CHUCK ROSENTHAL

The Legend of La Diosa

Before the poet La Diosa became Roscoe Harlan's lover, she danced upon the bones of a hundred men. In the beginning Diosa was known simply as Lisa Hornstein, Lisa Hornstein from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, whose father, Henry, worked in middle management for GM and whose mother, JoAnne, who changed her name to Joan (of Arc), believed that both her sons, one older than Lisa and one younger, that both of them were the Second Coming of Jesus; neither of them turned out to be Jesus, as you probably figured, but Joan, decades before it became chic in Malibu and elsewhere, stopped singing Christmas carols while she vacuumed, songs in which she'd substituted the names of her sons, first Norman, then Archie, for Jesus, and began channeling messages from the saints, who happened to work vaguely in iambic pentameter, some might call it doggerel, an odd form for the saints to work in, but many of the saints were not well educated (or as the Angel Gabriel said to Muhammad, "I'm speaking to you in Arabic so you'll understand"), and Joan made Lisa copy down her inspirations word for word after school—there are volumes of it somewhere—though oddly, Joan also read Shakespeare and Robert Louis Stevenson to Lisa, as well as Dr. Seuss. Years passed. Until one day, a preteen Lisa, on the verge of insanity herself, refused to copy anymore, and Joan decided that the only way around the problem was for her and the three kids to commit group suicide. Lisa could tell, because her mother sang, "We thought your first son was Christ savior, but he just didn't have the behavior. You thought your next son was Christ Lord, but saving the world made him bored. Your daughter won't write your cosmic insight. They don't believe you're Joan of Arc; they think that you're insane. So now there's nothing left to do but park them in front of a train."

"Want to go for a car-bye?" Joan asked them all after school the next day. "Want some ice cream pie?"

"Yeah!" said Norman.

"Sure!" said Archie.

"Uh-uh," said Lisa.

"You scream, I scream. We all scream for ice cream!" said Joan.

"Right after I go to the bathroom," said Lisa, and she crawled out the bathroom window. Years later, after several failed suicide attempts of her own, Diosa regretted not having let her mother take the whole suicide thing out of her hands, but back then she was just a kid. So when her father got home, she pulled him aside and told him everything. *Everything.* He put Lisa in a mental institution.

Wrong-headed as it seemed to Lisa at the time, putting her in a mental institution helped Joan get a little better. Call it transference even if it ain't.

Lisa met some interesting people in the mental institution, many of whom, all men, believed they were Jesus. Most of them, much like Flannery O'Connor's Misfit, seemed to have exploited the fine line between saving people's souls and murdering them. Women were much more interested in suicide, something that prompted Lisa to an early sociological insight: men murder, women commit suicide. She used to sit and play cards with one murderer named Jimmy Joe, who looked a little like a squat Elvis Presley. He believed he was Jesus and that all the hits on the radio were stolen from him.

"Know that song, 'Feelings,'" said Jimmy Joe.

"Yes, I do," said Lisa Hornstein.

"I wrote that."

"It's a lousy song," Lisa said.

"Doesn't change anything about its origin," Jimmy Joe said.

"I suppose it doesn't," Lisa said.

"Ever heard of a guy named Jesus?" said Jimmy Joe. "That's me."

Jimmy Joe Jesus shared smuggled cigarettes with her, then he shared some beer, then he tried to fuck her, and then he tried to strangle her. That's the short of it. Her other friend, a girl a little older than her named Rosie, had carved all the names of her ex-boyfriends onto her thighs with a razor blade. It took Lisa a little while to figure out that the boyfriends were made up. Rosie slit her wrists and got transferred to a more serious situation. Well, as we all know, insanity wasn't invented by insane asylums, it was just codified by them. Anyway, a little about insanity goes a long way.

Lisa got out of insane school knowing the code. Her parents moved to Detroit, where she went to Groves High and joined the cheerleaders. At half-time of their first football game against Birmingham, she went up to the second-floor bathroom, where she knew she could smoke a Marlboro and be alone. She ran into the captain of the Birmingham cheerleaders, Madonna. Madonna had dark hair and dark eyeliner. She held a joint to her lips and a bottle of sloe gin at her knee. "Here," she said with the joint.

Lisa met some interesting people in the mental institution, many of whom, all men, believed they were Jesus.

They got stoned as shit and drank sloe gin in the bathroom. They blew pot smoke out the window into the ghostly parking-lot night, where Madonna pointed beyond the bleachers to the parked cars and said, "See those girls out there hanging on boys?"

"Sober as asphalt," said Lisa. "Stupid and joyous."

"I like your way with words," Madonna said. "They're heading for nothing but no good. Disasters waiting to happen." She reached under her cheerleading sweater and pulled out several delicate chains from which hung gold crosses. "Cheerleaders and crosses are a good mix," Madonna said.

"Can I have one of those?" Lisa said.

"You sure can." And Madonna gave Lisa a chain and cross. She put it around Lisa's neck. "It's you," she said. She guzzled the end of the sweet, red gin, as red as her lipstick. "I like big cars," Madonna said. "I like the back seats of big cars."

"Bang, slam, thank you man," Lisa said.

Madonna raised her pom-poms. "Bam, bam, go Birmingham!" she said.

That night during the game, the school photographer took pictures. Lisa's mom kept that picture of her forever. She put it on her dresser next to her own wedding picture: Lisa grinning, her wavy brown hair falling around her cheeks, pom-poms raised in front of her, a gold cross dangling at her neck against her green cheerleading sweater, eyes like slits, stoned as shit.

If entertainers never find out who they are because they're too busy being somebody, then poets die on the cross of the self.

That night a boy in the stands went home and just like Rosie carved the words *Lisa* and *Diosa* on the inside of his thigh. He showed it to Lisa.

"Who's that?"

"That's you," he said.

In the next four years, over a hundred boys at Groves High would wear the scars *Lisa* and *Diosa* somewhere on their body. (And it was two more years until she even thought of changing her name.)

Madonna became Madonna. Lisa Hornstein became a poet. If entertainers never find out who they are because they're too busy being somebody, then poets die on the cross of the self. Got a cross in your room? If Jesus is on there, you're Catholic. If nobody's on there, you're Protestant. If you're on there, you're a poet. It doesn't matter if you're any good (though it might). It's a soul thing. That was the difference between Madonna and Diosa, who did not become fast friends, who, in fact, never met again.

That crucifix of the self was something that attracted Diosa to male poets, that willingness to kill themselves instead of somebody else. Call it their feminine side. And their deep, deep, deep need of romance, a constant need to fall in love and fall in love again, to become victims of inspiration and re-inspiration. The difference between a poet and a Casanova was the same as the difference between a poet and an entertainer.

The poet killed himself with love. Killed himself for love. And you had to love that. You had to love them loving you, doing that to themselves as they loved you, even if it meant they were not good lovers, nor faithful lovers, for they were enthralled by romance, by the self-indulgence of romance, the self-indulgence of slow suicide. Even when she came to understand that placing oneself on a crucifix was an act of self-worship, that to murder oneself is to immortalize one's self, it didn't change the heat.

And for their part, poets, among others, loved Diosa, too, as she grew into an alluring young woman, enchanting, quick-witted, multi-furtive.

Other than this chance meeting with Diosa, you probably know more about Madonna than I do, and almost as much, or more, as she knows about herself, except for the fact that when they met, Madonna was a year older than Diosa and now she's several years younger. Actually, you probably aren't aware of the film made of Madonna in high school in which an egg was fried on her stomach. By now it's probably on YouTube.

In high school, Lisa Hornstein was so beautiful as to be feared by boys. It happens a lot. A lot of men are afraid of women. A lot of men hate them. If most men reach sexual maturity by fifteen, then it is at fifteen when they settle into the anxieties of their sexual irresolution, when their attraction to other men is twisted into homophobia, and in reaction, their attraction to women settles into possessiveness, fear, aggression. Women never learn this. If they did, it would end the species. Like a lot of truly beautiful girls, Lisa felt isolated and unattractive. Nice boys feared her and bored her. The bad boys she was attracted to scared her. They stole cars and carried guns. Though she thought it might be nice to steal some cars and carry a gun.

The summer between high school and college Lisa took a summer job in Mackinaw City at the tip of Michigan. She did it to get away from her mother; normal enough, though in Lisa's case a run for cover. The shop was owned by an older woman, a widow, Mrs. Kisilinski. It was filled with tourist stuff: replicas of the Mackinaw Island Bridge, snow bubbles of Michigan with a star for Mackinaw City, paintings of the Last Supper surrounded by cheap seashells from Florida. Mostly, she sold fudge. She stayed in a boardinghouse where she had a room and shared a bath with two gymnasts from Bowling Green, Ohio. They were easy to ignore. She spent her time after work walking along the shore or standing in the park near the great bridge and gazing over the huge, blue expanse of lake and sky stretching out to Lake Huron and Lake Michigan. She began to write some things down. *The eyes of men*, she wrote, *are verdant with disgrace*. Her words were so like whispers, it was as if she could barely hear them, barely tell what they meant. Yet a virgin, already she was dreaming of infidelity.

It was an uneventful month but for a dark-skinned young man who visited the store, though that was uneventful, too. He was slender, often unkempt, but sometimes not. He always wore long, dark blue chinos and Birkenstocks with white socks, a button-down shirt covered by a sweater, even in the summer heat. He came almost every day. Occasionally he bought goat milk fudge. Sometimes he bought nothing at all. He watched her over the shelves of bric-a-brac, under a dark brow, and she found his eyes full of pleading; if not gentle, then at least pleading, for she began to notice him slipping things into the pockets of his pants.

She felt sorry for him and let him steal. She imagined him stealing to help support his mother, or a family. He'd turn as he left the store and catch her eye, and she felt that if there was not much good she could do in the world, then she could permit this, this indiscretion, which would right an imbalance. Until the old woman took inventory and accused her of stealing, or at least permitting it.

Oh, you know where this goes, don't you? Roscoe has told himself in the past that a good story, a well-told one, is so webbed full of causality that you don't notice it. That's why, I've answered on too many occasions, the good ones go untold, or if told, unread, if read, misunderstood. Give me simplicity or give me death!

Lisa took the hit for the young man. She said she didn't know who was stealing from the shelves. She got fired. She helped Mrs. Kisilinski close the store; then Mrs. Kisilinski subtracted the stolen inventory from her pay. She owed Mrs. Kisilinski eight dollars. "We'll call it even," Mrs. Kisilinski said without looking up from the register. Lisa took off her badge, which said *Lisa*, and put it on the counter. She didn't want to be Lisa Hornstein anymore.

When she left the store that night, he was waiting for her. It was not quite dusk. Mrs. Kisilinski watched from the window as the young man took Lisa's hand.

"Thank you," the young man said. "But it was unnecessary."

Lisa withdrew her hand. She said, "Would you like to walk to the bridge?"

She turned and walked. He followed her at first, then came up next to her, keeping his pace a shoulder ahead as if trying to lead a horse, had she known then about leading horses, though she did not. But she did not like him surging ahead of her and she stopped. When he noticed, he turned, offered a partial grin. At the bridge the fading sun was behind them in the southwest. It made the water silver and cast the arching shadow of the bridge onto the lakes. A wind rustled the August leaves, already turned down and drying in nascent autumn. She stepped in front of him to the railing and stared out to the water and sky. "You didn't need it," she said.

"No." He stepped up next to her again. "It is not proper for a girl to stand up for a man."

She stood on the edge of space, in the vise of opposites called the desire of men. In the dozens of times she'd watched him steal and met his gaze, she'd fallen deeper into the debt he owed her. No woman, not even Diosa, understood a man's desire, but she felt a chilling grip at her spine now, as if someone had pinned her wings in a fist.

"If I wept for you," she said to him, "would these lakes long for my tears?"

"My deeds are mine and your deeds are yours," he said.

She understood now that she shouldn't have walked to work. She should have driven or ridden her bike. She should have left the store the moment she was fired, in the daylight, instead of waiting for Mrs. Kisilinski to compute her pay and helping to close the store. She should not have let him touch her, not have invited him for the walk, though she now understood he would have followed her anyway. Now it was dark. Now there was no one around, and the city park stretched between her and the boardinghouse.

"Would you steal dark from darkness?" Lisa Hornstein said. "Light from light? Steal breath?" How could he know it was a curse when she did not? She turned away from him. He grabbed her shoulder and spun her to face him. She stepped back. He grabbed her by the neck, put an arm around her throat and a hand over her mouth. He dragged her into the park and attacked her. And when he was done, the young man named Arthur said, "God created the sexes, the male and the female, from a drop of ejected semen."

Arthur McGhee went home to his young wife, Sharid, who that very day, after months of complaining of mysterious illnesses that often kept her from having sex, had gotten him to take her to the Division of Motor Vehicles

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to apply for a driver's permit, a necessity, she argued, for an American wife who would shop for the family, with children who needed to go to the doctor and needed to go to school, all while he was at work. The Bible simply hadn't anticipated this car thing. You had to make a lot of inferences to keep women from behind the wheel. It was a lot easier in Saudi Arabia or Utah, where you had a whole society benevolently protecting them. He conceded. She waited behind him at the DMV, her tan face peering timidly out, but her brown eyes sparkling behind her wire-rimmed glasses. He spoke first. He answered all the questions unless she had to answer them. He wrote the check. Yet when they called her for her photograph, she stepped in front of him and walked to the camera. She stood on the yellow line and beamed.

At first, after the rape, Arthur's lust for the teenager from the fudge store seemed sated, then it aroused a passion in him for Sharid. He took her that night, as well. Then he despised her. He hated his work at IBM, where he designed software. He dreamed of moving his family to southern Utah and keeping several wives who did not drive cars. He thought of the girl. In the middle of the night he left his apartment and went back to the place where he'd taken her. He knelt on the impression of her body in the grass, smelling the ground. She had given herself to him. Even if she didn't know. She'd been brought to him by He who knew all, controlled all. Not a baby was born who was not in His thoughts. Not a moment passed anywhere in the universe that was not the beat of His heart.

Yet how each of us walked in our own doom. Cities and nations had been brought down because they had turned from God. She had put out her hand. Touched him. Followed him. Led him. Day after day her eyes touched his eyes. How could he have known she was a dark angel, a whore, that he had been in her spell? "I am not responsible for your actions," said the Book, "and you are not responsible for mine." God had made the world perfectly good. Placed the sun to light the day and the moon the night, blanketed the black sky with bejeweled stars, spread animals and plants over the earth to feed and clothe His people. Only the will of men brought evil into this bounty.

Arthur McGhee walked to the bridge. If he could have the girl again, he would. If he could kill her now, he would. But instead he carried her in his heart like a hive of bees; until his death she would make honey of his sin. God brings whom He will into his mercy. He whom God leads astray has no one to protect him. It is a long way down from the top of the bridge to the water, which is flat and hard like cement. He plans to think of God as he flies but he does not. He sees the girl before his flying eyes, and a hundred bleeding boys, a name carved on their thighs. He spreads his arms and ever so briefly thinks he is an angel flying headlong in front of a great army of believers; maybe he is, but as the water comes close, he is overcome by the anguish of a man desperately, hopelessly in love.

This is not a story. This is truth; a few inspired lines brought forth by metaphor, by parable, by prayer, by trick, by fever, by example; this was a sample; Arthur McGhee just a couple of words on a page. A man who raped a girl in Mackinaw City, Michigan, and committed suicide by jumping off the Mackinaw Island Bridge. Two lives were conceived that night, as well. One was Ramsey McGhee, the son of Sharid, who put her grief in God's hands, got her driver's license, and drove to Ann Arbor, where she started school and went to work in a bagel shop. She became a civil rights lawyer. Ramsey converted to Islam and became a famous intellectual and apologist for his new faith.

Lisa Hornstein found the police worse than the rape. She was ridiculed and probed, and cut off by her interrogator before she could finish her sentences. The interrogating officer was female. Lisa quickly surmised that the fact that she'd walked off alone with a thief made her more culpable than he. If knowledge is a community affair, then McGhee was right, it wasn't his fault. She didn't find out she was pregnant until she reached college almost a month later, in Kalamazoo. Alone in Kalamazoo she braved her first abortion.

Later, at college in Kalamazoo, Diosa, still Lisa Hornstien then, took a boyfriend, a sweet kid named Ralph Hopper, whom she called Hoppie, a high school All-American soccer player, not that it meant much back then. After he met Lisa, he quit the soccer team and joined the Kalamazoo College All-Kazoo Marching Band, an act of such self-conscious irrelevancy that it bored her. Things fell apart. Hoppie dropped out of school and joined the navy; Diosa always thought of him as her first and dearest love, her Michael Furey; in the navy he became a brilliant F-15 pilot, but without a war to fight he evolved into a flight instructor, then a member of the Blue Angels; one day, his heart aching, his jet a singing cross in the burning sky, he broke formation and took his final dive. (Not so many years later, on the Night of Ghosts, Roscoe sat on Diosa's bed in her apartment in Salt Lake City, across from the cemetery, and watched out the crack of her bedroom door as she sat in candle light with her Amontillado, watched as her dead lovers came to her door with their gifts: a pendant of amethyst, a camel's saddlebag, a spider's silken dream, the last thought of a dying child—what can you do with gifts from the dead? You turn them into poems, into eternity. Hoppie was the last to come, his arms full of gladiolus stolen from a grave.)

She fell in love with a woman. Her lover, a jovial, pretty girl who called herself Pheda Lamort, was an apprentice of Conrad Hillbury. Together Pheda and Lisa got high and read Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf, Leanora Carrington, Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich. Lisa changed her name to Lisa Diosa. She stopped shaving. Got a crew cut. Bought all her clothes from thrift stores and wore army boots. The two of them tromped through Kalamazoo, boots trucking, long, black coats flapping, yelling "Fuck off!" It attracted boys like buzzards. (Years later Roscoe's closest boyhood friend, when visiting him in Los Angeles, upon spotting a picture of Pheda Lamort on Diosa's bookshelf, fell hopelessly in love, sold his business, left his wife and children, and moved to Kalamazoo, where he threw everything he had into a small press dedicated to publishing lesbian poetry. The press went belly up almost immediately. Pheda Lamort gained weight and disappeared inside herself, and

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Roscoe's boyhood friend moved to Seattle and became a coffee mogul.) For her part, during her sophomore year, Diosa brought Pheda home for Thanksgiving. She announced that she'd changed her last name from Hornstein to Diosa. Her parents pulled her out of Kalamazoo and sent her to the University of Virginia in Charlottesville.

Where she took up anthropology. Her professor, Simone Peter Dubois, fell in love with her, though he was twice her age. He had a job. He bought her presents. He dreamed of Africa. Diosa dreamed she was a cat. At night, she walked along the fence outside his window, silver and silken, preening her long fur, her call to him like something carnal in his ears, *what color is the blue weeping of hyacinths?* He ran his hands through his thick, blond hair, held his face, left his wife. Traveled to Africa and learned to speak in short, guttural clicks. Upon his return, he was to take Diosa with him on his next trip to the Kalahari (but while he was gone, a young Chilean, Arturo Cruz, who claimed to be the National Chilean Surf Champion, met her at a bar and she went home with him; she made him so insane with love that he crawled across the walls and ceiling of his bedroom like a spider; he crawled over her; he sunk his mandibles into her neck; it was the first time she came; he took her to the coast and upon his surfboard stood with her upon his shoulders atop a seething wave; from there, turning her head from the shore, she saw the shores of France, the shadow of Paris like an insect on the edge of a web; by the time they reached the sand she

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couldn't love him anymore, couldn't drink any more Brazilian licorices; at night, he felt like something tiny that she would eventually have to eat; and so he stalked her; he slept at her door, his breath sucking through the keyhole, his fingers slipping through the crack on the floor, until he followed her one night to the bar where they'd met, and the owner, Sandobar Ohara, an erudite book lover and restaurateur, saw the look of fear and tedium in Diosa's eye when she entered his establishment, Arturo Cruz panting at her side like something once ferocious and now a whelp, lifted his finger and had Cruz knocked out and put on an airplane leaving D.C. with a liberal senator bound for Colima, Mexico; everyone on the small jet died when the pilot, thinking he'd spotted the tiny airfield in the fog, crashed into a forest strung with lights). Simone Peter Dubois returned from Africa, and Diosa saw that he was different in that way that men who have not changed believe they have changed.

"I am a shaman," he said.

"What did you have to do?"

"Stay awake for three days and nights, then eat the raw rectum of a skunk." She later found out there were no skunks in Africa and he must have eaten the rectum of an African Polecat. It only made things worse.

Diosa put her index finger on his lips. She held him there at arm's length. She turned away and left the Department of Anthropology. Simone Peter Dubois disappeared in the Kalahari.

Enter Sandobar Ohara, who feted her with pheasant, chateaubriand, and French wine, taught her to drink chilled martinis straight up with only a breath of dry vermouth and a lemon twist. She grew her hair long again, read all of Shakespeare and Colette. A short, dapper man, Ohara wanted her totally, completely; he was that kind of man; he wanted her so much that he bought the thrift stores where she bought her clothes, the bookstores where she bought her books. *All men are in love with me*, she wrote, *their eyes like caves, their skeletal fingers savage on my pelvis bone*. He wanted her all over him, her thick hair a hairfall around him. He could only release on her stomach when she wore hose and heels, which was fine with her but for the hose and heels. "Oh Sandy," she said to him, "I have too much hair." He took her to New York, where she ran off with a Jamaican boy, barely seventeen, a model who had slept with Liza Minnelli, Michael Jackson, Mick Jagger; he wore eyeliner and lip gloss, platform shoes with heels of glass. His loving was frail and quick, but maybe that was better. She came to find the fickle wand of manhood far too fickle. By the time she returned to Sandy's hotel in Chelsea, the boy had slit his wrists with the broken shards of his heels and Sandy lay naked upon his bed, weeping while she mounted him. Back in Charlottesville, she stopped seeing him for a while. "You're not leaving me," he said. And sensing something now, both inside her and outside her, she whispered, "No, I am never leaving anyone. Ever am I leaving no one. Never am I leaving ever leaving." She went back to her apartment and wrapped herself in scarves and lay in bed. She sat at her window watching the cars on the gray street. In a month she discovered she was pregnant and put on her long black coat at dawn and walked through an uncommon blizzard to Sandy's door. "You're back," he said. And she said, "I'm pregnant." He told her to wait there. She heard the laughter of a girl. He brought her $250. He said, "That should be enough." But a funeral costs more than that. The fetus had been male, and that night Sandobar Ohara lay in his bed like a fish, suffocating on air.

She dyed her hair brown and red. Her hair poured from her like a jungle. She moved to a cottage in the country, across from a field of cows. She opened the wire fence and let them rove onto her land. They came to her porch, then came onto her porch. She brought them inside and let them watch her cook, carrot and lentil soup, brown bread, rice. They folded up and slept on her living room floor, murring gently to her when she petted their soft rubber noses. On warm afternoons she walked with them in the fields, and they followed her in a line with their rolling behemothical bodies on their spindly legs, speaking to her of fur and grass and milk. Then, as if they had all been impregnated by a ghost, at night she heard them praying for their unborn children. "What are you afraid of?" she asked them. Loss, they murred. Loss. But she really didn't know anything about cows. She didn't know any more about cows than the cows had taught her. The babies came. She watched them struggle to their feet, follow their mothers. They bounced against each other, bounded, their round brown eyes and fur like satin. Her landlord, Gregorio Orozco, a famous and now wealthy poet at UVA, who as a boy accidentally shot his brother in the woods, an act from which he never recovered and wrote about over and over and over in poems that had gradually shrunk in size over the years from pages long to a few mere lines from which, if you knew his work at all, you could understand the allusions to the rest of his opus, an eventuality that caused him tremendous guilt, of which he wrote with even greater success. Orozco came for the rent.

"I can't pay it," she said. "I don't have a job."

"I thought you were a student," he said.

"Of cows," she said.

"Don't you know what they do with these cows?" he said to her.

But at that moment, her blue eyes opened an eternity to him, and he knew that he could teach her everything about poems and she could teach him everything about cows. Of course, he was wrong about both, but it was deeply felt, and it made him walk away without the rent and with the memory of her eyes, her face turned toward him slightly with the wisdom of a doe. When he went home to his wife, a painter, and his two young daughters, his life as he'd known it had already come to an end.

"Rent?" said his wife, Margrite.

"I might as well be dead," he said to her.

"You've only fallen in love again," she said, because she'd come to learn that he fell in love again and again, that he shot his brother again and again, and if he did not kill and did not fall in love, if he were not burdened with heart-aching guilt, then he would not write and there'd be no salary from UVA, and if divorce were a possibility, well, not yet, not while their daughters were so young; besides, she had as much or more to lose as he, this house, a mansion in the country, given to them by her parents, now half in his name, and as well the land where the girl rented the cottage; before this she'd learned enough and took a lover in New York City, where two galleries showed her work, but her trips to the city, once a month, were financed by the rent. But unlike his wife, Orozco couldn't simply take a lover, have an affair, go to the Y, and have a steam bath before coming home.

He ran his hands through his thick black hair. He sat, elbows on his knees, his hands covering his face, fingertips pressed against his eyes. He raised his head. The world was new.

"This isn't like the others," he said.

"They never are," said Margrite. "You have to pick up your daughters from school."

He arose. The simple duties of his life now were like walking on sand, no, a desert of sand through which he walked, his back laden with his own gravestone.

"Are you going to cry?" she said.

"I'll get them," he sniffled. If his greatness could be measured by how well he carried the desperate misfortune and horrible pain he often brought upon himself, then he was a great man, and a good one, too. But this time, this time, after all those times his love had been overwrought and his reaction overblown, this time he was right.

When he left for the girls, Margrite got up from her five-by-five canvas of huge brown and gold flowers that tumbled over each other in such profusion that the decorative became abstract and the abstract disconcerting, and the disconcern, if you kept looking, troublesome; she got up and went to her Volvo station wagon and drove out to the cottage where she saw the girl standing in the pasture

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among the mothers and their calves, the spring sun splaying the air as if it were raining knives, the cows murmuring in that aching, prescient way, and the girl lopping away chunks of her own hair with a pair of huge scissors. Margrite, hating her already, hated her in a way she hadn't hated the others. The others were only girl poets.

Margrite crossed the field, the high grass scratching at her naked calves left exposed by her Capri pants. She walked up to Diosa, who stood in the pile of her own hair.

Margrite said to her, "These calves become veal."

"Do you think I'm cutting my hair for my own good?" Diosa said.

"They are separated from their mothers, isolated, overstuffed, then slaughtered."

"Do you think it's a metaphor for young women?" Diosa asked. "Do cows choose to be cows? Veal meat?"

"Sleeping with Gregorio will not make you a famous poet," Magrite said.

"Who is a poet?" Diosa said.

And Diosa, who already suspected this was some wife, in fact, Gregorio's wife, because only men with wives lost their hearts so completely as Gregorio had—death leaping from a past self like a cat on fire, his heart dropping in front of her, his pleading hands speaking to the air, his brow whispering—Diosa said, "Will it keep me from becoming a famous poet the way the world keeps a refrigerator from becoming an elephant?" She lopped off a chunk of brown hair and blew it from her hand, because what do you tell a wife who has confronted you with her husband's love? That you want him? That you do not want him? Which is the greater insult? "Would you prefer a hollow man or a dead man?" she finally said to Margrite. "What have I done," she asked, "but stand here and cut my hair among cows?"

They came that night and took the calves. She heard the rumbling of the trucks and the baleful moaning of the mothers, the bleating of the calves, while some unknown part of her ran from herself, and instead of leaping from her porch to throw her body between the men and the babies, she slept on, awaking in the morning with blood on her swollen tongue. The mothers swayed and moaned for two weeks until slowly, like the groan of a departing train, it lay on the edge of her hearing. She couldn't walk among them anymore. She gave up vegetarianism. She jumped into her rattling Volkswagen Rabbit and drove to fraternity row, parked, and walked into a party. There, she spotted a thin young man with long wavy hair, wearing a sleeveless T-shirt and a bow tie. His eyes were gentle and witty, his pants linen, his shoes Italian, and he had his arm around another young man with short curly hair, the two of them swaying a bit drunkenly to Roxy Music and the soft voice of Brian Ferry. She liked Roxy Music and she liked Brian Ferry. The young man's name was Jonathan Chrisman Swift, yes, one of the meatpacking Swifts. She walked up to him. "Marry me," she said. And he did.

Soon afterward, at the English Department at UVA, she found Gregorio Orozco in his office and stood in front of his desk with her many lengths of hair and mascara flying across her face like black rain. "Let me study poetry," she said.

Gregorio Orozco's heart leapt like a hunter's behind a deer blind, his finger soft upon the trigger, his blood like mercury, his lungs liquid lead; exhale, then squeeze, don't tug.

He looked Diosa in the eye. "You were an anthropology major," he said. "What have you read? What have you written?"

Diosa picked up a pencil and a blank sheet of paper from Orozco's desk. She stooped over and wrote:

The Immense Jolt of Loving

For you the simulations of my mental instability become untranslatable. For you in the face of the air that separates us I purchase a revolver. I spit, I shut, I kick the curtains, the bolts, the forest of doors. You are sexual copper. You lie like a rose on our bed of poetic manifestations. Do you find me charming or idiotic? All this lavishness. Too much biting in the middle of the night? I've put the photographic plate of my face into an acid bath. You'll be shocked by what emerges, more or less. The bones of one continuous escape.

She handed it to Gregorio Orozco, who shook as he read, his eyes filling with something more profound than admiration, deeper than jealousy, more avaricious than love. Almost unconsciously he held out his trembling hand. "Maybe we can talk about this," he said. He choked. "Over lunch."

And Diosa put out her hand, too, touching the tip of his middle finger with a purple nail, her wedding ring shining like a poet's moon. She began to hum something, an old show tune, something from musical theater, she could barely remember. "How does that go?" she laughed. "A boy like you could kill his brother." Yet after that moment Gregorio Orozco became as an abandoned shell. When he tried to speak, his voice was a choking whisper. His thoughts, now like effigies of mannequins, fell invisibly upon the page. He drove himself mad with love poems that died on his fingertips, metaphors that became drool on his lips, similes that collapsed inside themselves before he could raise a comparison. His wife left him. Both of his children went mad. His life thus saved, he became a body builder. A marathon runner. A triathlete. He tried to sing opera. Learned Greek. Did not write again for twenty years. But it was the beginning of something. Her slouching toward Roscoe Harlan. And that's how Diosa came to study poetry and, in her way, saved Orozco's life.

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