Kathryn Ungerer

Harmony

Justin is thin and taller than most men, steering his truck through the forest. He thinks he has been following this road since a time before he was born: then on either side grasslands floated in and out of focus and beasts, stationary, rotated their eyes like heavenly bodies in single, immense sockets, following his passage.

Now he sees his wife, rooted to the roadside, her mouth opening. He has forgotten how to stop the truck. Once upon a time Justin went to a dance on a summer night. A red-haired woman in a white dress walked toward him across the splintering pavilion floor. She was not to be trusted. Later they married and she bore him no children: her skin peeled completely away each summer until he caressed a bone, investigating marrow, learning the feel of his own mortality by heart. "Father" she called him, within the cat's hearing.

Justin smiles, imagining her in the hospital, a bandage over one eye, propped up on pillows, barely tolerating the nurse's compassion. "How do you feel?" he asked earlier, handing over a box of Turkish Paste. "What do you think," she replied. "How would you feel if your son threw a block at you and hit you in the eye?"

Justin's wife studied early childhood development at a Catholic college in Rutland. At that time she was overweight and clumsy, eating at the table with the Sisters, wearing a large silver-plated rosary around her neck. Justin discovered a shoebox full of photographs soon after they were married. "Who is this?" he asked, pointing at a picture of his wife in an enormous Our Mother of Consolation sweat-shirt. "What a blimp," he added, chuckling. She would not speak to him for a week after that, nor would she explain the reason for her silence, swatting at his morning eggs with her spatula until the yolks ran over and congealed into a pale yellow mat, reminding Justin of the rubberized vomit his brother Miles used to station in various parts of their house, his favorite being on their mother's pillow.

Later, staring at the photograph, Justin was able to make out within pockets of fat his wife's narrow gray eyes, the surprised

upward tilt of her brows. He apologized obliquely, dragging the cat up onto his lap, a gesture for which neither he nor the cat was prepared, having lived out their lives together in a mutual tolerance born of dislike. "Sambo," he said. The cat refused to look him in the eye. "Your mother is mad at me. Do you think you could have a word or two with her and let her know how sorry I am?" The cat plunged claws of amazing sharpness through Justin's corduroy pantleg and into his thigh, as across the room his wife floored the treadle foot of her sewing machine, ejecting both herself and yards of flowered cotton through the open window and into orbit.

Thus he sees her now. She floats a little ways above the treetops, her arms outstretched, small tongues of flame lapping about her face where once she had hair. And her eyes: they are gone, replaced by the blank, indifferent stare of empty space.

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Rodney Benware's wife is named Bette, after Bette Davis, although she is short and dark, plagued by unwanted facial hair and a talent for benevolent dismay at all the wrong moments. "Ah!" she moans, presented with a photograph of a neighbor's firstborn. "The poor little thing." Thus Rodney, inching towards her under the sheets, encounters the heady dialectic of human passion and despair. But he is not home tonight. Bette stands at the livingroom window, watching for the lights of his car along the Groton Road. Her three children are in the upstairs bedroom, their six dark eyes all staring upwards at the sheetrock ceiling, waiting. They are oblivious to the trees, a cruel and indifferent language just out of earshot, and they do not understand that the soft hiss and rattle which floats up to them from the first floor is their mother's gesture of refusal, sliding the drapes shut on their tracks, turning her back on their father's slow progress towards the house, as well as on that of the forest, fir and pine unclenching their roots, drawing closer every night.

So Bette does not see the falling star which Justin has momentarily mistaken for his wife, nor does she mistake the sound of his tire blowing out for a gunshot. Her head is inside the refrigerator, her brain in its porcelain pan humming in unison with the refrigerator's invisible, dust-clogged motor.

"Macaroni," she says, "beets, sweet potatoes," pleased by her ability to identify the contents of all the plastic containers without removing their lids.

Bette and Rodney have lived in Lutins Mill since before the dawn of time. Then there were no trees, only immense, leathery ferns filling the yellow tangible air with spores. In the mud bones gathered: the disks of the spine strung together into two separate chains which tangled momentarily on a green plaid couch in Bette's parents' livingroom. It was a shot-gun wedding, only polite, Bette's father poking a ball point pen in Rodney's face, reiterating his concern for decency.

"She's a good girl," he said. "You remember that."

Rodney put his arm around Bette's shoulders and memorized forever the chaste sound of her nose blowing into a white handkerchief, as all the while tiny floral clouds danced by the picture window, detached untimely from the heartless blue sky. He sighed. He really believed he loved her.

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The truck sits, canted over to one side, its headlights illuminating a stretch of dirt road, an animal running, a clump of violets, a mailbox. Justin prays for delivery from this routine disaster, believing himself, his own black heart, to be the cause; helplessly he stands assessing the weight of the truck, the size of the tires, the muscles lurking in his body which he imagines as stringy things, unravelling.

"Only an idiot would drive the Groton Road at night," said his wife, switching channels on the television set, jabbing at the remote control box provided her by the nurse, who filled the doorway with white hostility: cloth, face and hair. A blue baseball diamond gave way to an ardent newscaster with face of green.

"What if the truck breaks down?" asked Justin's wife. She stared with loving concentration at the screen.

"It won't," said Justin.

Now he addresses the truck, its teeth eternally bared. "I've got to call a goddamn garage," he says and kicks at the bumper, just to the left of a sticker gummed on by the previous owner, which he has never had the nerve to remove. "We found Lost River," it says.

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When Bette Benware peers through the livingroom window she sees a praying mantis on her porch, its spiney foreleg pressed against the doorbell. She switches on the porch light and looks again: it is a young man, maybe thirty, with the blank, passionate

stare of one recently turned to stone.

"What do you want?" she yells.

Justin sees two eyes floating in the door's fanlight, two foci in a hemisphere, a condition for which geometry provides no solution. This is a person without a heart, he thinks, having been taught by his wife to imagine that organ as a small, dense mass, a neutron star consuming day by day all surrounding flesh and finally the house, the landscape, the world.

"My truck broke down," he says. "I need to use your phone."

She opens the door. "Sorry," she says, extending her hand, where a single pearl set in silver waits like an egg in a nest of soft dark hair. The hair runs up her forearm and disappears beneath the partly rolled sleeve of her red blouse. "My husband Rodney," she smiles. "He told me never to open the door to strangers."

"Sure," says Justin overwhelmed by her smile: the smile of a lesser deity surveying a green and fulsome landscape. He thinks, this is a woman who smiles into mirrors, who smiles as she brushes her teeth.

"The phone's in the kitchen," sings Bette, leading the way. Her red shirt hangs out over a pair of checkered slacks and Justin can see a swollen place at the nape of her neck: a black-fly bite or a boil. He is a man of few passions yet he longs to kiss that small pink lump, draw from it the poison, which if not checked soon, will shortly coat over the entire world, silver, ecstatic.

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Once upon a time a man held a woman in his arms. She had orange hair and was the youngest of three daughters: had he wooed her properly she might have provided him with a kingdom, a son, immortality. They might have posed in stiff golden robes at the edge of the world and called softly into the darkness *Lucifer,* taming that brilliant taloned beast with their own goodness. He might have curled at their feet, eaten from their hands.

But the woman was unruly and the man cautious. He read to her from books about the nature of love. "The sea," he said, his foot planted on the power mower as on recently conquered territory, "is greedy."

The woman watched flies settle on his forearm. "Who says?" she asked.

The man smiled, the same smile God hung upon the firmament the day he made Job's acquaintance. "That's not important," he said. "What is important is that although the sea is greedy to cover all the earth, it does not. Love holds it back. Love is the bridle."

"What about tidal waves?" asked the woman. She saw one now out of the corner of her eye, welling up from the meadow, dark and glistening, cresting far above the man's head. He stood, oblivious, like a tiny plaster saint in an oversized rural shrine: an upended bathtub in the middle of nowhere.

"You've missed the point," he said, just before the wave broke over him, smashing him to bits.

He was not a happy man but he sang to himself later, mowing the lawn. He thought, I am an instrument of Love. *Halleluiah, halleluiah* carolled the lawnmower, beheading dandelions, shredding frogs.

Inside the house the woman sat, combing her long orange hair. Her father was a poor woodcutter. One day many years ago a nondescript animal rapped at the windowpane, its eyes filled with longing. Her father opened the door and let it in, whereupon it crept into a corner and howled, leaving large tufts of its fur across the livingroom carpet. What could her father do? She was the youngest: he was not a man to challenge the established order of things.

Now she could not remember. Had he received any goods in return? Or had he handed her over free of charge, breathing a sigh of relief? Maybe he lived in a castle now and only cut down trees on weekends as a hobby. Or perhaps he was dead. She made a note to herself: "Find out about Father."

The wind. It was the wind she remembered: a cool, wet wind that swept across her face like a hand, wiping from it the scent of the animal's breath. For it panted heavily, carrying her over the countryside in its thin, boney arms, pausing only to redistribute her weight from shoulder to shoulder.

Nor did kisses work. She tried kisses, varying her technique, experimenting upon random parts of the animal's body. In time she gave up. Metamorphosis, she decided, was an empty concept. Her scorn for caterpillars knew no bounds: the man saw her occasionally laughing into their tiny, serious faces.

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"Well," says Bette, pouring hot water from the tap over some instant coffee in a pale blue cup, "how do you take it?"

"Black will be fine," says Justin. From a basket beside his chair potatoes extend the line of their vision tangibly in his direction: white, relentless.

"Thank God," says Bette, sniffing at a milk carton and pouring its contents into the sink, where they pool here and there among unwashed pots and pans. Justin waits for her to apologize for the disorder but she does not. Instead she perches brightly on the edge of a counter top and shakes her head. "Can you believe that stuff comes out of a cow?" she asks.

"My father kept cows," says Justin. He imagines the meadow, the green wavy grass dotted with milkweed. And the cows: each one wrapped in a thin cloak of sunshine, their intelligent stomachs hard at work, manufacturing substantial purity.

"Rodney," says Bette. "My husband. He grew up with cows." She picks up a partly eaten chicken wing from the collander and begins to chew. "He still talks about having one. Can you imagine that? A cow in this hellhole?"

Justin is relieved to see that she expects no response. Her little white teeth are busy grinding away on gristle. Through the window he can see trees packed in around the house, trees everywhere. It might be noon and still no light would be able to make its way into this kitchen: the major appliances lurk along the walls, all pigment drained from them by such long lives in darkness, like the blind white fish that inhabit underground pools.

This is Lutins Mill, four or five houses falling apart gracelessly along the worst curve on the Groton Road. The place has always terrified Justin. He remembers as a child driving with his parents to visit a distant, dying relative; then, as now, he believed the road to be without end, the dreary corridor along which he was destined to live out his life. No matter how many times he traveled those ten miles, that bridge from one sunlit highway to another, he never was able to learn by heart the details of its landscape, nor did he ever feel the sweet peace of familiarity, steering his truck around curve after curve. Mine is a life without landmarks, thinks Justin. He panics and shifts suddenly in his chair, knocking over a basket full of tiny gray socks and underpants.

"Steady there, fella," says Bette. She is smiling, staring at him as if at a slow-witted pet who has just performed an unexpected

trick. "Drink your coffee. It's going to take Lonny a little time to get here, so you might as well sit back and relax."

"My wife," says Justin, abashed. "She's in the hospital." He peers out at Bette from under partly lowered eyelids, hoping he looks sufficiently worn, the victim of a recent, personal tragedy.

She is leering at him.

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In an immense meadow of sweet timothy and clover the babies sleep, each curled in a wicker bassinet. They feed through their pores on sunlight and never wake, dreaming instead of the useful, healthy lives they will lead. A woman walks among them, dressed all in white, a white kerchief over her head: her bare feet slip soundlessly through the grasses. She consults a piece of paper. A boy, she thinks, they want a boy, and she bends down gently over one of the tiny sleeping forms. "Wake up," she whispers.

In the hedgerow a man and woman stand waiting, holding hands. They see her draw near, a woman in white, a blue bundle at her chest. She smiles. "Here is your son," she says, extending her arms, handing over to them the child of light, the apple of their four eyes. He is perfect in every detail. They are speechless.

Thus Justin imagined the process of adoption, sitting with his wife on their livingroom sofa, waiting for the arrival of the woman from the agency. It was an afternoon in late spring and two birds twittered outside the window, engaged in the construction of a small, tidy nest. Justin, not given to superstition, felt consoled. His wife stared at the door.

"Don't start in on Love," she said. "Not today."

Later they led a sad, pale woman through all the rooms of their house. She asked questions and wrote things down in a notebook. "Well," she said, "I can't promise anything." They all stood in the empty upstairs bedroom which Justin had recently papered over with puppies and clowns. The puppies were much larger than the clowns and suddenly seemed to Justin predatory, inappropriate.

"We've been waiting for so long," whimpered his wife.

The woman from the agency peered through the window. "Lilacs," she said. "I certainly envy you those lilacs." There were no lilacs outside the window, only some squat, listless bushes.

"I have a green thumb," said Justin.

A year went by. The room filled with furniture. Justin's wife made curtains and hung them at the window, above the crib where a male infant lay on his back, his face bright red, screaming.

"Can't you do anything," asked Justin. He watched terrified as his wife squirted milk from a bottle all over her shirt front.

"He's hungry," she said. "Poor little thing."

In time Justin came to recognize his son's hunger as metaphysical, unappeased by mere foodstuffs. So it did not surprise him when two years later William let fly a wooden building block, reducing his mother to a half-blind heap on the kitchen floor.

"Oh my God," she moaned.

William stood impassive in his yellow overalls, avid for nourishment. "Mommy," he said. He toddled over to his father, who bent from a great height and kissed his cheek. "Bad," said Justin, conspiratorial.

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The woman in his arms is a shadow. In His routine surveillance God casts a shadow over the world: now tiny, a pinpoint of darkness set upon pink flowered sheets in Lutins Mill. It is all Justin can do to hold it to himself, cover it over with his own body. The shadow writhes, explodes.

"No," says Justin, but it is too late. She will bear him a son, a child furred over and violent, beyond love. His name will be William, a name meaning Protection.

"Listen," says the woman. Like the stealthy migration of civilizations Justin hears the trees, the whole forest, passing from his life. He does not hear the engine shutting off, the car door slamming closed, Rodney Benware's gentle hand laid upon the barrel of his 30/30.

"I'll be," he says, staring up at his house and then down the road to where a red truck sits marooned among bracken. Rodney counts himself a lucky man, a man for whom hunting season extends into all twelve months of the year. "Bitch," he says. "Up to her old tricks again."

He is laughing, walking towards his house, as the world, so recently wrenched from orbit, slips back into its groove at his behest, around and around the sun. The angels sing for joy.