

## MINERVA ORTIZ

*Pig Man, 2007*  
Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 30 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## JUSTIN J. ALLEN

### Eternal Life

She was standing in her nightgown on the deck with coffee steaming, brightly rimmed by the morning sun.

“Kevin,” she said. “Are you all right?”

He came up the path to the house from the woods that the house sat on the edge of, clutching his left shoulder with his right arm. His face, already gaunt, was tight with pain.

“Drive me to the hospital,” he said.

She did not move or respond right away. As he climbed the stairs to the deck, he couldn’t see her face with the sun behind her. He felt a terrible, irrational fear that his wife would refuse to help him.

“Vanya,” he said at the top of the stairs, “please.”

She stepped forward and put her hand on his other shoulder. “What happened?”

“I passed out. When I was running, and fell down. I think I’ve broken my shoulder.”

She walked with him to the car. Then she went into the house and got the keys. He sat in the car sweating from the pain. She seemed to take forever.

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Even at this early hour on a Tuesday, the emergency room in Palo Alto was scattered with people waiting—the poor, uninsured, usually African American or Latino, who the hospital could not legally turn away. Visits to urgent care, Kevin reflected, reminded you of how inefficient the health-care system was. *These people should be taken care of*, he thought, *but is there any reason why I should have to wait with them?* Why on earth wasn’t there an express-lane system for those with premium insurance plans, similar to the elite status system that let him jump the registration line at the airport? His shoulder was an alarm, a signal that rose and fell, but wailed without relent.

Vanya sat silently beside him. He closed his eyes, waited, took deep breaths, opened them.

The minutes dripped. Vanya left to go to the bathroom. A woman in her fifties sat across from him. Kevin, without trying to, made eye contact with her. With a slight smile of sympathy, she asked, “Is it cancer?” She had a story ready to extend, he could see. Maybe someone she loved. Maybe her own. Kevin almost regretted shaking his head no. “Broken shoulder,” he forced out. He saw the knot of confusion pass through her—“Oh!” she said, and looked away.

It was his gauntness. The lack of flesh between his knobby knees and his running shoes. The emptiness of his frame. The hungry-looking eyes in a face with every bone outlined. All that, and the smooth head, which he’d long kept shaved to hide his male-pattern baldness. Yes: He already knew it. His appearance was something people found alarming.

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Kevin had not broken his shoulder, he had dislocated it. He was given anesthetic, X-rays, and in what felt like a crude, archaic procedure right out of the Middle Ages, a doctor had physically, forcefully, pulled on his arm to jerk it back into its socket. He’d felt a shaft of pain and nausea pierce the haze of medication. More X-rays verified the shoulder was back as it should be. His left arm was immobilized, put into a sling.

All of this involved long intervals of waiting. In the rush and disorientation, he’d left his smartphone at home and had nothing to distract himself with. He anxiously pictured the emails that would start flowing in, the confused follow-ups when he didn’t respond. Kevin often worked remotely, but this was predicated on an unimpaired ability to do rapid response. This was not a quiet time of the year.

A doctor he hadn’t seen so far today, whose name tag announced him as Doctor Singh, entered the room. He had a tense, intelligent gaze and stiff black hair with streaks of gray, and without anything to announce it other than his demeanor, he made it clear he was a head doctor of some sort, had some special responsibility at the hospital.

“Hello, Kevin,” he began, “I’ve looked at your medical records and we have a note that you’re practicing caloric restriction.”

“Yes,” Kevin said, “that’s correct. For almost two years now.”

“If we didn’t have that noted, my questions for you would be very different. Given your appearance I would assume you have a wasting disease or some other serious undiagnosed condition. Or severe anorexia or bulimia, which is less common in men but not unheard of. In fact—you may not want to hear this, but *anorexia* is the accurate term medically for what you are doing to yourself with the caloric restriction diet.”

“With all respect,” Kevin said. “I’m a senior software engineer with twenty years of experience. I’m very capable of research. And I’ve done a lot of research into this. All my studies lead me to believe that this is the best way of extending my life span.”

“You may be putting yourself at risk of malnutrition.”

“I’m aware of that, and I’m staying just short of malnutrition and have a very nutritious and well-rounded diet, just very minimal in size. Caloric restriction has been proven to extend life span in a range of mammals. It’s proven to lower free radical production by the mitochondria.”

“Yes, well, if I remember correctly, the life-extending studies of caloric restriction were first based on yeast. The human organism is a lot more complex than yeast.”

“It’s been confirmed with rats, rhesus monkeys. Up to fifty percent life extension.” Singh took a deep breath.

“As a physician I can only warn you of the risks, I’m not here to argue with you. I appreciate you’re looking at the science. But please also understand you don’t have the background a medical professional does, don’t see how the full spectrum of nutrition, lifestyle, and disease pathologies fit together to create health and well-being. You’re here today because you fell on your morning run, that’s correct?”

“Yes.”

“Did you feel lightheaded—dizzy or faint at all?”

“No,” Kevin lied, for the second time today. He’d omitted, repeatedly, mention of Senutri, the appetite suppressant he was taking and which he had obtained illegally on the Internet.

“I already answered that question. I just tripped.”

“All right,” Dr. Singh said. “It’s up to you what you do with your body. All I can say is, be aware of the risks. Continue your research. Don’t rely simply on advocates of this life-extension technique for your information. It would defeat the purpose of aiming for longer life if you compromise your health along the way.”

On his way out, Doctor Singh gave him a last stern look and handed him a brochure about the health risks of anorexia. Clearly, Kevin thought as he glanced over it, it was aimed at women with a host of body image concerns that weren’t relevant to him. He threw the brochure away before leaving the hospital.

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He was overdue for his midday dose of Senutri, and as the pain from his shoulder subsided, hunger had come roaring into the void. As she drove him home, Vanya was silent. They passed a row of palm trees on Junipero Serra near Stanford University and came gliding to a slow stop for a red light. She was a good driver, assertive but calm. Kevin looked at the sharp lines of her profile and after a while, she glanced at him, then down at his arm in its sling. A flicker of disgust registered on her face before her gaze moved back to the intersection.

There was an implacable otherworldliness Vanya had, five years after she came to this country. Six years after they met online, and started corresponding, and Kevin took his first trip to Kiev. Her coldness and stiffness in person had been an immediate and shocking departure from her initial, typo-ridden warmth online. But her intense physical beauty—she was by U.S. standards something of a mismatch for him—made him overlook this and suspend disbelief.

He had suspended it all the way through marriage and years of cohabitation. And the effort continued. If only she would say something. Just ask, “Does it hurt much?”

“It doesn’t hurt much,” he said. “The medication finally kicked in.”

“That’s good,” she said.

Something was preoccupying her. “What’s on your mind,” he said.

Vanya glanced over and the light changed and she drove on, giving him her profile again.

“Just worried about you.”

Her voice, hollow. Hands tight on the steering wheel. A terrible fear overtook him—bottomless, yawning like an abyss. He was powerless, weak, and could at any moment be crushed by a pitiless universe. *Crushed but not extinguished*. Merely humiliated. Reduced to a ghost that peered, impotent, into the windows of his former life. A house of new things half-unpacked but already gathering dust. Curtains thrown open, lights growing dim. He tried to exert control over his psyche, master his mind, but it squirmed willfully back to its negative vision.

“This woman,” he thought, not for the first time, “does not love me.”

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Back home, he immediately called Sam, his boss at Dyn-Tek. Sam had already guessed that an emergency had kept Kevin away. Normally such a clockwork man, it was completely uncharacteristic for him to be absent or unresponsive or even late.

“I can still email,” Kevin said, “using voice-to-text. I still have one hand free for typing slowly or correcting the voice-to-text.”

“Come on, Kevin,” Sam said. “You’re out of commission. That’s the breaks. Don’t worry about it. The company really values your consistency over the years. We want you to make a solid recovery. Alex is ready to step up and he’ll do fine while you’re gone. It’s just a few weeks.”

“Alex.”

“Yes,” Sam said. “We just had a meeting and he’s already talking about how he’ll make sure things are running smoothly. He’s got some fresh ideas. Gonna move forward on implementing *Q* and *Q*line on the corporate ecommerce properties.”

“But *Q*’s a very new technology. This is just what I’m worried about. The elegance and parallelism of Diamond-Cut are proven, performative, and horizontally scalable.”

“I’m the CIO, Kevin, it’s for me to worry about that. If *Q* is good enough for Verizon, Exxon, and Siemens, it’s good enough for us. Alex is up-to-the-minute with this stuff and we have to leverage that. We can’t afford to let our competitors get an advantage.”

“No downtime and a maintainable stack are an advantage.”

“What are you worried about? Getting up to speed when you get back?”

Kevin didn’t respond right away. The answer was obvious. He paced the living room in front of the windows and realized that Vanya was standing, pale and still, by the door to the dining room. Sam was repeating that everything would be fine, smoothing him over with a little flattery, saying that it would be “child’s play to jump back into it after a break.” Kevin forced out his thanks and promised—threatened—that he’d be back soon, and hung up.

The grandfather clock struck the half hour. It was a Victorian anachronism, the clock. Everything else in the house was clean, modern, midcentury or later. But the clock, a family heirloom passed down to Kevin that he

was sentimentally attached to, was old and unfashionable, polished cherrywood and brass.

“What’s going on?” Vanya said.

“Alex is taking over at work,” Kevin said, “the junior engineer, while I’m on leave.” Vanya said nothing, waiting for him to go on.

“Is there something else you’re worried about?” he said.

“No, it sounded like you were concerned.”

“I am concerned.”

Kevin took a deep breath.

“Alex is half my age. He’s inexperienced but he’s sharp. I’ve taught him a lot. In addition to that, he’s got an insane level of energy because of his prescriptions to Adderall and other medications. He can work a fourteen-hour day without breaking a sweat. By the time I get back he’ll have overhauled the infrastructure in ways I don’t even understand and I’ll have to struggle to keep up with.”

Suddenly he felt so tired he could barely stand. He sat down by the picture window, with its view of the woods where this morning, he had fallen.

“Could you get me my lunch, please?” he said.

Vanya blinked. She was not used to him asking for this. “I . . . don’t know what you want.”

“There’s a bottle of green soup in the refrigerator. Just warm it up. I usually have that with a half cup of walnuts.”

“All right. You don’t want anything else?”

“No thank you.”

She turned and went into the kitchen. When he heard the microwave beep, he started salivating like one of Pavlov’s dogs.

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Kevin looked out the window as Vanya left for work. The hard California light had a soft-focus gauze from the pain pills. She was dressed in plain, loose-fitting pastels and tossed her hair behind her as she got into the gold Lexus. There was no set uniform for a dental hygienist at Silicon Valley Smiles, the Mountain View clinic owned by Dr. David Malouf—a charismatic transplant from Beirut whose own smile was the fiercest white. Kevin had worming suspicions about Vanya and David but he so far had avoided letting them torture him and there was nothing, really, they came from but shadings on faces and inflections of voice on his rare and awkward visits to the office.

Insecurity was the soil they grew in and half-consciously Kevin set his mind to ignore these thoughts over the coming days of homebound paranoia.

Kevin was ill-suited to idle time. He did not enjoy passive activities like reading books, watching TV or movies. So he detached his laptop from the bay of screens in his home office, propped himself up on the living room couch with his injured arm wedged between pillows, and resigned himself to one-armed web browsing. It had been a while since he had logged in to the LongLife forum. For a while he’d been a very active contributor. Much of the discussion was devoted to caloric restriction, but that was not the only topic. Vitamin supplements, research into wonder drugs, and the science of aging were also popular themes. The rest consisted of speculative thought on transhumanism, cryogenics, and nootropics.

He frowned as he browsed a thread on resveratrol, a supplement that was said to duplicate the effects of the caloric restriction he was currently practicing. He had taken it before going on the diet and was planning on taking it again afterward. There was a new trial he hadn’t seen with limited but negative results. “RSV treatment did not lower circulating levels of hs-CRP, interleukin 6, or soluble urokinase plasminogen activator receptor in plasma,” the conclusions read, “and inflammatory gene expression in adipose and muscle tissues also remained unchanged. RSV treatment had no effect on blood pressure, body composition, and lipid deposition in the liver or striated muscle. RSV treatment had no beneficial effect on glucose or lipid metabolism. RSV treatment significantly increased total cholesterol ( $P < 0.002$ ), low-density lipoprotein (LDL) cholesterol ( $P < 0.006$ ), and fructosamine ( $P < 0.013$ ) levels compared with placebo.”

This still didn’t mean anything conclusive, he thought, when it came to life extension specifically, though it wasn’t encouraging. Life extension was very difficult to study in clinical trials, simply due to the length of the time frame. But of course, treatment of the “symptoms of aging” or “age-associated illnesses” was difficult to separate from the attempt to combat the aging process itself. A new iteration of an ongoing debate on this matter was raging on the forum in comments on the resveratrol results.

He surfed to the forum home page and unspooled a thread titled “How likely is it that radical life extension

will happen in our lifetime?” The results made his gut feel even emptier. It was a rehash of old information that got sidelined into a pessimistic and, in Kevin’s judgment, naïve and obscurantist view of consciousness extension into the electronic realm. He decided to weigh in and slowly tapped out a response with his right hand.

*While I do not expect it to happen for many years to come, I do not see any reason why hardware will not advance to the point where the brain can be replaced with mechanical hardware with the same ease as a hip replacement today. We already have neural networks that can recognize a face. And are close to achieving a full artificial heart replacement. These technologies will converge. There is no mystery to consciousness, simply an algorithm we haven’t cracked yet. Once we do, we’ll be able to liberate and extend the software programs currently confined to the fragile and limited hardware of our human brains.*

He clicked Post Reply, feeling validated by a sense of action. He was part of a tiny vanguard that one day would be looked back on—by the great minds of the future, which would defy current comprehension—as prophetic ancestors, tiny and bright, glittering on a dark beach of ignorance.

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Over the following weeks, Kevin’s homebound condition brought on a terrible lethargy: a lack of motivation that seemed, now that it had arrived, to have been lying in wait for him all along. He filled the days by surfing LifeLong and other forums, poring over his investments, and doing calculations on spreadsheets to refresh his assessment of his financial security. Kevin had been, if you added up the total value of his assets and equity, a millionaire since before he’d turned forty. The majority of that was locked up in the house, which had nearly doubled in value since he’d bought it—and at the time, he’d feared he was buying at the top of the market. Much of the rest was in stock options for companies he’d worked for, investment accounts, and 401(k)s.

Not that it had given him peace to reach the million-dollar mark. When he’d reached that magic number—which had beforehand been a sort of goalpost he was intent on reaching someday—it had instead triggered a major depression and turned his attention inward, to his body and to his mortality. Memories of his mother’s illness and

disappearance had flooded in. It was after he’d become a millionaire that Kevin had become interested in life extension. Yet that interest had kindled slowly, because first he had been preoccupied with securing another marker of completeness.

One pursuit had grown out of the other; it was on a meandering thread on the topic of “mind-body wellness” on the LifeLong forum, which had turned into a discussion on depression and loneliness and the search for companionship, that Kevin had learned of online matchmaking services that connected American men—often introverted technology professionals like himself—with “appreciative” and “traditional” women from Eastern Europe. One man shared his experience as a life-changing revelation. Another said he’d been laughed at, mocked, and rejected in his own country, only to find a wonderful wife abroad. *You can’t strike out*, the men said, *these women are incredible*. And Kevin, to whom linear, engineered solutions to messy human problems were an easy sell, soon was booking a trip to Ukraine to meet the women in person that he’d been introduced to online—including Vanya.

He had not particularly enjoyed his trips to Kiev, from the first glimpse coming in on the plane and seeing it overhead. The whole city was a jumble of spooky medieval-looking architecture set against hard slabs of Soviet concrete: both equally alienating to his California eyes. He found the people unfriendly and the cuisine unpalatable. It had not been hard for him to imagine that he was rescuing Vanya from that place.

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Fall came suddenly to the Bay Area that year. One morning in early November, it was no longer merely crisp, but cold. Breath trailed in jets, layers went on, and the coastal grayness gathered into something leaden. The sky, the woods, the house—all seemed to creak like a machine fallen out of use, the morning when the first rain came.

“Is that thunder?” Vanya said, coming to the window. Her face shone with an anticipation he rarely saw; it provoked him, not only because he felt it concealed something, but because his response to this weather was the opposite.

“It’s just the wind dragging the bins down the driveway,” he said. But a minute later, as the rain increased, there was an audible roll.



“Back home,” Vanya said, “we had always summer rains like this. The sky, almost black.”

“Rain in the summer?” Kevin grinned, shook his head.

This was a running theme—the bad weather and horrible food Vanya had escaped. At first, it had been a mutual joke. But as Vanya came to miss Kiev, it went one-sided, a way of Kevin reminding her she’d traded up. A short while later, he watched through the window as she got into the Lexus. The wipers pumped as it backed away, lights neon-warm in the tree-shaded driveway. This was now his routine: watching his wife go to work, waiting for her to come home. It was not something he could stand much longer. The need to do something was becoming unbearable. He got his keys from a drawer, went to the garage, and got into his Tesla as the big door yawned open. Pulled out, and sped off—but not too quickly—minding the curves in the road and needing to steer one-handed. Soon, taillights appeared below him through the trees. He slowed, not wanting Vanya to know he was following behind.

He trailed at a distance as she descended the hills, got onto the freeway, then off in two exits, then cruised down Lytton Avenue into downtown Palo Alto. Inexplicably, Kevin felt himself harden and realized it had been weeks since he’d had an erection. This state of excitement slackened as the drive continued, but he remained agitated. He did not know where exactly Vanya was driving, but she did not appear to be going to work. She made a right turn into a parking garage, and he kept going, then decided to risk parking illegally in a handicapped zone around the corner; precious moments and he would risk losing track of her, and he was already seized with anxiety that she was out of his sight. He crouched like a voyeur in the shrubs adjacent to the garage with a view of the entrance, and soon breathed in relief as she emerged.

He took care, now, to drift behind her undetected, not wanting to spoil his somewhat incredible act of tracking her across the city. She went into a café on University Avenue, and he waited, crossed the street, then peered from behind a car to see if she was meeting someone. Stomach aching, legs weak, he set his eyes on a dark-haired, dark-skinned man, unable to see full on, certain it was Doctor Malouf, there for an illicit rendezvous with his wife—the face shimmered, he blinked—and for a startling moment, he was instead sure it was Doctor Singh from the hospital, ready

to single out and admonish him. But as Vanya abruptly left the café with her coffee, he caught a clearer view of the man and realized he was mistaken on both accounts.

Vanya continued down University, and Kevin matched her steps from across the street and behind, past sycamores already wrapped in glowing Christmas lights. She passed a pharmacy, a new age bookstore, and stopped at a Western Union office and went in. Kevin watched, coming close, no longer worried about being caught spying, and stood in the glass as Vanya went to a window and filled out a form, handed over cash, and conducted what could only have been an international money transfer. She paused at one point and tucked her hair behind an ear—an unconscious gesture whose simple innocence sent Kevin first into a well of mystery, then back into a pure, liquid rage. Vanya smiled at the cashier, turned, and not noticing her husband standing staring from the sidewalk, walked right past his face in the glass and to the door.

On exiting the Western Union, she turned and then, seeing him, her face crumpled in horror. “Who are you sending money to?” he shouted.

People walking by stopped and stared. Let them. He moved toward her; she shrank. He repeated his question.

“My brother,” she said.

“You expect me to believe that?” He laughed, bitter. “You expect me to believe it’s not some Ukrainian pimp?”

With that, her jaw literally dropped in disbelief, and Kevin knew he had done something irreversible. Images of her brother he’d almost forgotten came back to him: short, bloated, white with hangover, wearing a tracksuit and a short-brimmed cap—almost a tough guy, but his eyes, washed-out and wounded, were too weak. He was her little brother by some years, and he had been unpleasant, even hostile to Kevin, but Vanya had obviously liked him a lot, cracking jokes in Ukrainian when, before the wedding, he seemed extremely upset.

“Yes, I expect you to believe it.” She was so quickly again her soft, measured, unprovoked self. “I sent money to Sasha. Not a lot. But to him, it makes a big difference. It’s my own money. And it’s no concern of yours. It’s really not.”

She moved toward him, reaching out, but not to touch him—to show him the receipt for the money transfer. He tried not to look at it, but he glanced over and it was true: her brother’s name and the amount. Her face was drawn,

full of concern, but otherwise impossible to decipher. The people who’d stopped to watch this domestic drama were losing interest and drifting on. The rain was again starting to drizzle.

“You’re sick, Kevin. You need to take care of yourself.” He turned then and walked away.

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His hunger was a flickering light in a dark cavern; tiny, yet casting huge shadows in the enormity of the space. Having nothing else to do, he’d returned home, paid the parking ticket that had been left on the Tesla windshield, and after a couple hours of job searching, restlessly paced the house. His shoulder throbbed, so he took a painkiller along with his dose of Senutri, then sat in the easy chair in the living room and did absolutely nothing.

The wheels of the Lexus rolling on wet gravel woke him from a reverie in which he had dreamed of building a new application. Happily lost in a labyrinth of code, he’d been busy setting up a brand new architecture—without any idea what the application was for, that part of the dream left entirely unsketched. The house was silent, and in the starless evening, completely black. He reached out and switched on the lamp next to his chair, not really wanting to, but not wanting to appear strange or sinister when Vanya came into the room.

He heard her walking up to the door, which would open right on the living room. A jumble of thoughts came clattering through his brain; it renewed his exhaustion, and he realized he could not face Vanya just yet but did not have the time to get up and leave the room. As he heard her key rattle the lock, he closed his eyes, leaned his head back on the chair, and played dead. He kept his eyes shut tight as he heard her enter, move through the house. And then, in the other room, taking a shower. He imagined her naked body, walled off from him in every sense, luminous gold in the bathroom steam.

Hours later he woke to the grandfather clock—louder here than in the bedroom. He wanted to go to bed but did not want to disturb Vanya and felt a need to atone. So he went to the hallway closet and pulled out a sleeping bag, went back to the living room, and unfurled it onto the couch.

The next morning, Vanya was not as he expected. Instead of distant, she seemed almost lighthearted. She took Kevin by surprise, first by asking him if he wanted juice—he declined, but thanked her for asking—and then, just before going to work, when she suggested they have dinner out that night.

“You want to have dinner?” he said. “Are you sure?”

It slowly dawned on him that this was, perhaps, not something to feel uncomplicated about. “We need to talk,” she said.

So it was like that. He could not object. And as he agreed, asking her where and when, making plans, he resigned himself to a day of gnawing anxiety followed by something he could never really prepare for.

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They met after dark, downtown again in Palo Alto. The act of making the same drive as two days before, remembering its edgy excitement followed by such a feeble anticlimax, made Kevin’s heart sink. At Perry’s, Vanya led the way into a long, low-lit dining room, large yet somehow intimate. Once they were seated, their waiter brought water with lemon slices and menus. Vanya looked Kevin straight in the eye for longer than he could remember. Directly. Which made him feel cautious relief. But her look was not without a certain hardness—and ultimately, he did not know what to make of it.

“It’s time, Kevin. I’m sorry. I can’t do it anymore.”

“Do what anymore?” he said, his voice rising.

The waiter glanced over. This was the reason she had wanted to go out to dinner. Avoiding a scene.

“Are you talking about our marriage?” Kevin said, more quietly.

“Yes. I want a divorce.”

The room rocked silently. Reality shifted. “How long have you been planning this?”

She closed her eyes, opened them, and moved on. “I don’t want anything. Your money, your house.”

“Is there someone else?”

She paused again, then kept speaking.

“No. And I don’t want to be enemies. I don’t want drama, or tears. I just want to go.”

Not able to face her—calm, resolute, sincere—he broke her gaze and looked around. The candles burned on the

tables. There, by the bar, was a man pouring drinks, looking timeless in his white shirt and old-fashioned haircut. There was an eternal world here in the present moment. It was the hum, the vibration, of the infinite possibilities of the future that were trembling on the verge, swirling, ready to swallow the illusory stability of the present. This terrifying, magic world was one he'd been suddenly thrust into by the upending of his life. For the second time, recently.

She was looking at him. Not with anger, or her customary self-protective opaqueness, but with sorrow—even pity. It was not a way she'd permitted herself to look at him before. He found that in spite of himself, he liked it. It was so much better than the quiet resentment he'd grown so used to. He tried to steel himself. He had to be a man, didn't he? Not even a "man" but a person, with some self-respect. He had to hold her to account.

"You've got your citizenship," he started. Then stopped himself and took a breath. "Did you love me a little? I want to know the truth."

"I used to think I could grow to love you. I told myself I could. I really tried, Kevin." He nodded. Tears were welling up.

"I do care about you," she said. "I think you deserve something real."

He felt very thirsty and took a long drink of water, every gulp ballooning his stomach, filling it out from absolute vacancy. Was it strange that this moment did not hurt as much as he had thought it would—or should? A few tears, wipe them away, and already acceptance was coming. No urge to fight at all.

"I know. It was foolish of me to think I could find a shortcut to a perfect life."

"Well," Vanya said and smiled, giving her face a radiance that took his breath away. "You have a long life ahead of you, Kevin. This is just one chapter."

The waiter reappeared and asked, very quietly, if they were ready to order. He looked from Kevin to Vanya.

"If you need more time, I can come back."

"Nothing for me," Kevin said.

"I'm sorry," Vanya said. "Just the drinks tonight."

The waiter said, "No problem," and took their menus with grace.

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Ever since college Kevin had been an early riser. Thrust into the groundless place that was the world beyond his parents' home and his hometown, he'd embraced wakefulness, vigilance, alertness as his savior. His departure for Texas, to attend his third-choice school (Stanford had rejected him, so had Berkeley) and pursue an engineering degree, happened to coincide with the diagnosis of his mother's breast cancer. He'd almost cancelled his plans, in favor of staying home and attending San Jose State—his mother's vehemence practically forced him to leave California.

He saw little of her before the cancer took her, sooner than anyone expected, within two years.

In the early morning sometimes Kevin looked out to the east—especially now, with Vanya gone and the house empty—at the light crowning the distant clouds, the jagged tree line, the rolling hills. He would feel the wind rushing over the land, and the coming of the day would fill him with an unspeakable dread. The thin edge he'd coaxed out of himself by waking early, by sacrificing his sleep, would in precious moments be lost: the world would inexorably wake and join him, all the masses around him. The sun would come, nothing could halt it, and bring him one day closer to the end.

**Justin J. Allen** was born in California in 1979, studied creative writing at San Francisco State University, and has worked as an editor, designer, and technologist for leading arts, activist, and news organizations. His short fiction has been published in *Crannóg*, *Fiddleblack*, and *Transfer* and is forthcoming in *Spectrum*. His journalistic work has appeared in *Full Stop Quarterly*, *EdSource*, *Sacramento News & Review*, and other publications. He lives in Oakland, California.

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*Cat Food, 2007*

Oil on muslin-coated masonite, 30 x 20 in



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