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A Light Rain

by Manuel A. Melendez

Spring 2010

Quiz&Quill Single author chapbook

8

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Alice McQuibben
Manny Melendez
Morgan Platchie
Debbie Sherfiss
Lillie Testers

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Otterbein College
Westerville, OH

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PART ONE

SCENE

Static of a radio.

The dim sounds of a long-ago broadcast echo within the broken machine, only whispers are carried above the din of its hollow voice.

A light rain begins to fall over the fading remnants of ghost noise.

LIGHTS UP ON: THE FUGUE.

Waves crash languidly against each other from afar.

A once well-kept courtyard, now seized by the shore.

TWO WORKERS move back and forth behind a long, thin mosquito net. They carry furniture, items of clothing, always a thing in their hands.

LOUIS sits with a cup of coffee, his attention solely on the book he's reading. He seems quite content.

The workers walk through a slit in the net to put a table in front of him. Louis looks up, startled by their presence. He folds his book on the table, an amaranthine marking his place.

The workers walk away, revealing PENELOPE. She stands right before Louis.

Penelope hesitates for a few seconds before grabbing a Post-It from her pocket, reading its contents before putting it back. She draws her eyes to the sky.

Louis smiles.

LOUIS

Lost?

(Penelope turns to him. She considers him carefully.)

PENELOPE

Well, no. This is precisely where I mean to be. But I do believe this is as far as I go.

LOUIS

Why?

PENELOPE

Faulty address.

LOUIS

Are you looking for someone?

PENELOPE

I don't know exactly.

LOUIS

You don't know if you're looking for someone?

(Penelope laughs.)

PENELOPE

Maybe I did and just forgot. No name on the paper. And the paper I only found in my purse today.

LOUIS

Today?

(Penelope hesitates.)

PENELOPE

Today.

LOUIS

Today of all days. I'm sorry. It's hard to help when you don't know how to start. Or where.

(Penelope nods, her eyes fixating on his coffee cup.)

LOUIS

Will you be leaving now?

(Penelope looks at him. Louis is overtaken, momentarily, by fear.)

PENELOPE

What?

LOUIS

Everyone leaves. Will you be leaving too?

PENELOPE

No, I—I— don't have anywhere else.

LOUIS

Oh. Then you're like me.

PENELOPE

I must be.

(beat)

Who's left? You said everyone leaves—Who's everyone?

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I'm the only one still living here. Everyone else—long gone.

(Penelope nods again. She sits down, letting her bag gently fall to the floor. She isn't looking at him. Louis' hands twitch against his book, but the fear retreats.)

PENELOPE

Where did they go?

LOUIS

One morning, they all vanished. Not a single trace left, not even dust prints. I made sure to write it down, that they were no longer here. It unnerved me—that they left everything as it was, that the only thing they took was themselves.

(beat)

I've seen you before today, haven't I?

(Penelope turns to him.)

PENELOPE

Well, I—I used to be a dancer. I made it on TV once. It was only an instant, but I was there.

LOUIS

Did we have television six months ago?

(Penelope bites her lip and shakes her head.)

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Then I couldn't have seen you.

PENELOPE

Why not?

LOUIS

I can't— can't remember things—faces—before six months ago.

(Penelope laughs too eagerly. She stops herself, watching Louis' hands move across the table.)

PENELOPE

What happened to you?

LOUIS

I woke up— from a long night of dreams. When my eyes opened, all I had was my memory of how the world works. How my hands fit on top of this table, the way I drink coffee, the rhythm of my breaths, my sleep cycles, how to eat. Some dreams I must have had. They took away the imprint of everything else.

(One of the workers passes through the slit and removes the coffee cup.)

LOUIS

I like that cup where it is, thank you!

(The worker immediately puts it back and retreats through the slit. Penelope looks on, baffled. She turns back to Louis. A beat.)

PENELOPE

So you know how—

LOUIS

But I don't remember what. Or why.

PENELOPE

How have you been surviving?

LOUIS

(beat)

Post-Its.

(They look at each other. Penelope lets herself laugh this time.)

LOUIS (CONT'D)

The nurses handed them to me to help. Help recuperate my losses.

PENELOPE

Have they—helped?

(Louis looks at her. Really looks at her.)

LOUIS

Not really.

(beat)

But after six months, something extraordinary happens. A little candle lights inside you, and with every new memory you make, it illuminates. When you wake the next morning, you forget, it's true. But the sensation of the light doesn't go away, just burns brighter. After six months, you wouldn't believe how brilliantly it shines.

(Louis sighs wistfully.)

PENELOPE

What?

LOUIS

I know something crucial is there, waiting inside my head. But I can't move past the layer of haze. It's more infuriating this way, with this veil. Knowing I'm lost, but not knowing how lost.

(beat)

I'm sorry. It must be odd for you— to hear these things. It's been so long since I've seen another body—a long time. I forget what's appropriate, and what isn't.

PENELOPE

What's appropriate now? I never really cared so greatly for propriety and now— well. It sounds like you're on the brink of an important moment. What could matter more? Just try not to ignore what your mind clearly wants you to remember.

LOUIS

I'm trying! It's my mind ignoring me.

(Penelope watches him fold his hands over his lap.)

PENELOPE

And the nurses?

LOUIS

Where do you think? They're all stolen away somewhere, at the last stations— praying. For anything except today, I'd imagine.

PENELOPE

If everyone's there, like you say—what are these people doing here?

LOUIS

Moving. Taking their things. Their belongings. Maybe even my own. I can't tell anymore.

PENELOPE

But why?

LOUIS

I— I don't know. I haven't bothered to ask. They comfort me. They— keep things still.

(Penelope watches the workers. She stands and walks towards them behind the net.)

PENELOPE

Did you hear about Pella?

LOUIS

The capital of ancient Macedon?

PENELOPE

Yes.

LOUIS

I stopped reading anything but this book a while ago. Never gets old, you know.

PENELOPE

Nothing there anymore. Not even ruins. It was the last record we had of the ancient world. Now wiped away.

(The workers stop and turn to Penelope. She reaches a hand through the slit in the net.)

LOUIS

Does this bother you?

(The workers move their hands through the slit to meet hers.)

PENELOPE

Our history being systematically eliminated from existence? Not at all.

LOUIS

It's poetic justice.

PENELOPE

Brutal justice.

LOUIS

Is there any other kind left for us?

PENELOPE

But it's not over yet.

LOUIS

It is for me.

PENELOPE

Don't say that!

(Penelope brings her hand down sharply. She vibrates with tension. The workers' hands slither back through the slit, resuming their work. Louis gets up, walking up to her. His hand traces a pattern in the air above her shoulder. She shivers.)

LOUIS

Do you know what it feels like to be a blank in the world? I can't form anything new out of what I learn each day. I just learn it again, and again, and again! I've been discovering, and re-discovering, that our world has been in the process of killing itself every single day for six months now. If even the earth we move on no longer wants us, how can you—

(Penelope forces herself to turn to Louis.)

LOUIS

You want to fight, but for what?

(Penelope lunges towards Louis. She instantly retreats, composing herself. They contemplate each other for a long moment. Louis' hands tense on the table.)

PENELOPE

I'm sorry. I should be back home. Doing—

LOUIS

Doing what?

(Penelope is silent.)

LOUIS (CONT'D)

What? What should you be doing tonight?

PENELOPE

What are you? You're just going to stand there?

(Louis smiles. He sits back down.)

LOUIS

And wait for oblivion. I've been waiting a long time before now. I really can't see it being more unbearable than surviving this question mark that's taken the place of living.

(Louis stays quiet, looking away. He turns back to her.)

LOUIS

When I was still studying, there was a café I used to frequent. It wasn't very clean, or special. But I laid claim to it, laid claim to everything inside its pasty little walls. That included a little spider that made its home by my favorite window. The one that faced the shore. I'd sit there, my latte on the table, my Strindberg taunting me, and the spider—just circling its web, tightening it, loving it. In every single drop of dew that'd shine off that web, I lay witness to something I had never experienced. Devotion. The fight to make, each day, a new and better web.

(Louis stands again, walking towards the audience. The two workers form the shape of a spider.)

LOUIS

It was six days later, when I saw one of the waiters roll the newspaper. He stopped to watch it at first, hypnotized, like I had been so many days before, by its pure dedication to its home. To its work. And then he aimed, and struck. Once. Twice. Enough times that there were no traces left, as though there had never been a spider—cleared from memory. Cleared from life.

(Penelope motions to stand, but Louis turns to her. She hesitates. The workers let their spider disintegrate, but they do not move.)

LOUIS

This isn't a choice. Don't you see— it's our turn to be swatted. It's our turn to be erased, until we too stick between the pages, nothing but ink black and a forgotten home.

PENELOPE

I can't just accept that's what's given to me. My life isn't a movable feast for destiny. I have rights! And choice.

(beat)

And so do you. You know it. Otherwise why spend time convincing me of anything at all?

(Louis sits down, so very, very tired.)

LOUIS

Now that we're actually coming down the pipeline, it's almost insulting to want any of that to matter.

(Thunder strikes from very far away. The waves grow violent. The workers begin to move, hurrying their pace.)

PENELOPE

Maybe it's a blessing.

LOUIS

What is?

PENELOPE

Not remembering.

(Louis opens the book where the amaranthine marks his place.)

LOUIS

This book I've read before. Many, many times before. It's my favorite book. The only book I would want to read. I don't need the light to see the words, or hear the voices, or see the pages. I know it better each time.

(beat)

This loneliness— it never becomes voluntary. Never becomes second nature. It's just as damning and impossible as what we're facing.

(Penelope stares, a smile tugging at her.)

PENELOPE

You're remembering it, aren't you?

(Louis doesn't try very hard to hide his smile.)

LOUIS

Easier said—

PENELOPE

Than done?

LOUIS

How did— how did you know I was going to say that?

PENELOPE

Everyone knows how to end that sentence. It's one of the oldest idioms in the world.

LOUIS

No— no— you knew. You knew I was going to say it!

PENELOPE

How do you know the book you've been reading is your favorite book?

LOUIS

Don't change the subject!

PENELOPE

It's part of the subject. Think— what is it about this book that leads you to believe it's the most precious to you? If you can answer that, well— then you know why I finished your sentence.

LOUIS

Is this a test?

(Penelope nods, and then shakes her head, very feebly.)

LOUIS

A few months ago, around the time all the apartments emptied, I found my cat dead— right by the window she used to leap out of to get to the gardens outside. She stopped eating, I guess, when she could understand that I wouldn't be able to save her from what was coming. Do you see the impossibility I'm dealing with?

PENELOPE

And which impossibility is that, living or forgetting?

LOUIS

One doesn't work without the other. Not for me.

(Penelope leans across the table.)

PENELOPE

You said so yourself. You were so close. Maybe today is the day you remember something. Anything.

LOUIS

I know enough to realize it won't happen like that for me.

PENELOPE

What do you know that convinces you so completely?

LOUIS

Seems like a poor time to start questioning.

(Penelope blasts all the air inside her and sits back on her chair, scoffing. It threatens to turn into a sob. She pulls her eyes away from Louis. One of the workers slips through the slit and grabs Louis' book.)

LOUIS

That's not yours! Hand it back!

(The worker hesitates, but drops the book. He walks back through the slit.)

LOUIS

The nerve of some people!

PENELOPE

(beat)

Light's almost gone.

(beat)

Do you know what I was doing before I came here? Dancing. On that stage, it didn't matter that the only traffic on the streets was the flight of gray leaves, or sour trash, long forgotten by their owners, all long gone. It didn't matter that I couldn't smell the cherry blossoms anymore, that all I could sense was the keen decay of the dying—everything fading, only shades left in the visible air. It didn't matter that there was no longer any signal to noise, no longer any real sense of breathing or sweating or crying. It didn't matter. Because I was moving. You shouldn't ever stop moving just because you know—and know what? You don't know the first thing about what's upon us. The fight is all we have. So fight!

LOUIS

I still shower. There's a river just behind us. With no one around to pollute, you can get so clean. So please don't misunderstand, resignation's not something I'm ashamed of right now. It's as much a part of me as the instinct to still wash. If I had given up my rights, my choice, my fight—why haven't I flung myself out my window? Why am I still so stubbornly alive?

(Penelope looks down at the table. She holds it tightly. Louis's hands flinch again. He motions to reach for her. Penelope looks up and grabs Louis' book. She pages through it. Louis watches her, his hands back on his lap.)

LOUIS (CONT'D)

I didn't think you'd stay. I didn't want a stranger to think I was afraid. I wanted you to leave thinking I was more prepared than you could ever be. Now I couldn't even care—realizing how much I'm going to miss you.

PENELOPE

Is it possible to miss people you've never met?

LOUIS

Everything else is possible.

(Penelope opens the book to the page marked by the amaranthine.)

PENELOPE

Our garden was destroyed today— I— I know that poem. Is it your favorite?

LOUIS

Yes.

PENELOPE

Why?

LOUIS

If I knew why— I wouldn't be here right now.

PENELOPE

And where would you be?

LOUIS

Searching for the reason I love it so.

PENELOPE

Is the reason out there?

LOUIS

Oh yes. Sure of it.

PENELOPE

You should try looking without your eyes.

(Louis looks up, a flicker of recognition in his eyes. Penelope's eyes widen.)

PENELOPE

It's only a theory.

(Louis is startled.)

LOUIS
What?

PENELOPE
Look at me.

LOUIS
Wh— what am I looking for?

PENELOPE
Look at me!

LOUIS
Who are you?

PENELOPE
Look at me!!

LOUIS
I am looking! I've been doing nothing but look since you stepped in front of me!
(Penelope looks down, holding out her hand. Louis watches her fingers curl on her palm.)

LOUIS
I— I don't know what I'm supposed to see.

(Penelope lets her hand fall to the table, crushed. Louis watches her. He tries to smile, moving his hand, as if to reach for Penelope's, but freezes before it moves beyond the table. Penelope smiles at him. Louis moves his hand again, each movement a measured one. He touches Penelope's palm with his fingers. He examines each one. She opens her hand. Louis's fingers trace the lines on it. He clasps their hands together, then immediately lets go.)

LOUIS
Your hand—
(beat)

Pangs. Real pangs. The candle— our garden— our garden—

(Louis shuts his eyes tightly and shakes his head. Penelope opens her mouth to speak as Louis opens his eyes again. He closes off. Thunder

strikes again, closer. The waves swell in an enormous symphony of salt and rage. The workers' pace reaches its fever pitch. Louis looks up, urging Penelope to do the same.)

LOUIS

Time's almost up.

PENELOPE

There's still light out.

LOUIS

Not for long. I can tell. So can you.

(beat)

We're about to expire. I see it when I see you. For days it's been happening—the corners of our eyes blackening, every step a snuffed out vision. Hands wrapping around our faces, squeezing until they shut us blind.

(Louis stares out into the audience.)

LOUIS

Why did you come here?

(Penelope stares out into the audience.)

PENELOPE

I was hoping you'd come with me.

LOUIS

Go— go with you— where?

PENELOPE

Maybe nowhere.

LOUIS

That's spooky.

(Penelope looks back at him.)

PENELOPE
I'm spooked.

(Louis seizes something in her eyes.)

LOUIS
All right. I'll go with you.

(The rain stops. Penelope smiles. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out the Post-It. She places it on the table, and gets up. She tips over to Louis and kisses him on the lips. She leans in to his ear and whispers. She slowly walks away, not looking back. Louis grabs the piece of paper. He drops the paper on the table, opening his book to the marked page. He watches her go, and closes his eyes. His eyes open, his hands grabbing the table, his book falling to the floor. Thunder strikes at the same time, right above him. The workers burst through the slit in the net and collapse. The waves stop.)

LOUIS (CONT'D)
Penelope!!!

LIGHTS OUT.

PART TWO

DIMMER LIGHTS UP ON: THE CATHARSIS.

(Penelope's steps hesitate. She turns back to Louis, disbelieving.)

PENELOPE
You remember?

(Louis shakes his head. Then nods. He covers his head with his hands, roaring in distress. He speaks through his fingers.)

LOUIS
Penelope— I know that name— I know that woman— You— you're as vivid as I've dreamed— and I'm still there, aren't I? Still lodged between my pillow and my pain.

PENELOPE
No. I'm real. There isn't a bone in me that doesn't ache. Doesn't burn with recognition. Trust me, they'd know if they were meeting you in slumber.

LOUIS
Why did you whisper to me?

(Penelope's brow furrows, but she smiles.)

PENELOPE
Only when we are barely heard are we truly listened to.

(Louis removes his face from his hands, all but the incarnation of a lost boy.)

PENELOPE

I never imagined the end would be so quiet. All I thought I'd want to do was scream—scream until all sound was mine.

LOUIS

So scream.

(Penelope laughs. She walks back to Louis and sits down. Louis watches the audience. He sees someone. He smiles very dimly.)

LOUIS

A lack of segue here—no new order, no home—I must be dying. And with it, all the faces of love, alive, returning—God is returning. You say you wanted it to end in scream—I want it to finish me in longing.

(The workers rise, delicately, dragging the net with them. They drape it over Penelope, who lets it fall over her, lets it cover her until she can't be seen. The workers begin to re-enact Louis' words, moving Penelope with them.)

LOUIS

The first time was with a man. Nameless, because even then, he represented all of them, all of me—like all things born out of comfortable banality, we had been wallflowers—acquaintances, on the cusp of becoming more. He sat, by a counter, cradling a nursing beer, boring a hole into the black corner of the room, that always room, forlorn—

(The workers join Louis. Penelope is static.)

LOUIS AND THE WORKERS

There I was, kneeling, half-sitting, half-praying, gazing up at him, the game of keeping appearances, keeping up with the grieving hours, fighting to stay awake against the battle drum-hum of insomniac love. I wanted to reach up with my hand and stroke the invisible webs around his face, maybe he could have seen better then—etched between spaces with the stains of living. He looked up with weary eyes, eyebrows curling up, melancholy amber, the touch of curling spring frosted over by the week. He licked his lips once and moved down to me as I met him halfway there, knowing inevitably we would have come to this—and survive it.

(Louis moves closer to Penelope, letting his own voice dictate the dance of his body, the workers moving away.)

LOUIS

I didn't believe him, whispering to me, *This is what I wanted to do*. He laughed inappropriately, failing to convince me and the weeping corners— so dry now, they will melt soon— understanding what it is to live stained in this trap of memory. We tripped our tongues, flirting with our sex. Hunger struck in our faces. *Let's eat*, his pupils dancing. I could have refused, but I wanted to know him this way, to memorize how my gravity fit his hand. Rubbing thumbs together, he opened his lips and took the bite. Lying bare-to-bare on the mattress, sinking under pillows of misuse— it was the careless tangent leading us there. Catching his scent of sweating tea, mixed awoken yeast— he wasn't poisonous, only contagious, bearing the fruit of us joined, swirling our tongues over mixed juices, a savored whiff of his darkening underarms— there— in that quiet, topless dome of youth—

(Penelope clings to Louis, following his dance with her own, the net still clinging between them. The workers speak again.)

THE WORKERS

It all equaled him, even as smells mixed unpleasantly, mossy moistness frothing from the tip of the spire—and then I could forgive his messes and his gases, his beauty and his trespass. Hot and suffocating, tapping out harmony with his fingers— the instant he swallowed me, bitter sea salt, musk of underground and a vague, hoodwinked fragrance when he ate me, through the hole and back out, no defining flavors, only sensations of swimming infinitely inside lines of sponge and sewage. All for him— climbing over my spire like a champion fool.

(Louis and Penelope are breaths away from each other. The workers mirror them. Louis blinks. He shakes himself from his reverie and steps back. The workers remain in their last position, slowly continuing Louis' dance.)

LOUIS

Tell me, if it ever occurred to you— that so-called original sin wasn't to bite into a forbidden anything, but to want it to make an

exception for you.

(The workers kiss and embrace. Louis averts his eyes.)

LOUIS

To give our skin, and risk the expectance of a gift. To think, in a fleeting instant, that we deserve more than the moment— that we have changed fate, and found an always in a vicious exclusive. All of us— variations on that savage expanse of alone. Killing ourselves to hold one more fingertip against our lips, one more chest to our heart—

(whispers)

One more— one more, please.

LIGHTS DIM FURTHER.

(Louis tears the net from Penelope. He shivers, closing his eyes. Penelope eyes the lights fearfully. The workers freeze.)

LOUIS

No hours on my clock to grieve over him— no hours to keep for myself to weep— no hours to see him one last time, running to the rain and into the white fog— never coming back, a smile with no return.

PENELOPE

Why are you telling me this?

LOUIS

He was you. Your name— his name too— my name— the name of all the ones that got away, the ones that came, the ones that formed right in the middle— the specter haunting our steps in the search for yet more human touch. Fuck— this yearning—

PENELOPE

Louis.

LOUIS

Who is he?

PENELOPE

Louis?

LOUIS

Louis— Louis—

(A clock starts ticking very near. Louis begins chanting his own name, laughing, letting it settle into hysterics, letting it turn into weeping. The ticking continues, speeding up. Louis' sobs become howling cries. The workers re-create his goodbye to the man. Penelope races to Louis. As the ticking crescendos, Louis screams mightily. The ticking ends. Louis is on his knees, eyes wide open. Penelope lets go of him. Louis turns to her. They look at each other, finally seeing the other.)

LOUIS

I got you, didn't I? We met that very day. But how could you know— how could you know I was saying farewell— too. It isn't your fault. It was never your fault I could never move past— that I didn't— couldn't—

(Penelope is on the verge of tears.)

LOUIS

You're the last.

(Penelope nods ferociously, letting herself fall into Louis.)

PENELOPE

And the first.

(The workers cover Louis with the net. They begin to re-enact Penelope's words.)

PENELOPE

It was my mother who knew what was happening before anyone else. I only spoke of her to you once, and it was six months later— right before it happened. She was the first, and I knew it, I recognized the acceptance in her gaze even then. My mother knew her delicacy, and she carried it, even when she knew her world would no longer carry her. She tried to tell me many times how it would end for her, how she saw it end for us, but there was never any listening. So we went on, encountering

our lives as they re-aligned, until they were formless, born and extinguished by the same touch, the same thought. Then I went to visit her, in that colossal room she possessed, the marble hall in the cracks, unkempt but so cherished, her now clearly thinning figure washing away the saltwater, cleansing the dust and dirt that flowed as winds blew past— her own weathers planting themselves on her face— an atmosphere of no regret, only humbled sincerity.

(Penelope sits with her back to Louis.)

PENELOPE

You can sense now what we're heading into— that absent week when you didn't see or hear from me. Because I told you there was an important job for me at home— told you about her. And— oh—the immensities, Louis— the immensities of the woman's work— when she knows her mother is dying. I cooked, to serve her hungry tongue, her favorite ribbons hanging from every inch of those painted walls, told her of you, how much it meant that you were, though days away, only inches apart from my heart. And we laughed, the sound of pleased memory, and forgot. The last morning, dew still dripping from window glass, the orange singe in the clouds—all of it manna from heaven—because it knew, it knew— that very morning she stood balanced on her balcony, and turned to me, the most serene smile in place—and— and—

(Louis moves to hold Penelope. She stays in place, slowly positioning her hands around him.)

PENELOPE

And made coffee. She made the most wonderful coffee. So I watched her make it, grinning all the while, because that hurt less than crying, and because— what else could I do, confronted with this radiance, this being that had shaped me to be ready, to prepare myself when I'd come out of her and take life's invitation. Of course, it was then that it occurred to me. I was no longer seeing her—somehow, the morning had become twilight, had turned to night, had fallen back into sunrise, and I was transfixed, watching her all the times she had looked through me, all the balcony scenes— we were no longer mother and daughter— only the form of moving, only sound— only that which remains—

(Penelope motions her lips shut. She rises and walks to the audience. The workers freeze.)

PENELOPE

With a kiss on the cheek I was back to you. You took me to the garden, and sat me down. Inside of me was this nest of bees, because you were about to propose that we marry at once, seal what we were clearly so intent on finishing.

(Penelope chuckles to herself, ghosting her fingers over her lips. Louis can't bring himself to move.)

PENELOPE

So you proposed, glimmer between the mosses, haloing each flower—the very flower you plucked—now a bookmark. And on what page? The one that kept my secrets for you. You loved me there. We made that garden ours, then I went to bathe, to prepare for my dress rehearsal only hours after. You called out to me, in between my giggles of delight, the comfortable drone of your cat's purring at the window—called out that you'd return as soon as you'd take one more voyage out on the boat. One more.

LOUIS

Oh God.

(The workers join Penelope.)

PENELOPE AND THE WORKERS

Six hours you were gone before we found you, thrashed against the rocks, the boat torn and shredded like your now useless clothes, the stink of a malformed sea all about you. It was my mother's warning, the clairvoyance she always sought now discovering her to be finally right. I gave you two hours, one more than I wanted to, but I stayed peaceful, lying that you were basking in the approaching moonlight. Lying to tame the gnawing bite of horror at finding you dead. At not finding you at all, losing you to the sirens, to the unknown in that horizon.

LOUIS

I was there. You were the first thing I saw when my eyes opened.

PENELOPE

I took that stony road to where the surf crashed most beautifully, sure I would find you there, waiting for me, as though the shore was our cottage, and I was finally home.

(The waves return. Penelope searches for Louis's face under the net. It falls away from him. The workers retreat.)

LOUIS

I rode the cot on the ambulance, nothing but yellow lights, mute— amazed by your beauty, by the animal you were caging—

PENELOPE

I thought you were leaving me even then. So I asked you to fight, whispering too close to one of your ears, pressing onto my own knees as I knelt, to keep from shouting, all the while the ambulance ran up the hill to the hospital. It wasn't much better there, the doctor befuddled by your loss of blood, seeing none, the only discernible mark a piercing on your flesh, no entry or exit wound— nothing but a hollowed river on your chest. I sat in the cafeteria. I sat so long that it wasn't until the doctor's footsteps approached that I saw— it had begun to snow.

LOUIS

The snow—I saw it from my window— yards away from you— little pieces of crystals— but there was no cold.

PENELOPE

The flakes fell down, the doctor sitting, and even I, someone who had never learned the signs, knew something had permanently broken. The cold came after.

(Penelope turns to Louis.)

LOUIS

I lost my memory.

LIGHTS DIM FURTHER STILL.

(Louis cowers. Penelope walks to him. The workers hold onto each other.)

PENELOPE

I confess— whatever the doctor said after that, I never heard. The riddle of your wounds remained so, of that I'm sure. An imprint of what the world was about to do to all of us. And that's how it began, as I took my leave upon hearing his news, and stepped into the first snow of the season, now relocated to the middle of July. And the cold— no speaking about that cold.

(The workers embrace tightly, letting their bodies move apart imperceptibly.)

PENELOPE

I took a cab back to your home, complete night now, the only light from the droplets of snow, lingering, as they melted on the still too-hot pavement. I rushed in and sealed all the windows, all the doors, locked myself in. A prison.

LOUIS

Then what? What did you—

(Penelope lets out a scream. She does not stop until her voice drowns itself. Until she begins to yowl. The workers open their mouths in a silent scream. A beat. Penelope gathers her breath.)

PENELOPE

I went to sleep.

(Louis laughs, despite himself. He sits down. Penelope joins him.)

PENELOPE

The next morning, the left side of my body was paralyzed. I lay in bed, willing it to charge, to battle it out amongst itself, but to let me move, move back to you, to where you were— helpless, alone— a new man. I think my own bones took pity on me, the muscles twisting around their own reluctances. It was inevitable, that when I entered your little cupboard of a room, looked into the eyes of your nurses, of that damned doctor— what little there was to be done had already been done. So I begged the doctor to let me take you with me that very morning, and see to it you were tended and mended— but by me. That very night I told everyone else to leave us alone, to go home. I wanted it to be you and me— waiting for the world to claim us.

LOUIS

Six months. That's how long I lasted.

PENELOPE

I did what I could. But I could only get as far as you shouting my name before you'd black out and the scene would repeat itself.

LOUIS

We've been at this—this very scene—

PENELOPE

Too long.

LOUIS

Not long enough, if this is the first time you've gotten me to remember anything.

PENELOPE

It won't last long.

LOUIS

Why?

PENELOPE

Because it's in your nature. Because everyone forgets when they let go.

LOUIS

Let go of what?

PENELOPE

Of you.

LOUIS

What are you saying?

(The workers exhale loudly.)

PENELOPE

When I heard you scream my name—

THE WORKERS

Penelope!!!

PENELOPE

The clouds just fell apart. A hundred miles away, my mother took her final intake of breath, and fell asleep. I wasn't there— but I didn't have to be— to see the water crashing into her, breaking through the walls, shattering glass and marble, all evidence of her. A hurricane had touched the earth the split instant you floated above the trees, and how I wish I could have witnessed it, and bear all of its power— I needed it, when the proof of your surrender was clear all over the garden. This time the wound was real— no strange magic to turn you back— to save you. To put together your broken body twitching against the slabs of rock.

LOUIS

Do you blame me?

PENELOPE

I summoned you, somewhere between the real and imagined you— to release you. To finish what we started.

(beat)

Yes, I blame you. No, I forgive you.

LOUIS

There isn't— anything I can say. Or do. Is there?

(She smiles very sadly, but proudly.)

PENELOPE

Turn the page, Louis. Open the book. Look at me.

LOUIS

To where?

PENELOPE

You know. You've always known, because you've lived in me. But now— well—

(Louis opens his book to the page marked by the amaranthine. A bell

begins to toll.)

PENELOPE

I'll be seeing you soon. I've waited, so long, but it's almost done. I'm almost ready. All the faces of love are coming back to me—and I've nothing left to lose.

LOUIS

I'm so sorry I remembered too late. I'm so sorry— so sorry— it's us— it's never been anyone else. And these— they're here for me— they aren't here for the things. Our home— our home—

(The workers chant his words very quietly to each other.)

PENELOPE

In this hour, I'm thankful that I kept you in me this long. Are you ready?

LOUIS

I see— really see—

TO BE CONTINUED (IN PART III).

