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## Lovers' Theme

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## *Lovers' Theme*

**I**'m a cell phone. That's what I told myself as I waited for Anna Conda to welcome me to the stage of The Cinch, a Polk Street gay bar in San Francisco. My heart beat against a pink cardboard flip-phone costume made by my close friend Kate. I prepared to turn my face, a mask of thick foundation, painted lips, and arched, drawn-in eyebrows, all framed by a wavy blonde wig, upon the crowd. (Through a hole in the giant flip phone's screen, I mean. Flip phone prototype: Motorola Razr. This was 2007.)

*I'm a cell phone.* As soon as Anna Conda called my name—my then drag name, Extremity—I'd climb the steps, a giant pink ladyphone in black Payless heels, ready to lip-synch a carefully selected medley of ringtones.

"Please give it up for Extremities!"

Amidst whooping, laughter, and applause, I heard Kate's voice call, "It's *Extremity!*" The stage lights glared down on me, and I carried myself with as much stylized feminine dignity as a bedazzled and spray-painted suit of cardboard allowed. The music came on—a loud, cheap-sounding, ringtone rendition of Britney Spears's "Baby One More Time," all synthesized bleeps and squawks meant to emulate the human voice. I opened and closed my mouth along with the tones, calling to mind, I hoped, a ventriloquist's dummy.

*"Meep meep meep meep...meep meep meep meep..."*

The people who attended drag shows in San Francisco generally ate this kind of thing up—part of the reason Kate and I wanted to put together the number. To my knowledge, no one at any of the drag nights had yet performed as a cell phone—surprising, actually—and this novelty provided motivation enough for me to memorize the sequence of ringtone yaps, to roll on pantyhose and affix false lashes to real. Many, many queens went to much, much further lengths for their drag numbers, putting hours into elaborate looks and choreography that graced the stage for three minutes at a time. (I once watched, agog, five people in courtly eighteenth-century European dress—powdered wigs, panniered dresses, deep décolletage—on a tiny stage at The Stud, performing a choreographed number to "Rock Me Amadeus," from the Mozart biopic *Amadeus*. "Ooh! Rock me Amadeus!") Kate and I more often threw things together for conceptual laughs. When the Cinch barflies started

to sing along, though, happily providing the vocals to a ringtone version of TLC's "Waterfalls," life felt, for the fleeting moment, simple—perfect.

And performing as a concept suited my anxieties better than trying to adopt a persuasive drag persona. This became more apparent when, after leaving the stage to nourishing applause, I discarded my phone costume. Made up, bewigged, and wrapped in a length of plain pink fabric, I saw my editor from the local newsweekly at the bar. I freelanced for her often, and we ran into one another out on the town often (in fact, I'd invited her), but this was the first time she'd seen me in drag.

"You killed!" she said, laughing.

"Hey, thanks," I said. "I mean, *thanks, honey.*" *How does a real drag queen act?* I thought. *How should a drag queen be?* Still on a giddy stage high, the absence of a protective cell-phone casing also left me exposed, like a turtle pulled from its shell, pancaked with makeup, and let loose in a crowded gay bar. Everyone needs a concept to hide behind from time to time.

"You look beautiful," said my editor. "Oh! You need a drink."

Why did the dissonance throw me? I often waded into the strange waters between my strongest competing social impulses: one, to compartmentalize people ruthlessly; the other, to mix the compartmentalized with anarchic disregard, like a manic child abusing distinct ovals of paint, swirling green and red and blue into muddy blurs. Being thrown usually appealed to me: I wanted to see what happened when the colors kissed and started to bleed into one another. If only one of my half brothers would drop by, along with the elementary school teacher who long ago encouraged my artistic leanings, along with the butch, menthol-smoking pool player I was then sleeping with and who remained unknown to my other ruthlessly compartmentalized friends!

Needless to say, this kind of thinking complicates the notion of a unified or consistent social identity. It does make for a fun party, if you have your vulnerably unmasked, half-drunk-and-torn-between-personae party identity on. I knew that I could never hack it as a true, long-term drag queen, not when the inner workings of my own mind occupied me to such an extent that I never learned how to do my own makeup. (Kate did it for me, usually.) I tucked a strand of synthetic hair behind my ear. I smiled, sipped nerve-soothing scotch—through a straw, so as not to imperil my lipstick—and chatted with my editor.

Soon recollected, I went mingling, smoking with the sissies, the beefy bears, the indie queers with their trim little mustaches and their skinny arms sleeved in tattoos. After banter and laughter and a dozen farewell air-kisses, Kate drove me to my apartment in Duboce Triangle. There

I washed the makeup from my face with baby oil, watched the whole mess run down the drain while I stood naked in the shower, humming a ringtone. Later still, Kate fell in love with a middle school science teacher; my editor became my friend; the cell phone costume sat gathering dust somewhere; and the order of the songs it once called to mind faded from my memory.

A little less than two years earlier, at twenty-three, the idea of becoming a real reporter, an actual journalist, took hold of me. I'd managed to support myself by freelancing for a couple of years in Portland, Oregon, churning out sophomoric arts coverage, business-to-business ad copy, and the occasional informational brochure for a master-planned suburban housing community. On the road to the Bay with my oldest friend, Rachel (a lesbian driving a U-Haul truck to Berkeley, where we *both* planned to live with her girlfriend in a one-bedroom apartment; no further comment), I penned a lofty, insipid review of a book commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Even then, writing in my notebook as Rachel drove us down the Pacific Highway, I hated the lofty and insipid style I brought to the task. *I'll work through this*, I thought. *I'll work through this lofty and insipid style, into something more perfect*. At the very least, I considered, writing in a speeding U-Haul showed commitment to my ambitions. Not even lesbian relocation could stop me from sullyng significant poetry with my posturing and imperfect opinion, to the tune of ten cents per word.

It took me a few months, but soon I landed two part-time day jobs, plus a freelancing arrangement with one of the local newsweeklies, plus an editorial internship in the San Francisco offices of the *Onion* (specifically, for the local edition of their non-satirical arts and entertainment division, the *A.V. Club*). I'd see those offices shuttered before long, but in the meantime a marvelous opportunity presented itself: to make zero money while establishing myself as a writer of frivolous local newspaper articles. Doomsday prophecies about the death of print media hung over the city like one of its famous fogs, but my attitude remained "Why worry about what's to be, when I'm reporting on a HoneyBaked Ham storefront for our special print-only Christmas pull-out now?"

A paid editorial staff of one managed the San Francisco edition of the *A.V. Club*: a harried but genial music writer named Marc. Marc toiled all day in a private office, where precarious towers of CD jewel cases and an iMac that looked like a child's toy covered every inch of space on his desk. His voice, pinched with pressure but still enthusiastic, met me from behind this barricade. "Hey! What's up? What's goin' on?" He

often kept his eyes on the computer screen as he greeted me, the white light from the word processor reflected in his glasses.

Out on the sales floor, where another intern and I typically found a desk at which to work, a half-dozen gregarious sales reps passed their days in cold calls and follow-ups. I heard them repeatedly explain to potential ad clients that the *A.V. Club* was “like *The Daily Show*.” Their comparisons then unfurled into an optimistic pitch for this doomed local enterprise. In their slightly stagey voices I heard the need for a drink grow more urgent over the course of the day. I loved the sales staff. They were sociable and, by and large, alcoholics—so different from editorial people like me, who were more likely to be unsociable alcoholics.

A twenty-one-year-old girl named Alix held the other intern position when I started. She showed up late with a consistency otherwise absent from her work life, having usually stayed out all night drinking or snorting bad Bay Area cocaine off a video artist’s skinny jeans at a Crystal Castles show, or whatever it was she felt compelled to report to me.

“Last night, me and this guy I’m kind of seeing experimented with *knife play*,” she once said, trying to provoke me while I fact-checked the music calendar. Her short hair and her malnourished upper body, the latter wrapped in a Warholish striped shirt, stayed almost motionless as she boasted of her exploits, an endless game of conversational chicken ruling her body language. *How far*, her whole person seemed to ask, *how far can I push these reports of my own edginess before you disapprove of me?* “We took turns holding a switchblade to each other’s throats while we made out. At one point he ran it along my inner thigh—I couldn’t believe how hot it was.” I laughed, though she saw little humor in this retelling. “I had multiple orgasms,” she added, gravely.

Alix’s refusal to work amused me, though it came to perturb Marc. My own amusement, too, turned to wariness when, several weeks in, she took to looking up from her computer and saying, apropos of nothing, “If only I were a handsome, funny gay man like you. Maybe then I could succeed.” Her tone fuzzed the line between compliment and sinister threat, as though weighted with a serious consideration of how to become me. Perhaps through a simple, edgy ceremony involving knife play, candles, and a lock of my beautiful, beautiful hair.

I didn’t have to worry long, because Alix soon disappeared. Her successor, a pretty Texas transplant, rented her own apartment in Lower Pac Heights, flush with the advantages of your usual heir to a fortune amassed through one’s father’s patenting and manufacturing a unique grapeseed-based skin-care formula.

“Grapeseed,” I said when I heard this, in a reverent whisper.

Though the Texan never vocalized a longing to steal my identity, now and then she did turn to me and utter some urgent, sage piece of skin-care advice, an Anti-Aging Oracle at Delphi. “Do *not* exfoliate your face every day—every few days will suffice,” she’d say, or, “It’s best to wash your face at night and moisturize right before you go to sleep.”

One day, while I sat wondering whether I exfoliated my face too often in life, Marc emerged from his office and onto the sales floor, slapping his hands against his thighs like a speed-metal drummer. He approached the intern desk. “Hey!” he said to me. “What’s goin’ on? Do you want to write a feature about this drag queen pageant?”

The assignment: to report on the Trannyshack Pageant, by then a San Francisco drag institution just over ten years old. I’d spent a Tuesday night or two at The Stud, the bar south of Market where Trannyshack drew a stalwart crowd most weeks. What I saw there little resembled what I thought of as drag: nobody paid homage to Barbra Streisand or Gloria Gaynor, but plenty of queens whirled, dervish-like, to Siouxsie Sioux, or channeled the expansive sensuality of a Bjork tune, or threw raw meat at the audience.

I accepted the assignment.

And then, of course, I took the assignment too far. Mistaking the Trannyshack Pageant for an opportunity to do some serious investigative reporting, I turned what Marc imagined as a light, local-color piece into an all-consuming task. After waking up at dawn to work one of my part-time jobs, by noon I’d be barreling down Polk on my bike, en route to watch old pageant footage with an eminent queen in her rent-controlled Tenderloin apartment. I scheduled phone interviews with pageant judges in other cities, checked out books and DVDs about drag from the library, and generally did all the secondary-source reporting possible, short of tracking down the contestants’ mothers.

This kind of enthusiasm falls short of remarkable, in some ways—you could hardly pick the finished piece out of a lineup. The reporter’s job remains, as ever, reporting on things. Something in my eagerness, though, gives me pause now. Excess appeared not in the probing nature of my questions, but in the compulsive number. Anxious, I ran from one end of the field to the other, waving my tape recorder; beneath each interview question—“How did your involvement with Trannyshack begin?” “How do you make your breasts?”—lurked a ghostly second question: “And where do I fit into all of this?” I carried on, never knowing when to stop, as nothing close to a satisfying answer to this second question ever arrived. Good thing for deadlines; if I tested the lengths

of my curiosity, I might've found myself—I soon would anyway—entering terrain where the personal and the journalistic overlapped, kissed, bled into one another, became one. Though I remained unaware of it then, the prospect of writing my way into something until its scenery surrounded me and became the new, known, intense setting of my life fed further fascination. A better sense of where I stood in relationship to reality, of who I was, and of what it meant to be fully alive, must surely await me beyond the next question, and the next.

It was a lot to ask of newsprint, a lot to ask of wigs, makeup, stage magic.

After writing about the pageant, I sniffed out more stories on the “drag beat”—more opportunities for breathless and enthused reporting. Behind the curtain of mundane life teemed this alternate universe, peopled by kings and queens and other mad royalty, all intent on transforming themselves, amusing themselves, joining in a dramatic, raunchy, playful, poised, serious catharsis. The drag performer, filmmaker, and “scream queen” Peaches Christ held midnight movie screenings at one of the many independent theaters then threatened with extinction, staging large *Showgirls* stage tributes. Heklina, the hostess of Trannyshack who took her name from the Icelandic volcano Hekla, put on theatrical drag reenactments of *Golden Girls* episodes. At the height of my mania, I attended over four drag events every week. Juanita More got me stoned at The Stud by lighting a gargantuan spliff and hotboxing the packed bar during her Erykah Badu lip sync. Mercy Fuque, in comic, dejected loneliness, ate a pint of ice cream onstage to Blondie’s “Sunday Girl.” Stoned or sober, I dreamed of writing a takeoff on Vasari’s *Lives of the Artists* called *Lives of the Drag Queens*. The list of names alone suggested a dazzling table of contents: Raya Light, Renttecca, Putanesca, Kiddie, Glamamore, Falsetta Knockers, Holy McGrail, Jupiter, Suppositori Spelling, Fauxnique, Precious Moments.

Then, a class of performers called “faux queens” came into view. Faux queen, by one definition, meant a biological woman who dressed up as a drag queen—a woman performing as a man performing as a woman (or whatever—distinct gender identities at any one of these stages often melted in the extravagant fires of persona and performance). This idea, not just once but twice removed from conventional reality, pleased me and spurred my desire to taste every variety of blended, blurred, gem-bright identity.

Kate, with whom I later worked on the cell phone bit, was the first faux queen I met. Recently, Kate and I reunited at a dinner party in

San Francisco. By then I hadn't seen a drag performance in at least two years, and lived in the Midwest. Kate, who still performed often, now worked as a flight attendant as well. The dinner party took place on Potrero Hill, at the home of the former newsweekly editor who saw me the night I performed as a cell phone. This gathering was all that remained of my brief return visit to San Francisco, and the thought of leaving again saddened me. Aside from my editor-turned-friend and her husband, I had visited few former drag-nightlife acquaintances; branded by time and distance, my past and my present now fell into separate, compartmentalized realities. My past, too, appeared to me, from this removed and relatively barren hilltop of the present, more fun in every way. The years had seen Kate and me, though still possessed of a delightful shared history, drift apart. And so, shortly after she showed up to the party, I grilled her about her new life as a flight attendant.

"What's it like?" I asked. "How long are your shifts? Where do you fly? When do you sleep? Do passengers behave differently depending on the route? Have you seen anything terrible happen?" I leaned forward on the couch, cradling a glass of wine in my hand, careful not to spill it on my khakis.

Kate took most any opportunity to share a lurid or absurd anecdote, possessed by her own searching curiosity, a curiosity I thought of as somewhat more zany than mine, less preoccupied with loss, less melancholic. And so she met my curiosity with familiar enthusiasm, regaling me with tales of in-flight rudeness, vomit, and excrement. "I heard that one time," she said, "a huge, drunk Samoan guy got on the plane, puked all over himself, the ceiling, his seatmates, and, somehow, the person *behind* him, then immediately passed out for the duration of the flight."

"Oh my God," I said.

"The daytime flight attendants tend to be more Botoxed and made up," she said. "They want to marry pilots. The overnight ones, like me, are more likely to be strange—pale, vampiric." She went on to tell me about a daytime flight attendant, the paramour of a married pilot, who flaunted the tale of a pregnancy test she had taken at the pilot's house and left on top of the garbage. "The pilot called his wife. He told her he had left some rotten meat in the trash, and asked if she could take it out."

I brought my hand to my face in horror, covering my open mouth. The anecdote further poisoned my faith in humanity, meanwhile shoring up my awe. Priceless, in other words. But a pang of regret over Kate's life and mine forking off in these different directions crept in: I wanted her to keep telling stories, to put on Scheherazade drag, to postpone

our return to the general present, where we crossed paths with waning frequency.

When I first met her, Kate was in art school. Her interest in performance had drawn her out to the drag clubs, and at the time, she hoped to be adopted and mentored by an established faux queen. Her art preoccupations, however, surpassed typical gender-bending, embracing insect behavior, abjection, “femaleness and the body,” and so forth. I once helped her revise a personal artist’s statement about transmogrification, which included the lines “I am deeply drawn to things that make no logical sense to me” and “I want to find the deepest, dirtiest point within me and expose it.” Though she often found classically draggy ways of turning herself into an absurd, inside-out exaggeration of femaleness, she would just as soon perform, under the name Kegel Kater, as a “drag praying mantis” ripping the head off its mate, or as a kind of hoofed, half-drag queen, half-pony creature in a short art film. Her stage name referenced the pelvic floor exercises named after the gynecologist Arnold Kegel; at art school she had somehow combined Kegel exercises and music in a performance project. I assume she got an A.

With Kate’s help, I continued to smear the divide between reporting on drag and being in it. My journalistic objectivity came into question the moment I agreed to play Kate’s silent lesbian love interest in a mash-up of Jill Sobule’s 1995 music video “I Kissed a Girl” and the then-trending, filthy Internet porn phenomenon, “2 Girls 1 Cup.” Kate sampled the latter’s delicate piano music (“Lovers’ Theme” by Hervé Roy) for an extended, Sobule-sullyng, messy, scatological stage freak-out involving a tub of soft-serve chocolate ice cream. Later, we performed a duet at Trannyshack, my queeny Burt Reynolds to her butched-up Dolly Parton, lip-synching the wrong-gendered parts to “Sneakin’ Around” from *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*.

“I like fancy, frilly things,” I sang, “*high-heeled shoes and diamond rings...*”

When, in the process of attempting to report on a Puerto Rican drag-queen-slash-photographer’s book of high-artifice, Pierre et Gilles–esque shots of local drag personalities, I ended up sleeping with him instead, Kate became my primary confidante.

“You *what?*” she said.

“He says ‘dude’ a lot,” I said.

And though I refrained from writing about the photography project out of a sense of journalistic ethics, at that point the phrase “drag-embedded,” once used by Marc to describe my self-made reporter’s beat, took on new meaning. Entangled and enraptured, I passed evenings drinking coffee with queens at all-night diners, or with a pocketful of

dollars to hand to queens walking the narrow aisle at Aunt Charlie's in the Tenderloin, audibly rasping their lip syncs below the pulse of the music. (“Do you be-lieeve in life after love? I can feel some-thing in-side my-seeelff..”) That, or I rolled a joint and rented a stack of films that one queer eminence or another said I simply *must* see—*The Women, Eyes of Laura Mars, Mahogany*. (The queen Glamamore, a friend and mentor to many, gave me the name Extremity, both a buried reference to the latter film and a simultaneous read of my status in relation to the community and the nature of my curiosity and actions—at the edge of things, drawn to extremes.) Red-eyed, dizzy, or trembling with caffeinated energy, I always stayed up an hour or two more, dashing off some silly notice for one of the papers.

All of that operated from a distance the night of the dinner party. I grew more melancholy the more I refilled my wine glass, ignoring the flavor of the wine, which had likely been noted and commented upon at some point during that easy, casual, altogether sane gathering; I hastened to numb myself. Hours earlier, my former editor and I had gabbed through the steps of preparing Flemish carbonnade flamande together, chopping onions, browning beef, conjuring a state of warm, happy security. What crisis of time awaited me now? What, now that the heady past lived on in words and wisps of memory alone (and maybe a few videos online)?

Kate and I coming up with some stupid number together: some of the most satisfying moments of those earlier years lived there. At our best, giddy collaboration cemented our bond. One night, I visited Kate at her apartment in the Richmond and found her putting on Hillary Clinton drag in a slowly mounting panic. Someone had asked her to do a Hillary number hot on the heels of Obama's primary win, but now, none of her ideas satisfied her. None of the songs, none of the lyrics she earlier thought right for the occasion would suffice. A tense silence gripped the apartment. Kate, frustrated, fine-tuned her makeup at her vanity, moving her eyes between a photo of Hillary Clinton and her own face in the mirror.

“I have an idea,” I said. “Look up *Carmina Burana* on YouTube—the ‘O Fortuna’ part.”

Kate said nothing, but turned to her computer. She found and played a version of “O Fortuna.”

“You could use this,” I said. The choir chanted the first lines in dramatic, ominous Latin. I didn't know the meaning of the words then:

*O Fortuna*

*O Fortune*

<i>velut luna</i>	<i>like the moon</i>
<i>statu variabilis,</i>	<i>you are changeable,</i>
<i>semper crescis</i>	<i>ever waxing</i>
<i>aut decrescis;</i>	<i>and waning;</i>
<i>vita detestabilis</i>	<i>hateful life</i>
<i>nunc obdurat</i>	<i>first oppresses</i>
<i>et tunc curat</i>	<i>and then soothes</i>
<i>ludo mentis aciem,</i>	<i>as fancy takes it;</i>
<i>egestatem,</i>	<i>poverty</i>
<i>potestatem</i>	<i>and power</i>
<i>dissolvit ut glaciem.</i>	<i>it melts them like ice</i>

“During this part, you just stand there at the front of the stage,” I said, “and keep a frozen smile on your face. You’re trying to stay positive, very political—smiling, smiling, playing the good loser.”

The choir chanted the second passage:

<i>Sors immanis</i>	<i>Fate—monstrous</i>
<i>et inanis,</i>	<i>and empty,</i>
<i>rota tu volubilis,</i>	<i>you whirling wheel,</i>
<i>status malus,</i>	<i>you are malevolent,</i>
<i>vana salus</i>	<i>well-being is vain</i>
<i>semper dissolubilis,</i>	<i>and always fades to nothing,</i>
<i>obumbrata</i>	<i>shadowed</i>
<i>et velata</i>	<i>and veiled</i>
<i>michi quoque niteris;</i>	<i>you plague me too;</i>
<i>nunc per ludum</i>	<i>now through the game</i>
<i>dorsum nudum</i>	<i>I bring my bare back</i>
<i>fero tui sceleris.</i>	<i>to your villainy.</i>

“Now during this second part, you’re still keeping a brave face, but you’re struggling. Your poise cracks—you find it’s harder and harder to conceal your anger and disappointment.” From the slight smile on Kate’s face, which looked passably like Hillary Clinton’s, I could see my idea gaining hold.

As the horns and timpani came in and the choir rushed back with more violence on the line, “*Sors salutis!*” (“*Fate is against me!*”), I ran around the hall, thrashed my arms, threw myself against the wall, and pantomimed crazed despair. The orchestra cymbals crashed, the choir’s lament crescendoed. “And now!” I cried. “Now’s the part where you just go fucking nuts, you freak out, you can’t contain your fury—the

injustice of it all! Your face—terror! You run around the club, grabbing people in the audience, screaming, ‘No! No-o-o! It should’ve been me! It should’ve been me!’”

The two of us broke down laughing. I’d fallen onto my knees, my arms raised to heaven, and now made my way forward with small, pathetic movements over the carpeted floor.

<i>quod per sortem</i>	<i>since Fate</i>
<i>sternit fortem,</i>	<i>strikes down the strong man,</i>
<i>mecum omnes plangite!</i>	<i>everyone weep with me!</i>

“Here you fall on your knees,” I said.

I suppose a fair amount of progress toward achieving what I wanted hung over me the night of the dinner party. In the years between lip-synching ringtones and cooking carbonnade flamande, I amassed a decent number of soft-journalistic reporting clips—though today I look back on almost every one of them not with pride but with embarrassment and a wish to write new things (like this) in order to blur out the old. One day, even this essay, less than perfect, may provoke the same desire, and so on unto the end, when I leave behind me a trail of futile attempts as evidence that I lived—in places, among people, all of us through the storm of time. (When I was a boy, my mother discovered me in my room with a pencil and a stack of paper, upon many sheets of which she saw circles in my childish hand. “What are you doing?” she asked. “I’m trying to draw a perfect circle,” I said, apparently in a state of frustration. How could she know she had witnessed me at the birth of a life’s task, a task that would only become more impossible as my materials, from a pencil to my life itself and the memory of it, gained a more ephemeral quality? With a pencil or a brush I may conceivably draw a perfect circle, as Vasari, in his *Lives of the Artists*, tells us Giotto did, in red paint; with my life itself and the memory of it I may go on trying, though the materials appear to me, relative to graphite or paint, essentially vulnerable, the circles I manage with them forever disintegrating, the task of redrawing absurd in its ever-cyclical demand.) I’d gone to work, briefly, as a fact-checking editorial fellow at *Mother Jones*, a magazine of serious investigative reporting to which I contributed little seriousness. The night of the dinner party saw me mere months away from completing an advanced degree in creative writing, another field in which I failed to muster much in the way of seriousness, but which at least looked more kindly upon futile attempts.

That's the CV version, anyway. On Potrero Hill, the wine bottles turned translucent with emptiness, the casserole soaked in the sink, and we slipped the records back into their sleeves. We extinguished the night's last cigarettes and prepared for imminent departures. "Good-bye," I said to Kate, who stood at the door with her bright blue motorcycle jacket on, smiling, her helmet tucked in the crook of her arm. "It was so good to see you."

Then time left me a man on a couch with too much wine in his veins. The room, warmed by soft, dim lamplight, tilted if I moved too suddenly; if I moved too suddenly, I became a man walking the cabin of a ship in seesaw. In the valleys of the city below me, the ghosts of a newspaper office stirred: Marc with his gleaming glasses, Alix with her striped shirts and knives, the sales team cold-calling against the inevitable. Elsewhere the Texan moisturized her face before bed, protecting it from the slow ravages of sleep. Trannyshack's twelve-year run at The Stud had ended; new drag clubs sprouted up, new queens lip-synching new songs. Who stood witness? Who, reckless, shared the photographer's bed, drawn to breathe in the sharp air of the present at the price of stale professionalism? Somebody handsome, I hoped, and sweet—not a writer, who would write about it later, saying, when asked what he was doing, "I'm trying to draw a perfect circle"—lofty, insipid. What sweet friendships bloomed? The pool player, a crushed pack of menthols in his breast pocket, leaned over his cue, calculating, taking aim.

I wouldn't sleep well that night. Aside from the wine, insomnia visits me often, keeps me up with its endless questions. *Where do I fit into all this?* The need to catch a plane in the morning added to my worry. Thinking of the plane led me to think of Kate. How many planes would fly before we met again? What new stories would we have to give, evidence of lives once entwined inside a circle, now divided in the wide world beyond? This repetitive fortune began to provoke my most unphilosophical hatred. *Sors salutis!* Then I recalled, with great amusement and from my sleepless hold on the couch, one of Kate's latest work anecdotes:

The flight in question had already begun. The plane had already sped down the runway, achieved liftoff, and carried through with its ascent. At cruising altitude, a woman in one of the window seats pressed the call button. A flight attendant made his way down the aisle to see what the woman wanted. When he got there, the woman turned to him, confused. She had been staring out the window, fooled by the solid white of the clouds.

"Excuse me," she said. "Are we moving?"