of her own improvisation. Her eyes were closed, so she could not see Sappho's lips curl up in a proud smile.*

*After a few moments, Anactoria finished the instrumental and let the chords drop to the background. Still caught in the music, she began to sing.*

It seems to me that the man is equal to the gods,  
That is the one who sits beside you  
And, drawing nearer, savors as you speak,  
The sweetness of your voice

And the thrill of your laugh, which has so stirred the heart in my own breast

*Anactoria opened her eyes and found Sappho.*

And my tongue is struck silent, a delicate fire  
Suddenly races underneath my skin,

*Her breathing quickened, though still controlled in the song. Sappho heard longing, aching, in that voice.*

And sweat pours down me and a trembling creeps over  
My whole body, I am greener than grass,  
At such times

*Anactoria's fingers flourished on the strings and let the final note hang in the air, a haunting, wistful sigh. Sappho did not know she was crying until the tears slid down to the point of her chin and splashed upon her folded arms.*

*Anactoria stood, her lyre in her hand, and went to her teacher. "That is a beautiful song," she whispered. Then she leaned in, kissing the wet trail on Sappho's cheek. Her lips found Sappho's.*

*Sappho reached for Anactoria, drew her down into her lap. The lyre slipped to the ground, but neither of them cared.*

*Algernon, 1865*

Often the dreamer is aware that he dreams. Algernon is awake though he believes he dreams. Though still the world of his recognition, everything is cloaked in a soft gray fog. Only Sappho herself seems to glow with a light that, rather than halo her from without, seems to illumine her from within. They are together in his apartment; Algernon has shaved and dressed. Sappho is as ever attired in draped ivory silk, her dark hair free and flowing, her feet bare. The window is open: birds sing, tree limbs sway, leaves shiver in a soft morning breeze, though all of this is dull and oddly muted. He and Sappho are the center only. She kisses his forehead and tells him to meet her by the sea when he is finished.

Algernon goes down stairs to break his fast, though he neither addresses any of his party nor joins in their conversation. When Dante makes a half-hearted attempt to engage him directly,

asking if he would care for another slice of buttered bread, Algernon's look of contempt withers the question mid-sentence and no one speaks for the remainder of the meal. When they are finished, Algernon returns to his apartment briefly to retrieve a rucksack with a blanket, his journal, a folding lap desk, pen and ink. He does not tell his friends where he is going, though Dante yells after him as he slams the front door closed.

The walk is familiar and gray and unremarkable. He walks as if asleep. Soon Algernon is again overlooking the icy northern sea.

"It is so unlike home," Sappho says. "Everything here is cold." She says this though she neither shivers nor is moved by the wind. Her hair does not stir. Algernon though, draws his overcoat tighter in about himself. They walk up from the shore to a sandy, scrubby dune. Algernon lays out the blanket and sets his sack with his writing materials out of the way. They lie together, Algernon with his head on Sappho's breast. She idly runs her fingers through his hair.

"There was a small cave just east of the temple of Artemis, hidden from the trade road by an orchard of olive trees. It was carved into the cliff face. I would go there as a child, to escape home—my brother's teasing, my mother's nagging, my father's hand. Though it was so near the water's edge, the air was always calm and warm. I often watched the gulls wheel in the air, or the fishing boats set out in the evening. I imagined lives for them all, and myself, out there."

Out of the sand around where Algernon and Sappho sit, a grove of silvery leafed olive trees rises. The air warms like a breath. The fog lifts like a gossamer veil.

“I composed my first song there as a young girl. I taught myself to play the lyre there with the birds as my chorus.”

Sea gulls spin and dance in the air above their heads, and added to their cries, Algernon can hear the high, unsteady voice of a child.

“Did you take your lovers there?” Algernon asks, dreamily. What a perfect place for long evenings of passion, he thinks.

“No,” Sappho says. “It was my temple. My sanctuary. I never shared it with anyone.”

She rests her hand on his head. It is cool, and though Algernon feels his own pulse beat in his temples, he cannot feel hers.

“Never anyone.”

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*“Where are we going?” Anactoria asked. Sappho had the girl by the hand and was leading her down an overgrown footpath through an olive grove. It was late evening. In Sappho’s other hand she held a pitch-soaked reed torch. It sputtered in the wind so close to the sea.*

*“Just a bit further,” Sappho said. Her heart raced, but not from the walk.*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie cracks one eye open, the one not glued and gritty with the crust of sleep. She is staring at a wall; it is muddy in the washed out light from the streetlamp in pre-dawn, but she thinks she remembers that it is supposed to be green. Some kind of green. Like cucumber. Or mint. Or sea foam. Sea foam sounds good. It sounds familiar somehow. She doesn't recognize the wall even though she thinks she should. Her breath catches in her throat. Where is she supposed to be? She isn't at home. She vaguely remembers that she is not supposed to be at home. Not home.

Where is she? Something happened. Something—yesterday? She doesn't know what day it is, only that something happened and now she hurts. Her whole body is a throbbing, aching bundle of hurt and she just wants to close her eyes and make it stop.

She feels hands on her and she cries out. It hurts when the hands touch her. Her cheek is wet, as is the pillow under her head. Her eyes are leaking and she doesn't know how to make them stop.

Then a wave of warmth envelops her and she sinks into it; soft, warm waves carry her way.

*Bernie, 2007*

*Bernie's legs dangled over the lip of the window ledge as she and Paul sat together on The Balcony, watching cars deadlocked on the interstate. The ledge was just wide enough for*

*both of them squeezed together. It was autumn and the Santa Anas rustled the papery fronds of the palms below them. Bernie pretended to sway a little and leaned forward dangerously.*

*“Don’t let me fall,” she said, grabbing Paul’s arm in mock fear.*

*“I won’t,” he said, laughing. “If you go, I go too.”*

*She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. She liked the rough stubble against her lips.*

*“Now that wouldn’t be fair, would it?”*

*Another gust of wind captured strands of her hair and wove them into coppery tendrils that whipped her face, but she and Paul were not sitting on The Balcony anymore. They were at Santa Monica, on the Ferris wheel that towered over the boardwalk like the spinning beacon of a lighthouse. They were not quite to the apex, but a few cars away, when the wheel lurched to a stop; sometimes horny kids bribed the operator for a few minutes so they could make out on top of the world. Their car swung with the momentum.*

*Paul leaned over the edge, causing their car to dip forward.*

*Bernie screamed, reached out for him. “Don’t do that!” She tried to pull him back, but he shrugged her off.*

*“It’s okay, B. It’s solid.” He banged on the side. The metal creaked and cried. On his last hit, the safety latch on the door crumbled into little metal shavings; the door swung open. They watched it in slow motion. Paul leaned over and the car dipped again. Bernie grabbed him, but when he went to brush her hand away again, he pushed her off the seat. Bernie grabbed his arm*

*just as her feet slid from the car and carried her over the edge. Her feet dangled, kicked, in the free air above the Santa Monica pier.*

*“Don’t let me fall,” she screamed. The car rocked back and forth and she swung from it like a pendulum.*

*“I won’t,” he said, laughing. “If you go, I go too.” He continued looking over the edge at her, his lips curled up in his usual half-smile. “Though, come to think of it, that doesn’t sound very fair, now, does it?”*

*“Help me up!” Bernie cried. “Stop joking!” Her grip was slipping. She clutched his wrist with both hands.*

*“I’m not joking,” he said. “Maybe it would be better if you just let go. Save us both the trouble.”*

*“Paul! Please!”*

*“I mean, that was your plan, wasn’t it? Just take off so I wouldn’t have to watch you fall? Really selfless and heroic of you, if you ask me.” He shook his arm as if shooing a pest. One of her hands came loose. “I’m just wondering why you continue to hang on.”*

*Bernie sobbed. Her fingers cramped, weakened their claw-like grip. Her arm shook with fatigue. “Please, Paul,” she cried. “I was wrong. Please, don’t let me fall.”*

*“It’s a little late for that, isn’t it, B?” He wasn’t smiling anymore; his eyes were dark and*

*cloudy. "You're hanging on by one hand. I don't know how long you can hold on."*

*"Just please don't let me go," she whispered.*

*Bernie, 2007*

It must be night when Bernie wakes up; the room is dark except for the orange glow of the lamp light outside her sliding glass door, which peeks in from under the drawn curtain. There is something she wants to do, something important. She tries to move but her body is heavy. There is something damp, soft underneath her legs; her bowels have released. She smells it, gags and begins to cry. This too, she seems unable to control. Her tears just pour out of her eyes and slide down her face is hot, messy streams. She hiccups, sobs. Her body trembles. Somehow she manages to depress the nurse's call button.

Night Nurse is kind, efficient. She reassures Bernie with soft platitudes while she handles her body, moving her, positioning her, yanking the soiled sheets out from under her like a birthday party magician with a tablecloth. She cleans Bernie with practiced skill and outfits her in a new gown and an adult diaper. Bernie closes her eyes so she does not have to watch; her tears have stopped, but only because she is out of tears. Her face is hot and tight; her mouth is cottony dry.

Just as Night Nurse is disposing of the mess in a plastic bin marked biohazard, Bernie remembers that there was something important she wanted. She got distracted, but there was something important. She feels the weight of it. She is running out of time.

She waves her hands, which amounts to more of a tick than a complete gesture, but she gets Night Nurse's attention.

"You want something, dear?" she asks.

*Yes, of course I do.* But her mouth is at odds with her brain—or maybe her brain is at odds with all of the rest of her. She tries to form the words and at the same time remember what is so damned important. She wants to cry again when she hears the garbled mess that comes out of her mouth. It is unintelligible, not even remotely resembling language. She knows it is nonsense and the frustration makes her shake and spasm.

"Are you in pain?" Night Nurse asks.

Bernie twitches her head.

"Do you want the television on?"

Another twitch.

"Music?"

If Bernie could have given her the finger, she would have.

"Wait just a second, honey. I'll be right back."

Bernie groans in protest, but there is nothing she can do; Night Nurse disappears out the door and Bernie slumps in her new sheets. She tries to relax, sink back into that moment when the thought first came to her. What could possibly be so important to her now?

Jeanette is dead. She knows this, remembers it. It makes her heart sink with sadness, and with the reality that she will soon follow. But this is not it.

Her leg spasms involuntarily, jolts her like when you are just at the brink of sleep and the sensation of falling triggers a kick.

Legs dangling. About to fall.

Night Nurse comes back in and Bernie nearly soils herself again, this time with urgency.

“This might help,” Night Nurse says. She pulls out a laminated card, the size of a chess board. Along the top is the pain scale one through ten with the cartoon heads that go from smiling to a red frowning face with tears (which in no way describes how she feels at this moment), but below it are pictures of everyday things: a TV, food (a rather uninspiring empty plate with a spoon and fork on either side), a pencil and paper, a telephone, a toilet. Below that are the numbers zero to ten and the letters of the alphabet, the words ‘Yes’ and ‘No.’ It is like a hospital Ouija board.

“Can you point to what you want?”

With Night Nurse’s help, Bernie positions her hand on the card and taps the pencil and paper image. Night Nurse pulls a notepad and pen from her pocket.

“Do you want me to write something for you?”

Bernie nods.

She slides her hand over the card in jerks. P-A-U-L. C-O-M-E. She taps out his phone number and then points to the picture of the telephone.

“You want me to call Paul and ask him to come here?”

Bernie nods.

“Honey, it’s two in the morning. Do you want me to wait until it’s day?”

*Do you really think I have the fucking time?*

She pounds the word ‘No’ over and over until Night Nurse reassures her that she will call Paul right now. She leaves Bernie, leaves the card. The stupid cartoon faces of the pain scale look up at her. She is beyond a ten, but she doesn’t dare hit her pump for morphine because she knows that there is a very real possibility she won’t wake up, and she has to see Paul. She has to tell him, before she falls.

Night Nurse returns. “Honey, I’m sorry. There was no answer. I left a message for him to call here, or just to come over as soon as he gets the message. That’s the best I can do right now.”

Bernie deflates. She taps the card again and Night Nurse pulls out her pen and paper. Letter by letter, Bernie spells out a message; Night Nurse writes it. When Bernie is finished she pushes the card away from her and Night Nurse takes this as a sign that she is no longer needed. “I’ll let you know as soon as he calls. I promise.”

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*Sappho was restless. Though she tried to sit and compose, her thoughts returned again and again to Anactoria and the softness of her lips. What could it mean? Intimate friendships amongst women were not uncommon, especially between the maidens of the same school, or when husbands were gone for long stretches of time either in trade, or at war—like now as the men of Lesbos were being conscripted to quell the colonist rebellion at Sigeum.*

*Sappho herself had had many such relationships, it was well-known, but rather unremarkable compared to some. But this. Though Sappho had fancied she had known passion and desire and lust before, this felt somehow different.*

*Unable to concentrate, Sappho walked out to the courtyard and plucked some of the lemons from her trees, snipped herbs from her garden, weeded their beds. Rising from her knees before the bed of thyme she had just groomed, Sappho saw Anactoria's discarded lyre still slumped in the grass. No one had bothered to pick it up from where it had fallen. It was a simple student instrument, unadorned, but polished ash wood with copper caps and gut strings. Sappho ran her finger over the wood; the bow was fractured, thin as a hair. But it was ruined. It would never again hold the tension of the strings properly.*

*Sappho called to a slave to fetch her purse. It was just after dawn and the market would already be awake with custom.*

*The agora was alive and roaring. Fishermen had returned from their night's work and were unloading their catch on the pier. Slaves and wives were picking it over, haggling, jostling, chatting. A cadre of Penthilidae, idle young men of that aristocratic house, stared down other*

*young men of the Cleanactidae. They shifted nervously, flexing their arms and spinning their clubs with bravado. Peace was bought because Myrsilus bore down so brutally on violence in the streets, though even this tense order seemed to be showing more cracks lately than usual. There were rumors. There were always rumors.*

*Sappho cleared the food market and came to the artisans' stalls. There was one in particular she desired, and she found Milekos, his back to her, lathing the crossbar of a kithara. He stopped his work as Sappho approached.*

*"My lady Sappho, how may I be of service?" he said. His voice was coarse, stones grating one upon another; but as a craftsman, he was unrivaled.*

*Sappho's heart pounded. She wanted this gift to be perfect, to somehow express this strange feeling. "Oh, I am looking for a trinket," she said. "What have you in the way of lyres?"*

*Milekos smiled, crookedly, with crooked teeth peeping through the mass of his grayed and grizzled beard. The market was a game; it required skillful playing. "I am but a modest crafter, my lady. These samples are unworthy of such a talented singer as yourself." He shrugged his shoulders. "And yet, I must feed my family."*

*"Indeed," she said, pretending to peruse the unstrung lyres he had on display. They were all good in their own way—everything that Milekos did was good. Yet, none struck her. None of them were Anactoria. "And yet I saw your Thyone only a moment ago with an entire pig's haunch. Business must not be so very pitiable."*

*He shrugged again and feigned long-suffering. "To be so saddled with a wife without a mind for economy. My dear little ones would have to go without sandals if not for the generosity of patrons."*

*Sappho nodded in commiseration, made appropriate, sympathetic sounds. Milekos's eyes followed her, followed her eyes.*

*"If I may be so bold, my lady. For whom is this trinket? A student? Any of these have soft enough action for a beginner."*

*"I do not doubt they do, craftsman," Sappho replied. "But this is not for a student, but a skilled player. Long fingers, though less flexibility in the wrists. A low voice, full, but she has not yet reached maturity in it, so there should be some room for growth."*

*Milekos scratched his beard, but his eyes danced. "I have something in the back here that perhaps will interest my lady, though it so poor that I would not bring it to my lady's attention. But if you will perhaps humor an old man, I may show it to you?"*

*Sappho glanced up. The sun had already risen well past the horizon. Her impatience was not feigned. "I have other errands this morning, craftsman. But perhaps I have just a bit of time to spare."*

*He bowed and then disappeared behind the woven curtain. In an instant he was back. In his hands was a simple leather case, dyed pale as butter cream. He opened it and withdrew a lyre the color of sunset, capped with bronze. The crossbar was inlaid with mother of pearl.*

*“The wood is cedar, from Phoenicia in the north,” Milekos said. As he spoke, his skilled hands strung and tuned the instrument. “The caps are engraved with tiny little birds. Nightingales, I think.” He handed her the lyre, and the plectrum. Sappho plucked out a series of scales. The sound was deep, rich, plaintive. In her mind she heard Anactoria’s voice over the strings. Sappho swallowed back a sigh.*

*She handed the lyre back to him. “It seems adequate,” she said. “Perhaps I will take such a trinket off your hands.”*

*“You are too kind,” he said.*

*Sappho returned home to find that Anactoria had been there and left. Her slave told her she had waited, but when Sappho did not come, she returned to her father’s home. Sappho had haggled with Milekos for what seemed hours. He knew she wanted the lyre, and would not walk away from it. Sappho ended up paying two talents of silver for it, though truth be told, she would have paid four had he demanded it. Extravagant to pay the yearly wages of three slaves for one instrument, but Sappho knew the moment she saw that lyre that it was perfect for Anactoria.*

*Sappho wanted desperately to send a slave to fetch Anactoria back so she could give her the lyre, to see her face light up with joy and affection, but doing so would spoil the moment, so she forbore and set the lyre aside.*

*It was a miserable morning. The pale leather case kept drawing Sappho's eyes like a bonfire in the night so that she could not sustain a thought for more than a few heartbeats before the lyre distracted her. It finally became too much. She snatched up the lyre and left her sanctum.*

*She walked in the direction of the house of Anactoria's father, but when the whitewashed stone walls came into view she turned abruptly and headed for the sea. She needed to think.*

*Her feet found the entrance of the little, hidden cave that had become her sanctuary as a child, and her private solace as an adult. Over the years she had brought blankets, pots, pitch and kindling, and other small amenities to make it more comfortable. If anyone else had ever discovered the cave, there was never any sign of disturbance.*

*The morning was still young and crisp and the cave, as was to be expected, was damp and chill. Sappho made a small fire in a rock pit she had constructed years ago—she fumbled with the fire making but finally managed to catch a spark on the dry bark. Wrapped in blankets and before her pleasant little fire, her mood softened. She withdrew the lyre from its case and tuned it. It was just as good as Milekos had promised. At first she played a few songs of her own composing—complex, detailed songs, but they did not fit the moment. Instead, she played some of the simple songs of her youth, lullabies, hymns. And then she let the words fall away and merely played their melodies. In the strings of the lyre she heard Anactoria's voice sing new songs. Sappho played and Anactoria sang. They composed together there.*

Of all the stars the most beautiful—

*When she opened her eyes she fully expected Anactoria to be seated next to her, and it broke her heart when she was not. Sappho loosened the strings of lyre and returned it to its case. Then she wrapped it in blankets and tucked it into the further recess of the cave. She extinguished the fire and returned home.*

*Sappho could not wait for the morrow to see Anactoria. She sent her slave to Anactoria's father's house and paced up and down her sanctum until he returned. But Anactoria was not with him.*

*"Mistress, I have a message from the steward of the house of Marius Anacreon. He says that the young lady has been taken by her father for the morning and will return around the close of day. If it be your will, he will inform his master of your desire for the girl when she returns."*

*Sappho sent her slave back to the steward with an affirmative. There was nothing else for it. She would have to wait until Anactoria returned. But in the time before that, she could make arrangements.*

*Algernon, 1865*

"Did you ever love her?" Algernon asks.

Beside him, Sappho tenses. "No, of course not," she says. "She was a mere amusement. Nothing more."

Algernon lifts his head and tries to look up at her. “Sometimes when you speak of her, there is a kind of tenderness.”

Sappho says nothing, moves not at all. She is hard and stone-like.

“Sappho,” Algernon says, “I know what it is to love. With Mary—,”

“You are a fool, poet,” Sappho snaps. “You know nothing. There is no such thing as love.”

“But—,”

Sappho pushes Algernon from her.

“Enough, poet,” Sappho says. She stands towering over him, her arms akimbo at her chest. “Your impertinence wearies me. I will return when you have learned better to check your tongue.”

She is gone. The olive grove, the cave, all fade to nothing and Algernon is alone on the frigid coast.

“Sappho!” he yells. Only the beating of the waves upon the surf answers him, though he cries her name several more times. She is not coming back, and it takes him a moment to realize this. “Fine,” he says, snatching the sack of his writing tools from behind him. He unfolds the writing desk and sets it upon his lap. He places the ink and pen in the carved out craters in the desk made for securing such instruments, and finally places his notebook upon the desk, open to the next blank page. “Indeed, *your* impertinence wearies *me*,” he tells the air.

He uncorks the ink and stabs his pen tip into the jar, shakes the excess ink like a terrier with a rat, and brings the pen to bear over the paper.

He tries to remember how it felt to touch Anactoria in Sappho's sanctum, to assault her lips, to grip the softness of her skin, to bore furrows down her arm with his nails until she cried out. He had wanted to—he had needed—tasted—

Nothing.

"Bloody fucking hell!" he screams. He slams the pen against the desk, the force of which causes the nib to break and spurt ink like a severed vein over the desk and the notebook. Algernon throws the desk from his lap; it lands up ended. The jar of ink empties into a black puddle, and is drunk by the thirsty sand. "Sappho, you bitch!"

He presses the palms of his hands into his eyes as if to clear them of some invisible, metaphysical film that has somehow left him blind. But it is, of course, to no avail, and only leaves the faintest traces of ink smeared over his cheek as if he has been pummeled by an unseen hand. He rises and walks back to the house, leaving all of his implements where they have fallen.

Algernon enters the house from the back door as would a thief or guilty lover. His hope is to scuttle up the stairs and dart into his room before being spied by anyone, though he refuses to admit that this is from anything other than repulse at the prospect of confronting Dante's remonstrance. He is halfway up the stairs when the sound of a woman's voice in song arrests him. The voice is low and rich and soft, familiar somehow, and though he cannot hear the words, he feels them resonate in his bones. He races back down the stairs. The sound is coming from the parlor.

He presses his ear against the double doors. The woman's voice is accompanied by some instrument, but the sound is too low and muffled by the door's thick wood. Unable to control himself and heedless of interrupting the music within, he opens the doors and stands in the frame.

He sees a woman on a low stool with a lyre in her lap. Her hair is bound back in a kerchief of pale blue that matches the linen of her dress and the swaths of fabric draped over her shoulders, bound with a leather belt at her waist.

"Anactoria?"

The woman turns. "Cousin, is that you?"

The woman with the lyre melts away. Another woman is in her place, seated at the parlor's pianoforte. She wears a travel gown of russet gingham, a white apron about her waist and a shawl over her shoulders. Her hair is pulled back into a prim white cap which is common with married women.

"Oh, Cousin!" she exclaims. Both hands fly to her mouth and her brow knits tightly. "Oh, but you do look dreadful. Mr. Rossetti told me you were so out of sorts these last weeks." She rises from the pianoforte and steps toward him.

Algernon raises both hands as if to ward off a blow. "Mary, what are you doing here?" The words are wrenched from his throat. His heart pounds. His gullet rises and he feels as though he will vomit there at her feet. He steps back so he is half in the hallway. "This is a dream. It must be."

“I called at my aunt’s only Monday last and she told me that you had taken ill and sought the seaside. She thought it would rally you if Robert and I came to visit. Oh, but the letter I sent must have gone astray of the post. Did you not receive it?”

Algernon’s mouth is dry. He shakes his head. Before he can stop her, Mary closes the gap between them and embraces him, encircles his arms with hers. She lays her head on his chest. “Oh, Algernon, but my aunt said you were so very ill. I have been worried about you.” She looks up into his face. She moves one hand to his cheek. “You are so pale, my dear. So haggard. Please tell me what’s wrong.”

She waits for him to respond. There is pleading in her voice. He looks so much worse than anyone had let on—pale, yes, sunken eyes, bloodshot, ringed with shadows, lank hair. And his face is smeared with ink as if he were some bandit or savage. Indeed, there is something wild in his visage. He shakes even as she holds him. She hopes—but there are rumors back in London that this is no physical illness but a fevered brain. The gossip of his outburst at the Norrington’s supper party is still whispered by the grand dames and their lords. She searches his face for something. Her hand caresses his cheek, his neck.

Algernon wants to sink beneath that touch. Mary’s scent, the tang of her sweat from travel, the perfume in her hair, fills his nostrils. But when her fingers graze his neck, the memory of the sharp, bitter sting of Sappho’s teeth breaks the enchantment.

Algernon shrugs off Mary’s touch. “You should not have come,” he tells her. Then he races up the stairs and to his apartment.

*Algernon, 1865*

As is his common mode of behavior, Algernon refuses to come down stairs the rest of the evening though both Mary and Dante take turns pleading, cajoling and threatening. When Mary is at his door, on his side of the room Algernon presses his hand against it, where he imagines her heart would be were she facing him. He closes his eyes and imagines he feels her heart beat through the door.

He also imagines he hears them discuss him.

*“He looks worse than I feared,” Mary tells Dante. She presses one hand to her heart and one to her stomach, as if these were the wellsprings from which flows her concern for her cousin’s health.*

*Dante nods in agreement. “He had made a small progress since we arrived, but these last days he has grown despondent. He secrets himself away either in his apartment or somewhere by the shore. The servants say they overhear him speaking to himself, even arguing. He eats so little, and you can see the physical toll it has taken. He is wasting away.”*

*“It is not consumption, do you think?” Mary’s voice is high with distress. She grabs his arm as if for an anchor.*

*But Dante shakes his head no. “The physician assured us before we left for Tynemouth it was not consumption, but nerves. I haven’t heard a cough from him.”*

*Mary is relieved.*

*Dante takes both of Mary's hands in his. "You know he still has tender feelings for you."*

*Mary cannot reply, but the slight tilt of her head acknowledges the fact.*

*"Perhaps if you tried to speak with him. He may open up to you as he will to no other."*

*Based upon Algernon's reception of her this afternoon she has doubts, but Dante's eyes plead with her and she tells him she will try when they have an opportune moment.*

Algernon waits until he cannot hear Mary or Dante's voices outside. Then he strips off his clothes and wraps himself in his dressing robe. He climbs into bed and draws the comforter around his shoulders, up over his head so that only his face is exposed. He sits, his back against the headboard.

Then he draws in a deep breath, as if to steady himself. "Sappho," he whispers. "I am sorry. Please, my lady. Do not abandon me. I need you."

*Algernon, 1865*

He does not hear her at all, but she is beside him. She peels back the bed sheets; he feels her weight slip in beside him. It is cold.

"I told you it would be like this," Sappho says. "Will you believe me now?"

“Yes,” he says. The words fly from his mouth without hesitation. “Yes, please, just help me. I cannot face her.”

“As you wish.”

Algernon knows it is coming, but the shock of her lips on his skin, so cold, and then the sharp piercing teeth, make him start. His breath quickens. His eyes roll back to whites.

*Bernie, 2007*

*In the doctor’s office, Paul asks, “What do you want to do?”*

*I don’t know, I don’t know. She shook her head. She reached out and turned the door knob. I just can’t be here.*

*Paul got up and stood behind her. He wrapped his arms around her shoulders, leaned down and kissed the back of her neck.*

*“Whatever you want to do,” he said. “I’m here for you.”*

*“I have to go,” she said. “Just, just give me a minute.” She shrugged off his arms and walked out the door.*

*Behind her, she heard Paul say, “Okay, I’ll wait here for you.”*

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*“Where are we going?” Anactoria asked Sappho. She had the girl by the hand and was leading her down an overgrown footpath through an olive grove. It was late evening. In Sappho’s other hand she held a pitch-soaked reed torch. It sputtered in the wind so close to the sea.*

*“Just a bit farther,” Sappho said. Her heart raced, but not from the walk.*

*They were both chilled by the time they reached the cave, but Sappho built the fire quickly and lit it with the torch; they sat together in front of the flames, wrapped together in a thick woolen blanket. “What is this place?” Anactoria asked.*

*“My sanctuary. I come when I desire privacy.” Sappho found Anactoria’s hand buried in the blankets and took it in her own. Anactoria squeezed it, leaned into her and rested her head on the woman’s shoulder.*

*“Hmm. Do you mean with your lovers?” Anactoria asked. There was laughter in her voice.*

*But Sappho’s reply was serious, and its tone caused Anactoria to lift her head and look her in the eyes. “No, Anactoria. I have never taken anyone here. Until now.”*

*The younger girl smiled shyly, leaned in and kissed Sappho on the lips. “I am honored,” she said.*

*Sappho's heart fluttered. Though still cool inside the cave, she suddenly became flushed.*

*"I—uh. Oh, Anactoria."*

*Now Anactoria laughed aloud. "What is this? Have I stolen your words? The greatest singer in all the world?"*

*Sappho laughed too, and they snuggled together in the heat of the fire and their own desire. Below them a flicker of light seemed to sail over the surface of the water; when it finally reached the shore, they could see it was the torch of an emptied barge being driven to shore from the deeper waters where larger ships waited. They arose together and stood on the brink of the cliff, which dropped sheer into the sea below.*

*Rows of men and horses, barely visible in the torchlight. They could hear the stomping of feet, clanging armor, loud male voices and horses neighing. They were being loaded onto the barge, troops being sent north to the colony at Sigeum, near Troy, to quell the rebellion. The wind blew harder and both of them shivered. A sea bird shrieked overhead. Sappho took Anactoria's hand and led her back to the fire.*

*"I have something for you," Sappho said. She poked a hand out of the blanket and retrieved the lyre from its hiding place. The leather case was blazing sunset in the firelight.*

*Anactoria opened it, and gasped. She turned it over in her hands, but said nothing.*

*"Now who is speechless?" Sappho asked. She could see the girl's eyes glisten.*

*"Oh, Sappho," she breathed. "I do not even know what to say." She smoothed her fingers over the shell inlay, the bronze caps. "Are these little birds?"*

*“The craftsman told me they were nightingales. I thought of you when I saw them.”*

*“Because they are small and brown?” Anactoria asked, wryly.*

*“Because they sing so sweetly and yet seem so unaware of the fact,” Sappho countered.*

*Anactoria strung the lyre and plucked a few notes. They rang out clear and rich. She set the instrument on top of its case. “It is wonderful,” she said. “It is more than I deserve and more than I can repay.”*

*But Sappho shook her head. “It is not even a fraction of all that I owe you.”*

*Anactoria frowned, cocked her head in that way she had.*

*“Anactoria, this time you have been with me has been worth more than a thousand—”*  
*She couldn’t finish.*

*And Anactoria did not let her. “Beloved,” she whispered. She slipped her hand around Sappho’s neck and drew her to herself. She kissed her lips, let her kisses trail down her neck.*

*Sappho unclasped the brooch at her shoulder and let her gown drop around her waist. Anactoria did the same with her own. She cupped the tender flesh of Sappho’s breasts, but stopped short.*

*Sappho lifted her head. “What is it?”*

*“I have never been with anyone like this before.”*

*Sappho took Anactoria's palm in her hand and kissed it. Then her wrist. Her arm and shoulder. Her neck. Her lips. She eased Anactoria back until she was lying on the blanket, her chest rising and falling quickly.*

*"Then I will have to teach you."*

*Algernon, 1865*

"I gave her everything, my poet. Everything," Sappho says.

"One morning I came to my sanctum, readying myself for lessons. The sun in its chariot was blazing toward its zenith, the agora was bustling, servants were about tending to their chores. I strung my own lyre and stroked the strings to warm up my fingers. It was a pleasing feeling, the hardness of the strings on the callused pads of my fingertips.

"But I was growing vexed at Anactoria's tardiness. I had purchased a lyre from the agora to replace the one she broke. I wanted to hear her play it. I sent a slave to her father's home. The slave returned with a brief note that Anactoria would not be at lessons today, but would call upon me after the evening meal. There was no explanation, and I could get nothing from my slave, who only said that the house was in upheaval.

"I could only wait, and each passing moment added coal upon coal.

"That evening, finally, one of my slaves announced Anactoria's arrival. I had her brought in, a rebuke on my lips. I do not like to be kept waiting.

“I knew right away that something was amiss. Her hair was bound back, covered, not only by her kerchief, but the hood of a heavy travel cape. It hung over her shoulders and down to her calves.

““Have you tired of my instruction already?’ I asked. I kept my tone even, but anger pushed against my lips.

“Anactoria lifted her head and I knew for certain now. There was hauteur in her eyes. This was the first time I noticed it, though I know now it was there all along.

““No, indeed, Mistress. However, I will no longer require it. I have been given over to a new master, one whom I must serve now with the graces you have taught me.’

““You are married, then.’

“She nodded. ‘My father has informed me of the match today. He has been negotiating with my new lord, Tyronus of Sardis these past months. My dowry is being delivered as we speak and I am to follow soon after.’

““And my time has been worth not even the courtesy of a farewell?’ I asked. I could not withhold the rancor. ‘I had to send a slave to fetch you to find out what happened.’

“She stood there, silent and still. What impertinence of such a one as she to treat me this way. After all I gave her.

“She cocked her head to the side. Her words were cold. Her true voice. All the rest of it—the blushes, the timidity, the softness, that had been her mask. I saw her now truly. ‘Your teaching has been valuable, Mistress. My father’s coin was well spent. Fare you well.’

“She turned for the door.

“‘Wait,’ I said. ‘I bought you this.’ I bent down and picked up the lyre in its case. I had no need of it, the reminder of her. And it would give her the occasion to pleasure her husband with my instruction—perhaps it would redeem my own investment. The leather was supple in my hands. ‘Consider it a nuptial gift.’

“She turned back to me for a moment. Her eyes went to the lyre, then my face, and back again. ‘That is not necessary.’ And she left.

“I swear to you in that moment, poet, I felt the flames of Hades. They licked at my flesh and it charred and crackled on my very bones. I wailed as only the damned may do. I tore the lyre from its case and hurled it at the door. It shattered with an unearthly scream and fell to splinters.

“‘I will make you pay, you ungrateful whore!’ I screamed. ‘All of eternity will know of your faithlessness!’

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon's head pounds with every movement, worse than any hangover he has ever experienced. And he has experienced many. A woman's shriek, the crackling of wood, still echoes in his skull. When he finally maneuvers himself up upon his elbows, nausea swift and potent grips him. He is just in time to the chamber pot beneath the bed.

Hanging over the bedside, he wipes his mouth upon the cuff of his shirtsleeve, heedless of the vomit.

"Do use a handkerchief, Algernon," Sappho says.

Her voice has ceased to startle him. "What are you doing to me?" he asks. With tremendous effort, he pushes himself to sitting.

He vomits again before he hears her answer. "I am doing as you asked. I am purging that woman from your thoughts, from your desires. I am giving you a poem that will live on beyond this life and the next, that will tell the world of love's ingratitude. How dare she run off with Tyronus over you."

Algernon wipes his mouth. "Who?"

Sappho glares. "That idiot Colonel, of course. Your precious Mary chose the Colonel over you."

"That was not what you said, lady. You said Tyronus. Was that not the name of the man Anactoria married?"

Sappho turns her back to him. “You are not listening. Algernon—”

“Algernon?”

His name is doubled, as an echo. The door opens. Sappho is gone, and in her place is Mary. “Cousin,” she says, her voice quailing. “Dear God, what is going on?”

Algernon starts and jumps to his feet, but the sudden motion makes his head spin and he falls back onto the bed with a hard thump. “How long have you been standing there?” He closes his eyes. If only the world would stop spinning.

She comes in but does not approach closer. She stands with one hand on the door knob. “I was just passing in the hall when I heard you retching. I thought I would offer you some of the chamomile I brought with me. I have found it soothing for nausea. I stopped at the door about to knock when I heard you speaking. Who is Anactoria?”

Algernon presses the heels of his palms into his eyes. By the gods, he is so tired. He would like nothing more than to just lie back and sleep. Sleep forever, perhaps. But *she* will not let him rest. Algernon doubles over so his elbows rest upon his knees. He does not even know which *she* he means anymore.

“No one,” he tells Mary. “Just a story. I’ve been writing a poem.”

Mary claps her hands together as if in prayer. “Oh, but that is wonderful, Algernon. Whatever is it about?”

Algernon lifts his head. The world has stopped spinning for a moment. “It is about a beautiful woman, Anactoria, who betrays her lover with another. It is about how she rips the heart out of her lover, parades her conquest merrily for all to see.”

He stands, unsteady at first, then takes a step toward Mary. “It is about the lusty joy Anactoria takes in abandoning the pure kisses of her lover for a poor substitution.”

He takes another step forward. Mary retreats a step. “It is about her lover’s anguish when Anactoria’s soft body is pressed against another’s.”

Algernon takes a last step. Mary’s back is against the doorframe. He lowers his head so he is only an inch from her face. “And it is about the exquisite revenge that lover will have on her.” He slams his hand against the wall, just level with Mary’s head. She cries, flinches and clutches her belly.

Algernon looks down at her hands. His brow contracts. Then understanding.

“You are with child.” It is not a question.

Mary ducks under his arm and escapes into the hallway, but she does not leave. She hesitates, reaches out her hand to him. “Oh, Algernon. Do you not see that I have done this for you?”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “For me?”

“I hoped that without me you would find another who did not indulge our—particular habits. I had hoped you would find a wife with whom you could share a pleasant—,” she pauses

to find a word, “—natural—love.” She begins to cry, a soft, quiet cry that leaves her face unmarred. She always cried prettily. “I did this for you.”

Algernon looks at her belly, still flat beneath the fabric of her dress. His fists clench and flex spasmodically. “Sappho was right,” he says. “She was right.” He turns back into his own room and slams the door shut.

*Bernie, 2007*

Time stops. Each second that passes seems to slip away rather than collect and combine into minutes, which combine into hours. Bernie feels no closer to morning than when she first awoke.

She can’t sleep. Not that she is unable, in fact, her body aches and cries out for sleep; her fingers seem to itch of their own accord to press the PCA pump and release a dose of morphine. She can’t sleep because she has to hang on to consciousness as long as possible. Until daybreak. Until Paul comes.

It is dark. So dark. When will the sun rise?

“Who is Anactoria?” she hears someone ask.

*Bernie, 2007*

“Who is Anactoria?”

Algernon presses the heels of his palms into his eyes. By the gods, he is so tired. He would like nothing more than to just lie back and sleep. Sleep forever, perhaps. But *she* will not let him rest. Algernon doubles over so his elbows rest upon his knees. He does not even know which *she* he means anymore.

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He stands, takes a step toward Mary. “It is about the lusty joy Anactoria takes in abandoning the pure kisses of her lover for a poor substitution.”

He takes another step forward. Mary retreats a step. “It is about her lover’s anguish when Anactoria’s soft body is pressed against another’s.”

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“You are with child.” It is not a question.

Mary ducks under his arm and escapes into the hallway, but she does not leave. She hesitates, reaches out her hand to him. “Oh, Algernon. Do you not see that I have done this for you? I did this for you.”

*Bernie, 2007*

“Who is Sappho?”

Algernon presses the heels of his palms into his eyes. By the gods, he is so tired. He would like nothing more than to just lie back and sleep. Sleep forever, perhaps. But *she* will not let him rest. Algernon doubles over so his elbows rest upon his knees. He does not even know which *she* he means anymore.

“She is no one,” he tells Bernie. “Just a story. I’ve been writing a poem.”

Bernie claps her hands together as if in prayer. “Oh, but that is wonderful, Algernon. Whatever is it about?”

Algernon lifts his head. The world has stopped spinning for a moment. “It is about a woman who betrays her lover—leaves him. It is about how she rips his heart out and runs.”

He stands, takes a step toward her. She freezes.

He takes another step forward. Bernie retreats a step. “She just leaves a bloody note and thinks that is enough.”

Algernon takes a last step. Bernie’s back is against the doorframe. He lowers his head so he is only an inch from her face. “And it is about the way she will die completely, utterly alone.” He slams his hand against the wall, just level with Bernie’s head. She cries, flinches and clutches her belly. It is hard, like a rock.

Algernon looks down at her hands. His brow contracts. Then understanding.

“Your tumor.” It is not a question.

Bernie ducks under his arm and escapes into the hallway, but she does not leave. She hesitates, reaches out her hand to him. “Oh, Algernon. Do you not see that I have done this for you?”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “For me?”

“I hoped that without me you would find another. I had hoped you would find a wife with whom you could share a full—,” she pauses to find a word, “—long—life.” She begins to cry. “I did this for you.”

“For who?”

Bernie presses the heels of her palms into her eyes. She is so tired. She would like nothing more than to just lie back and sleep. Sleep forever, perhaps. But something won't let her. Bernie doubles over so her elbows rest on her knees. She does not even know who she is anymore.

“No one,” she tells Paul. “Just a story.”

Paul rubs the back of his neck with one hand. “Oh, okay. What's going on?”

Bernie lifts her head. The world has stopped spinning for a moment. “It's nothing really. I just, you know, because I'm sick. I think it would be best if I went somewhere.”

She stands. Paul takes a step toward her. “Somewhere where people can take care of me.”

Paul reaches out for her. Bernie retreats a step. “I can take care of you,” he says.

Bernie shakes her head; her back is against the doorframe.

“No, Paul. I need—I don't know.”

He lowers his head so he is only an inch from her face; he kisses her on the cheek. “I want what is best for you.”

She cries, flinches and clutches her belly.

“But I miss you,” he says.

Bernie ducks under his arm and escapes into the hallway, but she does not leave. She hesitates, reaches out her hand to him. “Paul, don’t you see that I did this for you?”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “For me?”

“I didn’t want to be a burden. I want you to be free.” She begins to cry, hard, wracking. “I did this for you.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it. You did it for yourself.”

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie presses the heels of her palms into her eyes. She is so tired. She would like nothing more than to just lie back and sleep. Sleep forever, perhaps. But something won’t let her. She grabs a pen and rips a piece of paper from a notepad.

*Dear Paul,*

*The doctors say that I’ll need care, constant care. I’ve decided to go where I can get that. It is really the best thing. I’ll call you when I get there.*

*B—*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie's eyes flicker minutely and recall her attention back to herself. She tries to take a deep breath, but it is difficult. Her eyes are closed and she cannot feel her body except as a vague kind of weight and so does not know its orientation: she could be face down in her pillow, she could have rolled over on her oxygen line, which she feels pressed against her face. It tickles her nose. Yet the tickle, the difficulty breathing, register as if they are not quite her own body, but happening to someone else she is watching. She is curious to see it play out.

She overlooks a vast, churning body of water, the ocean probably, but not the Pacific like at Santa Monica, or when she and Paul would stand in the dunes in Huntington Beach, or watch the weirdos come out in Venice. This ocean is frothy, powerful and seductive. It pulls at the cliff like it would climb up the rock and seize her.

Wind riles the waves. It tosses her hair in long black tendrils. She knows she does not have long hair anymore and she never had black hair. She is aware that in reality she is not standing on a coastal cliff but rather lying in her bed in the hospice. She looks down at her hands like people do in the movies when some surprising transformation has occurred and they just can't believe it. These are her hands, slim fingered and bony knuckled. She is wearing some kind of draped gown of thin, tissue-like fabric that tosses with the wind but mercifully covers everything it is supposed to.

She is not cold. Strange, with all of the wind and chilled spray from the waves.

She should not hear footsteps over the violent crashing of the waves, but she feels like she has, and turns more because she feels like she should than out of any real curiosity.

“I wondered if you would come,” she says, in a voice she does not recognize as her own.

“I was surprised by your letter,” says the one behind her. She knows who he is even before she turns. She knew he would be there even before she climbed the cliff, or rather, when she imagined herself who is not quite herself climbing the cliff.

“I didn’t think you had anything else to say to me,” he says.

“Phaon,” she breathes. The name is on her tongue, strange but familiar too, like a scene she had seen played out a hundred times, only now she is the actor. “I needed to see you before I left.”

Phaon steps toward her, but still out of arm’s reach. He is not dressed like her, but in faded blue jeans and a white T-shirt, both splattered and smeared with paint. His feet are bare though, as are hers. She wonders how they made it up the rocky cliff without sandals, but figured he had gotten here the same way she had.

“What did you want to say?” he asks evenly. She had expected anger or cold resentment from him—she deserves both, she knows—but he offers her neither. He just seems tired.

She shrugs her shoulders. “I don’t know. I thought when I saw you I would know what to say, but having you here is different than speaking to you in my head.”

Now Phaon shrugs his shoulders and tucks his hands into his jean pockets in a familiar/not-familiar gesture. “We are in your head, so it shouldn’t make much difference.”

He is right, but she had never been *here* exactly before, and it seems to make a difference, if only a small one. She wonders what other unfamiliar landscapes lurk in her mind, but right now she doesn’t have much time.

The earth gives a quick shudder that only she seems to feel.

“Okay,” she says. “I had wanted to apologize to you. That’s why I asked you to come see me.”

Phaon waits with his hands in his pockets. Neither of them speaks.

“Well?”

“Not all of it was my fault,” she says.

Phaon snorts and pulls one hand free of his jeans. He scratches the back of his neck.

“Okay, that’s not much of an apology.”

“Give me a minute,” she snaps. She hates it when he does that to her, like everything is so simple and you can just say what you mean.

The cliff rumbles under her bare feet.

“Look,” says Phaon, shifting to a wide-legged stance before her, both of his arms now crossed over his chest. She hadn’t seen him move at all; she didn’t remember blinking. “You asked *me* here, so I’m here. Jeez, it’s never enough for you, is it?”

She opens her mouth automatically to contradict him—that is always her first impulse—even now in this dreamscape in her head—but then she shuts it. She knows he is right.

“I know,” she says. “I know I always do this and now I can’t undo it all. That’s why I’m sorry. Please, just give me a minute.”

Phaon shrugs his shoulders noncommittally but he doesn’t leave. It looks like he is going to hear her out.

She swallows. “I wanted to apologize to you,” she says again. “I was a bitch and I know it. You offered me everything and I hated you for it.”

She wraps her arms around herself even though she is not cold.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Phaon says, dropping his hands to his sides. He takes a few steps toward her and she wonders if he is really doing it himself or if she is somehow making him.

“I know it doesn’t,” she says. “But that’s all I got.”

The cliff shakes again. Phaon stands steady. Her legs wobble. She stumbles with the earth’s force and only manages to catch herself before she falls over. Her legs are tired. Her body is tired. The waves below, that she cannot see, but imagines, batter the cliff side. Chunks of rock fall into the sea.

“That was the second time you kept me waiting,” Phaon says. “The first time, I get. That was my bad. But not this one. I want to believe you did it out of love, or because you were afraid, but I don’t know. I just don’t know.”

He turns and walks. The sky shatters, breaks into a million tiny crystals that twinkle and shine as they fall. When they hit the water they make little pinging and plinking sounds, like plucks of a lyre string. Thunder booms. The cliff cracks and pieces break free, slide down into the water. The sea devours them. The shaking knocks her to her knees. In her mind she feels the rocks cut into her knees and palms; she imagines her blood spill out and the earth drink it up.

“Don’t leave me!” she cries.

Phaon does not turn, and he is too far away, but she hears him anyway. “I didn’t.”

## **Part 5. “out of the unexpected”**

*Bernie, 2007*

*Paul wasn't home, but she had the key—had had it for almost six months. She hadn't felt well at work today, the past few days actually, so she took a half-day and then rode the Metro to his place. She wanted to take a nap, and his apartment was closer to work than hers. She knew Paul wouldn't mind.*

*She stripped off her shoes, skirt and blouse and slid under the covers. They were soft, smelled like him. She tried to cuddle under them, but the persistent ache in her belly would not let her get comfortable. She knew she wasn't due for her period in another week, but this felt like the cramps that came a few days before—worse, really. And she was spotting. She shifted, tried to get comfortable, but the ache wouldn't relent.*

*Frustrated, she got up. She found some aspirin in the drawer where Paul kept all of his toiletries—his studio's bathroom was literally a converted closet, shower and toilet only—so he used kitchen drawers to hold his tooth paste, toothbrush and other necessities. She found the pills rattling around next to the floss and some condoms.*

*She popped the pills. Since she couldn't sleep, she rummaged through some of the things on Paul's desk: his collage of 'inspiration' that he kept tacked to the wall, his notebooks with the names and addresses of galleries, contacts and the occasional contract work. She flipped*

*through some of the books of poetry he kept there, all familiar to her now. Sappho. Swinburne. Ovid.*

*These reminded her of the portraits, and though she knew Paul never liked to show his work before it was finished, she was curious what he had made of her. He had finished preliminary sketches some time ago. Now she spent time with him apart from modeling; they practically lived together. But still, she had not seen any paintings of Paul's vision of her as Sappho. He usually just tore off the sketches and dropped them on the floor, then gathered them up and stashed them somewhere.*

*She looked at the easels already set up with either canvases or newsprint pads. The latter she flipped through, but none of the sketches were of her. Of the three canvases out, only one was a work in progress, and not of her; the other two were primed, but blank.*

*The studio was not a large one. She didn't want to stoop to checking under the bed, and she was certain there was no room in the bathroom. Curiosity was eating at her, but at the same time she felt a little as if she were betraying Paul's confidence the more she had to search. If they were just out in the open, that would be one thing. She would just stumble upon them. But that they were put away, with the feeling of hiddenness, made her feel like she was eavesdropping on a conversation of which she was not a part, or reading someone's diary.*

*What if there were no sketches? What if for some reason Paul decided she was wrong for Sappho, or he no longer liked her look? What if she had done something wrong in her modeling and all of his sketches were useless? What if there was never going to be a series on Sappho and he had just used it as a ploy to get her in bed?*

*Well, at least she had made him wait almost a month before they first had sex, and the fact that they continued to have sex, and spend non-sex time together too, made her at least tentatively toss this last thought out. Counting the first time they met, they had been together just over a year. If she was any judge, which she rather doubted, she and Paul had moved from just casual friends to a more—dare she say—committed relationship. He had given her a key to his studio. She had a drawer with her own toiletries. Granted, it was in the kitchen too, but it was still hers. That had to mean something.*

*Bernie sat back on the bed and wrapped the covers around her shoulders. She would not look for the paintings. She was going to trust Paul. If she really wanted to see them, she would ask him. She lay back on the bed, pulled the covers closer and tried again to sleep.*

*Algernon, 1865*

There is no uproar or menacing hoard of pitch-fork wielding peasants clamoring at his door, so Algernon assumes that Mary has not said anything concerning their conversation. He comes down to the supper table quietly, though he must pause on the staircase and catch his breath. He is trembling when he seats himself, but a glass of port calms his nerves and he finds he can follow the conversation around him without losing the thread, or blacking out.

He pushes away his plate of roasted chicken, boiled carrots and potatoes. The sight and scent of them turn his stomach, though there is little left in it after his episode upstairs. He notices that Mary has eaten little herself, though he knows her reason.

“Perhaps some chamomile, Cousin?” he asks dryly, indicating her plate.

Mary flushes, and the Colonel, oblivious to it all, pipes in that he too would care for a cup of tea after supper and sends a servant to the kitchen to put a kettle on. When all parties have finished eating, save Algernon and Mary, and Dante having second servings, everyone removes to the parlor where Mary takes up some fine needle work, the Colonel strides about the room admiring Will’s collection of sabers, Will catches up on his correspondence, Dante reads from a volume of Mazzini, Christina sits at a writing table with pen and paper muttering every now and again, ‘goblins,’ and Algernon finds himself restless and at ends. He watches his friends at their various employments, but his eyes return again and again to Mary. He watches the delicate sinews in her hands and fingers thrust and pull the needle and thread. She runs her thumb and forefinger up the taut thread like a lyre string.

A lyre string.

Algernon clenches his jaw. The Colonel finishes his perusal of the sabers and comes to sit beside his wife. His hand sweeps casually over her shoulder; Mary smiles up at him. Algernon’s hands begin to shake. His chest tightens.

Just outside the doorway, Algernon hears the soft pad of feet on the wood floor. It must be the servant with tea. He looks up.

Sappho glides through the door, radiant and aglow in the candlelight. She is draped in white so bright the light seems to come from within. Her hair flows in black cascades down her back. She walks through the room, past the writing desk, the shelves of books, the chairs

arranged in a private tête-à-tête around a low, round table, the upholstered sofa where Mary and the Colonel sit in marital reverie.

Algernon catches his breath. She walks straight to him, graceful and sure, and no one else in the room blinks.

“Sappho,” he whispers. Her name is just a hiss of air.

“I say, Algernon,” Dante says, closing his book with a snap. “I wonder if you might entertain us this evening. Perhaps some poetry? I know you’ve been hard at work.”

The others in the room nod approvingly, except Christina who is oblivious, and Mary, whose eyes widen just a sliver.

Sappho smiles with red, wetted lips. Algernon does not take his eyes from her.

“Yes, indeed,” he says. “I think I am ready.”

*Bernie, 2007*

*“What do you want to do?” Paul asks.*

I don’t know, I don’t know. *She shook her head. She reached out and turned the door knob.* I just can’t be here.

No—that’s not how it happened. She can’t—start again.

*Bernie turned from the door. Paul was there, his arms open. She buried her head in his chest and sobbed. "Please don't leave me," she cried.*

*Paul held her close, rubbed circles on her back. "Never."*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie awakes drenched in sweat. She tries to kick off her covers, but it takes too much effort; she cannot move except for a slight nod of her head and an occasional twitch of her hand. Her mouth works like a landed fish, but she cannot make sound come out. She turns her head to see if she can read the bed-side clock, but the light from under the curtains tells her. It is murky gold-gray. It is morning.

There is no knock, but her door opens.

"I tried to find you," Paul says.

*I know. I am so sorry. I should never have left.*

He comes to the bedside and touches her hand. Bernie blinks. Tears gather in the rims of her lower lids. They threaten to spill.

"I don't know if you can understand me," he says. "I got the message from the nurse. She said to come—that you might not have much time."

He pulls a chair close and sits, but he never lets go of her hand. "I wish you would have let me take care of you. I wish you didn't leave."

*There was no knock, but the jangling of keys. The door opened.*

*Bernie must have drifted off to sleep after all, but Paul's return woke her up.*

*"Hey," he said. He dumped his bag on the kitchen counter and went to the bed. "What are you doing here?"*

*"Didn't feel good," she said. "Still don't. But I thought a nap would make me feel better."*

*"What's wrong?"*

*She rubbed her belly. "I don't know. It just hurts."*

*He looked at her for a minute. "Are you pregnant?"*

*Bernie frowned, then shook her head. "No, I don't think so." She'd never heard of pregnancy feeling like this, but what did she know? "I think you're supposed to feel nauseous, like morning sickness. This feels like major cramps."*

*"Oh."*

*Bernie wasn't sure, but it almost sounded like Paul was disappointed. She searched his face for something that would tell her more, but she just couldn't tell. She didn't know how she felt about that. That Paul might want to have children with her.*

*"Is it?"*

*“What? Cramps?” Bernie shrugged. “If it is, I’ve never had them this bad. It doesn’t just ache. It hurts.”*

*“What about appendicitis?”*

*Bernie hadn’t thought of that. She didn’t really know where the appendix was. Her belly twinged and clenched. She groaned and doubled over.*

*“Should we go to the emergency room?” Paul asked. He took one of her hands in his and squeezed it.*

*Algernon, 1865*

Algernon rises, a little unsteadily, as all eyes train on him. “Anactoria,” he says. He closes his eyes.

“My life is bitter with thy love; thine eyes  
Blind me, thy tresses burn me—

*He and Mary lie naked in his bed. The sweat of their bodies still glistens and cools in the night air. Her head rests on his chest and her hair is spread over it like a golden wave. His ring is on her finger.*

*“My angel,” he tells her. “I have never been so happy as I am now.”*

*“Nor I,” she says.*

*He lifts his head from the pillow so he can kiss the top of her head. "I could wish we would be forever like this."*

*Mary sighs contentedly.*

Algernon sways on his feet. He holds the arm of the chair to steady himself. Sappho rests her hand on his shoulder.

"Yea, all sweet words of thine and all thy ways,  
And all the fruit of nights and flower of days,  
And stinging lips wherein the hot sweet brine  
That Love was born of burns and foams like wine

*Mary slides from Algernon's chest; Algernon props himself up on one shoulder so the two of them are face to face. With his other hand he strokes her cheek. It is soft, warm, flushed with their lovemaking.*

*"What of the Colonel?" Algernon asks. "Do you regret turning down his proposal and accepting mine?"*

*Mary shakes her head. "How can you even ask? You, and you alone, have held my heart."*

*Algernon rests his free hand upon her breast, just over her heart. He feels it beat beneath his palm.*

Algernon opens his eyes. Mary's hand rests in the Colonel's, but her eyes are on Algernon. Her chest rises and falls in deep, heaving breaths. Her lips are parted just slightly. Her brow is pinched and her eyes beg him. She mouths the word 'please.'

"Who doth thee wrong,  
Sappho?" but thou—thy body is the song,  
Thy mouth the music; thou art more than I,  
Though my voice die not till the whole world die

*"You and I, my love. None shall come between us." He bends and kisses her neck.*

Mary shakes her head so minutely that Algernon is the only one who sees it, his eyes so intent as they are upon her. Algernon feels Sappho's grip tighten on his shoulder. Her nails dig into his flesh, piercing him.

"Ah that my mouth for Muses' milk were fed  
On the sweet blood thy sweet small wounds had bled!  
That with my tongue I felt them, and could taste  
The faint flakes from thy bosom to the waist!

Algernon shakes. His breathing comes ragged. Red film falls over his eyes.

“That I could drink thy veins as wine, and eat  
Thy breasts like honey!

*Algernon closes his hand around Mary’s neck. He presses down.*

“I am sick with time as these with ebb and flow,  
And by the yearning in my veins I know—

*Mary’s eyes fly open. She grabs at his wrist. He presses harder, forcing her into the mattress.*

Blood rushes into Algernon’s ears, but he does not stop. His heart hammers in his chest  
and he clutches at it with one hand.

Dante rises to his feet.

“Algernon!” Mary cries.

*Mary chokes for breath, her eyelids flutter. Her lips form his name. Algernon bends down  
over her and his teeth tear into the tender skin of her breast. Blood pours into his mouth.*

Algernon staggers. He bites his lip and blood drips down his chin.

“Yea, though thou diest, I say I shall not die.  
 For these shall give me of their souls, shall give  
 Life

*Mary's limp hand falls against the pillow.*

Algernon collapses onto the floor. Sappho kneels beside him. “Well done, my poet,” she says.

The others are frantic: Dante loosens Algernon's cravat, calls for a servant to bring a cold cloth; Will sends another servant for the physician; Mary cries into the broad chest of the Colonel, who holds her and strokes her hair. Algernon cannot hear any of them.

“Sappho,” he calls. It is strangled in his throat. His lips move, but only barely. He feels as if something is draining from him. He is empty.

“Do not try to speak,” Dante says. “Everything will be fine.”

“Sappho, my love,” Algernon tries again. She touches his bloodied lip. Then she rises and seems to hover over him. She shimmers and flickers, and then she is gone.

Algernon cries out, reaches for her. Heavy, bitter loneliness pours into his body, fills the void, as cold as the sea. He shudders once, then his eyes roll back in his head and his hand falls to the ground.

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*Anactoria stood in Sappho's doorway. She was clothed in a long robe and a travel cape.*

*"Where are you going?" Sappho asked.*

*Anactoria swallowed hard. "Sardis."*

*That was a journey of several hundred miles, first across the strait and then over land into Lydia. This was not a light endeavor.*

*Sappho pursed her lips. "How long will you be gone?" She did not want to hear the answer, but perhaps it would only be a few months. That would not be quite so bad. Months could fly by in a blink.*

*Anactoria began to tremble. She choked back a sob. "I—I am not—coming back. My father—"*

*She could not finish, but there was no need. Anactoria was sixteen. Her father had been negotiating with a suitor. The visit out of the city was probably to pay the dowry and show her to a family representative.*

*"You are married."*

*Anactoria shook her head. "No, but I will be as soon as I arrive in Sardis."*

*Now she broke down into violent sobs that shook her whole body. She wrapped her arms around herself, as if they would protect her.*

*Sappho went to her, took her in her arms. Anactoria clutched at her so hard she nearly drove the breath out of her. She tried to sooth her, patting her hair and her back. Finally the sobs subsided and Anactoria released her. She sniffled and rubbed at her eyes.*

*“I wanted to come and—and say goodbye.”*

*She turned to go.*

*“Anactoria.”*

*She stopped.*

*“Don’t go.”*

*“My father is expecting me. He only let me come to say goodbye, and that he will pay out the rest of this month’s tuition.”*

*Sappho shook her head. “No, Anactoria. Don’t go. Stay with me. Here. You can stay with me and we can—”*

*Anactoria cocked her head. “And what, Sappho? Can we really be together?”*

*Sappho opened her mouth, but Anactoria shook her head. “I will think of you often, Beloved.” She kissed Sappho on the cheek, and then left.*

*Sappho stood for several minutes, shaking, staring after her, before a slave came with an urgent message from the house of Alcaeus: a coup against Myrsilus failed. It was bloody. Houses are in arms against Houses. They must flee.*

*Bernie, 2007*

Bernie and Sappho stand together overlooking a vast, gray sea. The drop from the cliff to the water is immeasurable.

“It’s okay,” Sappho says. “You don’t have to say anything.”

Bernie looks from the sea to Sappho and back again. She’d never noticed before how profound a silence there was at its edge. It nearly knocks her over.

*Bernie, 2007*

One of the nurses at the front desk is talking to someone. The words are just on the edge of her hearing.

*She left you this.*

Bernie wonders if it is Sharon, finally coming to pick up Jeanette’s things.

She turns her attention back to Paul. He still has one of her hands in his. She had always loved the feeling of his hands: calloused fingers, but so graceful. A light touch.

“I know you never got a change to see these, so I brought something for you,” Paul says. He leans down and picks up a giant portfolio case. She hears the zipper and rustling paper. He

lays several sheets of newsprint out on the bed, over her legs.

“There is no painting,” he says.

*“No,” Bernie said. “I don’t think it’s appendicitis. It’s definitely a down-there issue. I’ll make an appointment with my gynie.”*

*Paul’s shuddered a little, which Bernie attributed to all of the female talk, so she changed the subject. Her mind wandered back to the painting.*

*“I know you don’t like to let people see your work before it’s finished, but I was wondering if I could see some of what you’ve done with Sappho? I’m really curious.”*

*Paul hesitated for a minute. “I can’t,” he said.*

*Sappho, 590 BC*

*The ferryman took Sappho’s hand and eased her into the barge. Her travel chest rested in the stern, causing the barge to be back heavy and raised a little in the bow. Once Sappho had settled herself, wrapped her cloak around her body, the ferryman untied the barge from the pier and pushed away with his long, pole-like oar, pushing along the shallows rather than rowing. The pointed nose of the barge cut through the water.*

*“Where are you for, my lady?” he asked.*

*“Sicily.”*

*When she did not elaborate, he asked, “Do you know your ship?”*

*Sappho’s brow pinched and a fleeting look of confusion gave way to defeat. She shook her head. “We had to hurry.”*

*The ferryman bit his bottom lip so it disappeared between teeth and his wiry, black beard. He shoved the oar deep into the water, then pushed hard. The muscles in his arms, naked chest flexed. His thighs strained as he counter-balanced himself against the force of his strokes. He repeated the action again and again without seeming thought. “If I may be bold, my lady. If you haven’t booked passage, you should speak with Sosthenias the Cretan. He captains a merchant ship that makes frequent voyage that way. If I recall aright, he’ll be headed there with the tide, and he is always happy for a passenger.”*

*Sappho smiled with a quivering lip. The ferryman swallowed. “I could negotiate a price for you, if you like.” He pushed his oar again. Sappho nodded her thanks, then folded into herself, her arms wrapped tightly around her body to keep out both the cold, and despair. It was the ferryman’s voice that drew her out again.*

*“There is a blanket under your seat, my lady. If this cold is bothersome, it will be worse as we move out to sea toward the ships.”*

*She took the blanket, as promised under the wooden slat that served as a bench, and wrapped it doubly around her shoulders. “The cold does not bother you, though?”*

*He shrugged, more of a slight tick of one shoulder. He was without tunic, and a sheen of sweat glistened upon his chest beneath the dark whorls of his hair; but for his erect nipples she would not have known he felt the chill. He pushed the oar again, and Sappho watched the sinews in his arm flex and contract, his shoulders lift and lower. “What is your name, ferryman?” she asked.*

*“I am called Phaon, of Chios. In the south.”*

*“You are away from home, Phaon of Chios.”*

*He nodded. “But where is home? I have driven this barge for near half my life. I know this sea road as if I had fins and a tail.”*

*Sappho smiled. A true smile. “Are you a son of Poseidon? Do dolphins pull your barge and you only feign to work in front of us mortals?”*

*Phaon laughed. It came deep from his belly. “If I am Triton, then who are you? A Nereid?”*

*Sappho dropped her head. “No, I am afraid I must be Persephone, banished from the world of the living and sent to stay in Hades.”*

*Phaon lowered his eyes and turned his attention back the oar. They were less than half a league from the merchant ship’s anchor. Sappho watched as the ships came into view, jewels afloat on the sea. “Some say an army of horsemen, some an army on foot, and some say a fleet of ships is the loveliest sight on this dark earth.”*

*Though she seemed to be speaking to herself, Phaon asked, “They are indeed, my lady. But I wonder what you would say?”*

*Sappho looked up, and, as if coming out of a dream, looked the ferryman in the eye. Tears fell unheeded and dripped into her lap, but she smiled nonetheless. “Anactoria. Beloved. Gone.”*

*Phaon pressed his lips, nodded, and pushed the barge on until they were flush against the side of a merchant ship with a brilliant scarlet and gold striped mainsail. Once the barge was tied off to an iron ring on the ship’s side, he climbed up a rope ladder and disappeared over the side of the ship. Distant voices, shouts, and a kind of clamoring greeted him. Though Sappho could not make out anything distinct, to her ears they sounded more cheerful than threatening. And it proved so. A few moments later Phaon climbed back down.*

*“I’ve secured your passage. The crew will see to your belongings.”*

*A man with a gray beard and gold in his ear peered over the side of the ship, said something to Phaon that Sappho could not understand, and made an odd hand gesture before disappearing back into the ship.*

*“Sosthenias has cleared a cabin for you and will see to your needs for the journey.”*

*Sappho nodded. She reached into her purse and withdrew a gold coin—one stamped with her image. Though the prize had lost its esteem, gold was still gold. “I am indebted to you, Phaon of Chios.”*

*Phaon bowed. "As one away from home to another, my lady. Fare you well." He helped her to the rope ladder and held it steady as she ascended. She cast one last glance over her shoulder, at Lesbos, at home. She was not sure she would ever see it again.*

*Bernie, 2007*

"I just couldn't do it," Paul says. "I kept trying and trying. To see her. To see her in you and you in her and I just kept failing. I started I don't know how many canvases. All of them were wrong."

*This is all my fault. If I had been there, maybe you could have finished.*

"And I realized that it wasn't you, or her," Paul says. "It was my vision." He indicates the top most sheet of paper. It is a sketch, or rather, several overlapping sketches. There are still perspective lines visible. In the margins are thumbnails that hint at motion like single cells in a roll of film.

The top sheet is a sketch of her naked back; her hair is caught up on her head in lines that suggest a sloppy bun. There is a smudge, a shadow, high on her neck: a long removed tattoo. The picture fades as it moves out from her spine. There are no lines to delineate ribs, the genesis of her own creation lost.

Beside this sketch is another. Bernie sits facing the viewer with eyes full and wide and searching. Her jaw is a sweep of charcoal like the strike of a scythe. Superimposed over this face is a second one, tilted in thought. A third face has her mouth open in a roar of laughter, and

behind this one, a fourth face, just the whisper of lines to suggest angle and proportion. Four faces, like the seraph of St. John's revelation who will usher in the end.

Paul pulls this sheet away and shows her another. In the corner of the paper, she is the line of spine and shoulder, angled in a cross. Next to it, the entire span of her body from the neck down, the slant of clavicle into the curves of breasts, down into the plain of her torso and belly, the dark coils of pubic hair and down to her thighs, knees, legs and feet. She is sinuous, without head or arms, a river on the gray newsprint.

He pulls this one aside revealing one more, and lines the three side by side. None of them are complete.

"It just wasn't right," Paul says. "Every time I tried to finish it, it felt like I lost something. I think," he pauses, searches for a moment, "I think I need the gaps. They are Sappho. And they are you. The places I'll never know."

*Bernie frowned. "I don't understand," she said.*

*"You know. I just don't want to show my work until it is finished," Paul said. "That's all there is to it." He shrugged. "It's not that big a deal."*

*Bernie didn't know why, but she wanted to make it a big deal. Maybe it was the on-set of PMS, but she felt an almost urgent need to see them, as if to see herself in them would somehow reassure her that she was—what?—there. "But the paintings are of me. I think I have a right to see them."*

*"I'm sorry, B. I just can't. Not right now. I promise, though. As soon as they're done you'll be the first one I show."*

Paul gathers up the newsprint and tucks them back into the portfolio case. "I hope you like them, B."

She blinks in rapid succession, a kind of convulsive movement. Her breath comes fast and shallow.

From outside: *I gave it to her.* It is a man's voice. Not Sharon.

Nurse: *It meant something to her. She had it with her all of the time.*

Bernie opens her mouth, but her throat is dry and her words barely a whisper. She nods her head toward the bed-side stand.

Paul follows her. He points to the cup. "You want water?"

She blinks and wobbles her head. She nods again to the stand.

"The book?"

Her lip twitches. Paul picks it up. A note falls out, flutters and drifts and lands on the bed.

Paul picks it up, unfolds it.

*What is this?* The man asks. *It isn't her handwriting.*

*No, the nurse says, she couldn't write at the end, but she dictated what she wanted me to write.*

It is a note. It has Paul's name on it. "Do you want me to read it now?" he asks.

Bernie blinks, tries to nod. It is so hard to move now.

*Bernie, 2007*

*Paul,*

*Another note. I'm sorry about that. I really screwed things up, and I can't take it back now. But I want you to have this back. Maybe think of me. Phaon, I think it's time for me to let go. It isn't fair if we both go over together.*

*Yours,*

*B*

## VITA

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