

Clay Manor  
or  
*né Hecatanchire* by Marie Lévi-Bosko:  
a Novel  
by  
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## Abstract

*Clay Manor* gazes inwards at the academic strictures governing the contents of its writing. *Clay Manor* suggests, through self-reference, that critically-conscious writing exhibits symptoms of melancholy narcissism.

In this novel, “Revenue” (a caricature of literary institute), commissions its employees to fetch the “taxes” (memoirs) of a homeowner on McHugh Bluff in Calgary, Alberta. Revenue’s protocols demand that taxes adhere to traditions of the classical novel. Characters inside the house, however, willfully disregard local folkways and thus accumulate back taxes while upholding their dream sequence. Revenue’s employees, “taxmen” (literary scholars), do not receive their payday unless they file paperwork for their commissions. In frustration, the taxman assigned to McHugh Bluff forges the homeowner’s taxes himself. The taxman names his paperwork after the house: “Clay Manor”, and discovers that the surreal lifestyles inside will not accord to literary conventions such as moral order, chronology, or language.

*Clay Manor* uses metafiction to juxtapose the didactic aims of theory against the descriptive aims of story. *Clay Manor* performs the inward gaze of melancholia thus restricting its own avenues for narrative in order to critique the academic thesis as a mode of authorship.

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Clay Manor doesn't actually lean out from the bluff in Calgary, but *Clay Manor* stands on shindigs of real teachers and friends who live, work, or have visited the city. Many of the people who helped me build this house are members of the very institutes I claim to undermine but actually have much to learn from. Professors Suzette Mayr, Robert Majzels, Christian Bök, and Joshua Lobb have choice seating in *Clay Manor*'s dining hall.

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I once brought Clay Manor with me on a road trip. Kathleen Brown, Jake Kennedy, Claire Lacey, Kevin Macpherson Eckoff, Sandy Pool, and Indra Singh know what that looks like.

Many others stand on the rhombi out back. Join them. Dance or something.

*to Marie Lévi-Bosko, if I don't as a joke  
but also to Darren Chang—as another joke*

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## **Exegesis: The Taxman Stole My Introduction**

The taxman stole my introduction. He reads it to other characters as part of the story on PAGES “SO AND SO” (chapter 17). He passes it off as his own work. The bastard. That bastard Gaspard Hobbes.

He’s left me only a bibliography.

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## 1. Clay Manor Introduces Itself

Clay Manor inches its door ajar. Clinks its chain rigid. A taxman strolls up the walk. He stays his finger from the bell. Should bang out the cold, he thinks—and as it happens, Clay Manor slams its front door. Bang.

“And back.” A raven claps its wings on the driveway. The raven cries out. “And back.” It hops from one leg to the other and in ovation topples over on the snow. The taxman turns back to Clay Manor. Again the door clinks open.

He peeks in through the inch between door and doorframe. The greeting room gloats with portraits, each painting a mishmash of different characters. A corridor yawns onto the eastern wing where on the rug a pipe organ stands two-feet-tall.

He slips his thumb into the letter slot. Leaning forward, he peers through the shutter. The greeting room props a staircase on the upper storey. Behind the doorway letters clutter—a sentence, that is, from taxmen.

He shuffles paperwork from one hand to the other. He pokes the doorbell. He breathes onto his pinkened fingers, he wipes snow off his pea coat. He pokes the bell again, knocks the doorframe. He calls into the greeting room. “Hello.”

“Well,” echoes Clay Manor. “Hello.”

He tucks his tie into his button-down. He flips open his paperwork. Clay Manor’s tax letter reads *One after another, taxmen snooped through*. He jots a margin note: the latest taxman peering in that house is him. He draws a picture of the door chain.

“And back.” The raven claps its wings beside the taxman to the door—which slams—then the raven hops along Clay Manor’s eastern wall, applauding.

Should mum itself, the taxman thinks. He snaps his briefcase closed.



Clay Manor inches its door ajar. The taxman strolls around Clay Manor's corner after that gabbing raven.

The taxman lurches past bow windows. He mistakes frost across the panes for etched glass portraits of the Muse named Calliope jotting taxes on her beeswax tablet. Whoever lurked this way before the taxman stomped a mess of footprints in the snow. They penciled murals down the wall. Ahead of him, the raven hops into the yard. The taxman peers behind himself.

Clay Manor teeters on McHugh Bluff, the plot wedged deep into the steep-face. Its private driveway cuts down the hillside from a crescent road above. Below, houses line the avenues while the river clangs its pack ice. A toast. Downtown lifts towers to the blizzard.

“And back.” The raven tilts its head around the corner from the yard. It blinks its milky lids. The taxman wonders, Shall we lurk behind Clay Manor?—to which he replies. What raven says, and for that matter, says aloud?

Shut up that raven, thinks the taxman.

Behind that house, a clutch of purple loosestrife tosses *loves-me-nots* at February. A tar stain oozes down Clay Manor's backside from the clerestory windows to the loosestrife on the ground. A sketchbook lies frozen open at the loosestrife's edge; a doodle of weevils marches in a figure eight over its paper.

The taxman strolls through the garden. At the far side of Clay Manor's back, a shock of conifers flickers tawny with dragonflies. The insects jig around the branches two-by-two. The raven leads the taxman closer. What he mistook—what *only he* would mistake—for dragonflies with dance partners are dragonflies eating smaller dragonflies.

The raven totters through the trees. The taxman squeezes through the needles after. At their fingertips the evergreens are new with blue. He lurks along Clay Manor's western wall,

pinecones underfoot, and he steps onto the driveway where he started. He follows the raven hopping up Clay Manor's walk again. "And back."

Rather than a welcome mat, a tablecloth sets dinnerware across the doorstep. A pair of tuning forks to the left and to the right a yellow pinwheel. Crème brûlée torched to ashes in a purple ramekin. The taxman flips open his paperwork; he jots a note, he draws a picture.

The raven hops along the eastern wing, clapping while it starts a second go-a-round. Again the taxman lurches past Clay Manor's windows. This other time around the house, however, the taxman halts in his own tracks. He peers behind himself at the frosted windows which he again mistakes for etching. He turns forward.

Our first time round, no one jotted in the margins that an argyle parachute drapes red and grey rhombi across the snow behind Clay Manor. The taxman writes this now. He draws the parachute; red, grey rhombi on his paperwork. From somewhere in the yard, a woman says:

"I never did follow. But I never said to 'shut up' either."

A second someone back there answers, "Well. I've yet to tame either the worm's- or bird's-eye view. Though I am all right, perhaps, at shading. Lights and darks—maybe—are my hot spots."

"*A worm?* Worms are blind. You've mastered blindness fine, I'd say."

"To shade the darkest darks," the second someone carries on, "simply draw the tightest plaid. A 'cross-hatch' they call it."

"Who's 'they'? I'd have let this trail off already, Aeolus. I'd have let this go." The woman adds, loudly—"Pooh"—then whispers, "Yes. Simply that. No?"

"Who says?" the second someone asks. That second someone then answers himself. "Perhaps who doesn't follow."

“And back.” The raven peers backwards at the taxman, then hops around the corner to the yard.

The taxman lurches nearer. He asks himself, Is this that dream I have where every word I utter turns to letters? He runs his hand along Clay Manor’s wall; the penciled murals on the brick spell ornate blocks of letters. He reads, *a tuning fork is silverware / the main course is war music*. In brackets afterwards, a pair of numbers “2”—half-erased and separated by a comma—haunt the block-work. Again the taxman asks himself, Is this that dream?

The someone in the yard: “Fancy following,” she says. “I’ll wake up twisted. Sirens pealing.”

“A good thing then, that we hid your keys. There’s no difference between telling stories of you drinking and sharing rumours of the long-gone. None of them should travel, that’s to say. I would offer my back to mount, but sphinxes can schlep only so many.”

“Is that the royal or a jotter’s ‘we’ who hid my keys? Churn my stomach, why don’t you. Make me feel as though I’ve eaten Gouda.”

The taxman leans still closer. He thinks such wacky gossip should happen after dark but he believes that people—save detectives—should not *should* others.

The second someone raises his gossip.

“‘Gouda’?” he snarls. “As if you could hold that down. Kindly don’t spill my cheese into the toilet later. ‘Simply that’ you say? How about ‘No’?”

“No. *No*. How about ‘What’?”

“For shindigs,” the second someone whispers. He screams, “*Remember?*”

The noise of glass shatters from the yard. Flinching, the taxman creeps onwards, pressing himself close against the wall. He tilts his head, peeks behind Clay manor.

The woman rides the rhombi on her back, wears just a checkered shirtdress and black ballet flats. She lies broadside to him, stretching her legs to the middle of the yard. She glosses her lips with a honey wine. Snow falls in her drink and tangled crop cut. Her arms marble pink and white with shivers. She sneezes. “Woof.” A girl my age, the taxman thinks, should save her drink for bedtime.

A nearby birdcage wears a chiffon wedding gown. Green ribbons at the waist. Underneath the fabric sheer, that raven swings on a perch, casts its shadow on a bowl of ice cream served with baklava. The woman in the shirtdress reaches through the birdcage’s skirt. She breaks a baklava in half, feeds some to the raven. The woman pecks a sip of honey wine from her glass’s rim.

Wine glass number two lies shattered at the far edge of the parachute where a tom cat lolls sideways. Would dwarf an eastern wolf, this cat, and grey rosettes char its black fleece from tail to pompadour. Around this cat the snow has warmed to slush. Hair rollers curl over its square withers. Down both sides of its face the fluff spins into mutton chops. It rolls onto its belly, flops its plummy tail over, over. With a stick of charcoal pinched in its front claw it doodles on a leaf of foolscap.

Winking mismatched brown and yellow eyes, the cat pitches its head left to right, flips its mane through the snow. It blinks at the raven swinging in the birdcage then smiles at the taxman lurking at the corner. What the taxman mistook for the cat’s sea-coloured collar is, of course, the cat’s sea-coloured necktie cinched tight with a Windsor knot.

“You and I,” the cat tells the taxman. “We have matching nooses.”

The taxman smoothes his pinstripes which, as the cat observed, hang blue. The cat lifts its leaf of foolscap. The doodle: of a woman in a shirtdress, from underneath, climbing a ladder that

leans against Clay Manor. Although the cat holds just the stick of charcoal, indigos on the shirtdress in his cartoon match indigos on the woman lying near him.

The woman in the checkered shirtdress props herself onto her elbows. She smooches her last drip of honey wine. “Didn’t you just stroll through here?” she asks the taxman. Indeed his footprints cut through the yard, in one spot over the red and grey parachute.

“It’s only human,” says the cat, “to stroll with doldrums.”

“How about, ‘Says you?’” asks the woman.

“Well how about it, *Marie?*” the cat hisses back.

“Hello,” the taxman says. “I am Gaspard Hobbes.”

The woman and the cat trade grins. She tugs down her dress’s hem and the cat winks its brown eye. The cat lowers his foolscap and he pinches at the dress worn by the woman in his picture.

“Hello. My name is Gaspard Hobbes. I work for Revenue.” From his paperwork he pulls an envelope. Revenue’s red logo glowers at the upper corner. “This letter is for Pallas Briefman.”

The woman nods her head. The cat nods also. She lifts her arm. The cat likewise lifts his paw. They point at one another. From inside the wedding gown between them, the raven says, “Every squid wears a beard.”

“What’s the letter tell us?” asks the cat. “A ‘Once-upon-the-times’ or somesuch? How about a recipe?”

“Tax delinquency.”

“I call myself Flechette.” The cat glances to his woman friend. She wipes her knuckle underneath her runny nose, saying “Why, I’m Siobhan Frye.”

The taxman turns his envelope to the raven. The raven shakes its head.

“I am Gaspard Hobbes. Hello. I work for Revenue.”

The woman tugs up her dress’s hem, the cat winks its yellow eye. Petals from the purple loosestrife drift over the parachute. The raven claps its wings.

“So I’ll slide this in the mail slot.” The taxman mimes shoving the envelope into a letter slot. He unfolds a second paper. “And I’ll have one of you sign this.” Revenue’s red logo glowers from the upper corner of this other paper also. At the bottom of the page, an underline marked with an “X” asks for an autograph. “Please,” the taxman says.

“If you passed *me* that paper—the first paper; the letter in the envelope, that is—nobody would need to write a word,” the woman says.

“The first one is for Pallas Briefman, not for you,” the taxman tells Siobhan.

“Well then.” Siobhan upends her empty glass. It falls onto the rhombi. She extends her hand. Palm up. Quivering. “Pen.”

“Help yourself to my shindig while you’re at this.” The cat gestures to the ice cream in the wedding gown. “Just the four of us for now, but I’ve invited a whole hopscotch. You and I can play the hangmen hung.”

The taxman steps onto the rhombi. He passes the second paper and that felt-tipped marker to Siobhan. He suspects no cat should host a shindig. Least of all on Wednesday afternoon. He suspects no woman so unclothed should lie outside in flurries. He leans over the birdcage. The bowl of ice cream freckled with vanilla bean and baklava, he thinks, should not sit beneath a raven. The raven’s birdcage should not wear a wedding dress, particularly with no garter nor white pantyhose. Loosestrife should not bloom through the new year. And certainly, thinks Gaspard Hobbes, no taxman should stand behind Clay Manor reaching through a skirt for his dessert. The taxman steps backwards. He peers behind himself.

“Look at you,” says the cat. “Turn me down.”

“What’s it to eat dessert?” Siobhan asks. She hands back the taxman’s marker, his paper.  
“Look how big you’ve made yourself.”

The cat replies, “Is the cloud between us your bad breath or mine?”

As he strolls from the yard, the taxman peers behind himself. He catches the cat whisper.  
“What did that other paper say?—the one you signed.” To which Siobhan answers, “Some point-form stupid.” She sits back down while the cat skulks inside the house. The taxman rounds the eastern wing. He strolls up the walk.

Clay Manor’s letter slot inches open. Through the shutter, the cat peers outwards. With his brown eye then the other. Yellow. “You and I,” says the cat. “We are likewise.” The taxman slides the tax letter addressed to Pallas Briefman through the letter slot. “I call myself Flechette,” says the cat. “I call myself Flechette.” The letter slot inches shut.

A wicker sunhat on the driveway catches snow across its brim. The woman underneath the hat stares downwards. Stomping in the taxman’s footprints through the snow, this woman in a sunhat strolls up Clay Manor’s walk.

She gazes left. The taxman’s footprints dawdle to the yard. She gazes right. Taxman footprints doodle all around the house. She says, “And back. Again and back.”

“Hello. My name is Gaspard Hobbes.”

“I don’t remember you *either*,” she says. She stomps through his tracks around the corner, strolls into the yard.

At Clay Manor’s other side, the raven totters from the trees again. It claps its wings across the driveway, hops through the snow after that sunhat woman. She must be older, thinks

the taxman. Here for that *shindig*. He lurches from Clay Manor, flips open his paperwork, and ambles up the private driveway.

The sunhat woman stomped in every footprint he tracked through the snow when he approached the manor earlier. All the way from a sedan parked on the crescent road above. Her tracks start beside the sedan's door, nested inside his. As though she rode here with me, thinks the taxman.

He peers behind himself. He peeks into the sedan's window. A plastic bag filled with coloured cardstock sits on the passenger-side floor just as he left it. He slides his key into the socket, opens the door. The safety belt curls onto the leather. Cake crumbs from his friend's breakfast speckle a pillow in the back.

Snowflakes drift through the open door onto the driver's seat. The taxman sits in the sedan. The flurries melt a wet spot on his pants. He shuts the door too gently so he reopens it. He shuts the door again. He pokes his key in the ignition.

He peers into his rear view. Clay Manor's conifers poke upwards from below, their needles lit with dragonflies. The raven perches in the branches, blinking.

“And back.”



## ***2. What are Taxes? not How to Pay Them?***

*What it means?* wonders Gaspard while he lurks home from Clay Manor.

The taxman's bungalow wears crossed gables matching the adjacent brick-and-shingle street pieces. The shiny onion on his roof, unlike those above his neighbours', often switches the direction of its spin and is the only outward hint of fiction here—whereas already-purpled flowers and the shock of conifers alight with dragonflies behind Clay Manor seem six months ahead of time and that much closer than the rest of McHugh Bluff to answering the question *What it means?* even though the homeowner neither returned letters nor answered the door.

*What it means?* Gaspard wonders, that this homeowner neither-nors? How's it Pallas Briefman in Clay Manor now? *and why? What it means?*

“Why does Revenue want taxes from Clay Manor?” Gaspard asks himself. “And why can't Pallas Briefman write them? Are Clay Manor's taxes romance or a mystery? Do I need a detective?”

Gaspard flips open his paperwork.

Pallas Briefman inherited Clay Manor half a year ago alongside a chain of bakeries famous for its ages-old sourdough and yogurt. The prior owner, Vincent Clay, died of an aneurysm in the eastern wing. Vincent's mother, Ashley, was founder of Clay Manor. Ashley had one hundred hands to bake dessert, some say. She stoked every potbelly in those bakeries herself before she toppled down the spiral stairwell, crinkling her backbone. The truth, however (according to Revenue), is that Ashley cooks dessert through hocus-pocus.

These days, Ashley Clay lies in the hospital. Her backbone twisted nips her nervous cord. She says, “I never met Pallas Briefman. Why did Vincent call him ‘Pallas Briefman’? If I were hocus-pocus, would my house owe taxes? Bogus. All of it.”

Snowflakes tumble from the ceiling fan in Gaspard's bathroom because that shiny onion on his roof turns backwards. Gaspard mops the puddle. The baseboards peel with mildew. Gaspard wrings his mop over his toilet. The water rusts with fungus. Gaspard flushes. A housebroken goat lives in the bungalow with him so Gaspard has to clean the toilet water.

“What *this* means?” Gaspard asks himself. “Means I dream of middle age, of course, when braces sort my grin persnickety as letters on a press and every word hereafter uttered crisp as printing.”

Gaspard wishes Clay Manor would answer *What it means?* on its own. That way Gaspard Hobbes could file paperwork. If the house itself could speak he wouldn't *need* Pallas Briefman to answer the door.

Tax letters are memoirs. Revenue collects memoirs from characters in order to police the stories lived out in the city. Each letter must answer *How's it?—the who, wherein, this when and why, what it means?* or Revenue evicts the characters and seizes their property. He Himself (who founded Revenue) insists that taxes exhort morals, lessons followed, or do-overs. In summer, He Himself commissions taxmen to slaughter goats for vellum. Then He Himself prints that year's memoirs. Tour guides gather readers to visit characters who best showcase *what it means*, morals exhorted, lessons followed, or do-overs.

If a taxman does not collect a tax letter in the first place or later cannot stomach the slaughter, the taxman earns no payday. Every taxman who strolled McHugh Bluff that Gaspard knew of gave up on Clay Manor's commission to work on other letters. So far four this half year. Gaspard Hobbes only just strolled up the walk, yet already he fancies maybe *What it means?* is neither moral nor a lesson followed. Rumours whisper about taxmen who jot first chapters themselves, leaving only *What it means?* to homeowners and quickening their stories.

Gaspard lurks downtown to work. The assistant, already in her corner of the office numbered fifteen-sixteen, munches on a cabbage whole. She offers him a leaf.

“Why not jot the whole tax letter?” Gaspard asks. He folds the leaf of cabbage into his mouth. He says, “Hello,” to the assistant. “Why wait for anyone to answer the door at all?”

The assistant fiddles with her glasses. Her velvet suit wears lint on its shoulder. The assistant blinks and shakes her head. Her cabbage crunches when she chews it. She nods when Gaspard sits behind his desk.

Gaspard opens up the drawer he knows is empty.

The phone on Gaspard’s desk goes ring.

The assistant bobs her head in time with the jingle.

“Hello?” says Gaspard Hobbes.

“Gaspard Hobbes?”

“This is me.”

“This is He Himself. Hello.”

“He *who*?” asks Gaspard Hobbes.

“He Himself. Who founded Revenue.”

Taxmen bicker over whether “HE HIMSELF” (who autographs commissions) is actually named He Himself or whether He Himself is even real. No one sits in seminar nor shares their food with anybody of that name. He Himself never signs the ledger in the break room to buy the coffee beans. Gaspard Hobbes thinks it unethical, that “HE HIMSELF” bakes no gumbo for lunch while “MARIE” shares baklava; “THALIA”, halal with falafel; “HILDEGARD”, mulligatawny; and “GASPARD” shrimp with chicken gumbo and fishes in bouillabaisse. Gaspard thinks that He Himself who preaches how to live out stories should help, at least, to stoke potbellies.

“Sixteen-sixteen,” He Himself tells Gaspard Hobbes over the phone. “Meet me.”

Gaspard peers up at the ceiling. Gaspard always believed the office over his was empty.

He Himself stares northwards out the window. The pea coat buttoned-up on jeans.

Checkered noose. Dirt in the breast pocket feeds a primrose boutonniere on the lapel. An assistant sits in the corner nodding while He Himself mumbles to no one.

“In third person,” says He Himself. “As though in tandem with a narrator who explains *What are taxes?*”

Gaspard Hobbes stands outside in the hall, wishing that his buttons shone as gold as He Himself’s.

“*Clay Manor*,” He Himself tells Gaspard Hobbes.

“Yes.”

“*‘Why not forge the whole tax letter?’ says Gaspard Hobbes?*” asks He Himself. He Himself steps closer. He Himself says, “Because He Himself sees every word hereafter uttered.” He Himself winks an eye. “Crisp as letters.”

He Himself’s assistant shakes her head at Gaspard Hobbes. She wags her finger.

“No,” says He Himself’s assistant. “Don’t.”

“What this means?” asks Gaspard Hobbes.

He Himself pats Gaspard on the shoulder. The primrose on that pea coat beads with wetness. Dirt inside the breast pocket leaks ruddy.

“He Himself will know if you forge that letter.” He Himself tells Gaspard Hobbes, “He Himself decrees taxmen forging letters heresy. He Himself won’t endorse that letter. Or that payday. He Himself. Who founded Revenue.”

Each time He Himself says that name, the assistant at the corner nods her head.

Gaspard Hobbes lurks to the elevator. He shakes his head with bother. He passes by the break room. A box of baklavas, again. Even though “MARIE” no longer works for Revenue, she still writes her name down in that ledger. The baklavas are Ashley Clay branded pastries.

“What that *means?*” asks Gaspard Hobbes.

Gaspard Hobbes prefers the finger-shaped baklavas because he doesn’t have to open his mouth wide to eat them. He brings a pair of knuckles to his office. One for him, one for his assistant; who shakes her head and chomps her cabbage. Gaspard wraps the extra baklava inside a paper towel for his girlfriend, whose name is Ladidah.

Gaspard sits behind his desk. He peers behind himself, northwards out the window. Clay Manor teeters on McHugh Bluff in the distance. Gaspard pictures red and grey rhombi spread over the snow. Purple loosestrife.

Another rumour Gaspard hears is of He Himself (who founded Revenue): that He Himself is neither almighty nor know-it-all.

Gaspard nibbles on the baklava he saved for Ladidah. The orange syrup brightens on his tongue to lemon. Hocus or no pocus, Gaspard thinks, Ashley Clay’s are tasty. He shuts his mouth and crunches the hazelnuts.

“The early chapters,” Gaspard says. “Just the first. To hurry story. Only.”

Gaspard touches a felt-tipped marker to his paperwork. He jots: *Clay Manor inches its door ajar. Clink: the chain.*

“Was that not weirdo?” Gaspard asks. “How I strolled twice around to notice characters behind Clay Manor.”

Gaspard Hobbes’s assistant shakes her head at the corner.

“I have to jot that sentence over,” Gaspard says. “Bothers clutter grammar through and through.”

Gaspard writes: *A taxman slides a letter through the letter slot.*

### 3. the Cat Behind Clay Manor

He whose wanderlust now snoozes through Clay Manor's blue-green bed sheets also boogied through the sea. He's tasted every salt. He who calls himself Flechette who is—who else?—the cat behind Clay Manor, surfed oceans with a crocodile, dived with jellyfish. He's drank high tide curdled thick with herring spawn and he's chased sperm whales through the bitter syrup they squirt backwards. He who spreads rhombi behind the house also minds the yard.

To mind Clay Manor's yard he scrubs bed sheets in the bathtub. Vacuums curtains. He brews detergent from bubbles spittlebugs sputter on grass. He mops his accidents off hardwood. His paw prints shimmer crimson from the fireplace across the floor. He pitters through the co-op garden without permission to usurp crowns of broccoli and cauliflower. He patters to the grocer's for smoked cheddar. Flechette seasons cast-iron skillet with pig fat. He saves a hock to practise tapping tattoos into.

He fluffs his pompadour against the welcome mat. He purrs while napping. Old Ashley Clay's used hair rollers twirl his fleece. He bleaches his mouth with a kitchen sponge and claws the lampposts to prove who is the biggest. Other cats stop hunting when they smell who marks the bluff. They yield their prowling grounds to oblige Flechette's howling. Flechette braids his children's manes with reds, purples, and blue.

Oftimes he schleps a bed sheet through the manor with him. He lolls beneath south-facing windows, so morning suns his pompadour. He paws the thermostat. If the dial turned to three-fifty, he'd bake the inside of Clay Manor to cookies. If the dial turned to noon, he'd spend his life at teatime. My pomegranates are so shivery, he thinks. He turns the thermostat. To red.

So she could throw a stone wherever, Ashley Clay built Clay Manor without glass. In place of windows, Ashley mounted blocks of plastic. In place of mirrors, boards of silver. To

light the manor, Ashley lit the ovens. In August when the house was warm enough she told stories over sherry of what Vincent promised he would do through winter. Ashley dribbled her wines from ceramic.

“I have since bought crystal,” says Flechette, “for shindigs. Never met my master’s mother. Never prowled the hospital. My friend Siobhan tells me ‘The cleaners switched to different bleaches to shut the door on odours.’ To which I ask ‘Who knows who owns that place?’ ”

Flechette shifted his sense of belonging from a freight container to Clay Manor shortly after Vincent Clay inherited the house. Since Flechette speaks our language, not only could Vincent train him, Vincent could tell him a story. “Mind the yard, to earn your keep,” Vincent told the cat. To mind the yard, Flechette digs. Six months after Vincent’s funeral, he still slinks through the yard to pick the dirt under the shock of conifers. “I never knew a necktie before I met Vincent,” says Flechette while he knots pinstripes. “What cat’s as dapper? Bastet, perchance.”

“Furthermore, what cat hosts shindigs? What cat bakes dessert? What cat spreads rhombi and what cat speaks our language? What cat minds the yard? Just stone cats, that’s the what.” Vincent Clay entrusted the house and all its things-to-do to he who sires litter after litter on the bluff. Yet Flechette thus far can’t hand down his language. Flechette asks his kittens “What is this? What is that?” To which they only reply “Meow.”

His friend who wears the sunhat tells us, “Every cat will hold its bitters—but he gets on without a drop, that Pussy. He talks and talks of ‘what’ and ‘what’ but really what he means to say is ‘how I see it.’ Pussy says he minds the yard. He says he makes dessert. What he does—or rather how I see it—is throw shindigs.”



As per his shindigs, Siobhan and the woman in the sunhat are last again to set their crystals down and leave. Flechette sprawls in the yard. He waves and whispers “Bye.” His stomach groans with syllabub and panna cotta. Throughout the night, he fed the shindiggers a honeyed chicken and a honeyed ham, a pucker of butter tarts, a grin of baklavas, a margarita giggle with a quarter triple sec, a box of mangos baked into cakes and a crate of apples fired into pies. A toolbox full of screwdrivers, half a smirk of cookies, a palette of Greek pizza, and the funk of psychotropic mushrooms neighbours had brought over.

Flechette slumps onto his fours. He shakes the flurries off his curls then tugs and tugs the red and grey rhombi inside. The back door doesn’t fit his withers, so he angles himself in. “So big,” he whispers. “What cat’s as?” He drags the parachute into the eastern wing where he drapes it over then naps across the chair for passing out on. Snow melts off the rhombi, drips onto the floor. The second storey creaks with movement from the shindig’s overnighter. The creaking wakes him so he slumps from his resting place and lolls onto his fours again.

The cat behind Clay Manor musters company from madams and misses. He books his routine to oestrus and to menses. The smell of time to wake, time to eat, time for shindigs or for work. When Flechette wandered with *his* family, along the river they called home, their dailies lacked itineraries since they chased after the growing season. Every time was harvest hour and Flechette had many children. Now Flechette hides inside Clay Manor—where every hour is time for dessert, it seems. Flechette’s former master scheduled the cat’s housekeeping to follow year-long rhythms. Mind the yard. Dig under the shock of conifers each August. But since Flechette could not follow Vincent Clay’s itinerary, he would rummage through the trees year round. Until he learned to hang off the smell of madams and misses to count the months and lionize his deal to earn his stay inside Clay Manor.

“He taught me the word for pompadour. For mutton chops. Now I have both.”

Flechette pitters up the grand staircase, sniffing. Against balusters that no longer wear his musk he thumps his head. During shindigs, extra misters always find the upstairs bathroom. Thinking they can flush the second storey toilet, they sometimes linger on the steps. Afterwards, the balusters smell as if the extra misters own them. Flechette had told the misters, “Nobody is in there. I’ve just locked the door. I’ve flushed other toilets, you know? You can spray in the yard, you know?” But throughout the shindigs, extra misters always find their way outside the upstairs bathroom.

Extra misters line up at the library as well. Flechette suspects that shindiggers will line up outside any door inside Clay Manor so long as that door is locked.

The woman in the sunhat tells us that the second storey bathroom and the library were Flechette’s former master’s. “Best you hear my name is Marie Lévi-Bosko before we *really* say how Pussy ‘Minds the yard’,” the woman in the sunhat adds.

For as long as Flechette lived here, the shower in that upstairs bathroom filled Clay Manor with the smell of baths stained yellow black. To earn his keep, Flechette plunged the drain. Mucus smell from the pipes would finger its way down his throat. He would retch. Yuck enough to fill the triple bath. Even now, he asks Siobhan and Marie, “Still smells yellow, does it? Black?” To which Marie Lévi-Bosko questions back, “What makes you think that we can smell what you smell, Pussy?” So Flechette thumps his head about the manor, bumping out the smell of Vincent Clay. He’s locked the second storey bathroom ever since his master’s aneurysm. Mind the yard, he thinks. Yet the house smells yellow black. Flechette dodges the what when shindiggers ask about the upstairs toilet or the library. “Are you missing the mushrooms now?” he questions back.

He tracks the shindig's overnighter to the second storey bedrooms. He paws open a bedroom door. Blue and green; the empty bed sheets. He snoops through the other chambers, one by one nudging them open and asking "Hello?"

"Hello you," replies the overnighter.

She toured all nine bedrooms, for some reason, lay down on every blue and green before choosing bedroom five. She lifts her head from the pillow.

"Little Meow," she calls Flechette.

He lurks through the doorway. Thumps the bedroom shut.

In order that he wake up on the hour, Flechette cuddles with an overnighter after shindigs. Earlier, he put on this: "If I can sketch your face in colour using just this stick of charcoal, then you'll be my sleepover. If I cannot, I'll name you Clay Manor's owner." After the wager drew his favour, Flechette added, "What cat's as on strong?"

Not even Flechette knows why his paw turns ashes colour. When Flechette wandered his river back home, spearmen could stalk his pride by fuchsia prints left in the cinders. Of course, Clay Manor's houseguests have never seen the such. So at every shindig, Flechette's charcoal fools a madam or missus into sleeping over—even though Marie Lévi-Bosko tells them no. "How I see it, Pussy's duped you," says Marie.

The shindig's overnighter pats the spot beside her on the blue and green. In his stupor, Flechette cannot squint out the colour of her hair. He remembers neither brown nor blonde.

"Come on then," she says. She pats the spot beside her again.

"*'Come on then'?*" says Flechette. "And *'have at it'?*"

Flechette paws the bedsprings. The overnighter rolls onto her back and yawns. On his second try, Flechette pounces up, flops down on top. Bed sheets between them. His weight

squeezes a high-pitch flatus from her tuckus. He rests his goatee on her shoulder. She wraps her arm over his withers and tickles his scruff. Flechette flicks his tail from side to side while they trade winks for several breaths. He purrs so deeply he sends rumbles through her chest. She closes her eyes. By her eyelids down Flechette knows today is over so he squeezes from their snuggle. He rolls off the bed.

He slinks to the window. Peers into the yard. Those dragonflies have gone to hiding in the shock of conifers. The purple loosestrife shivers in the garden. Mind the yard, thinks the cat. Yet the yard breaks out in purple loosestrife through the new year. From smell to smell, Flechette doses the soil with another medicine. Last August he dumped buckets of hot tar onto the garden from the windows. Before the shindig he drew weevils in his sketchbook thinking they might scare the weeds into retreat. Oftimes Flechette thinks to upend the plot, to seed the dirt with table salt. But for the shock of conifers and for his sleepovers. February builds a blizzard in the yard.

“What’s outside?” asks the overnighter from the bed.

The dragonflies and trees outside smell of his former master.

“Yellow black,” says the cat.

“Yellow and black sure look white to me, Little Meow.”

Flechette turns from the window. One more today gone by with purple loosestrife.

“Come on then,” she says.

A shadow of the trees behind Clay Manor gropes one hundred hands across the wall above the bed. The shadow pantomimes lifting a hundred middle fingers. For just a thought, because he recalls how Vincent once lifted a middle finger in anger at Siobhan, Flechette mistakes this *Hecatonchire* across the wall for the spectre of his former master. The spectre, of course, that was a *Hecatonchire*; a hundred-hander with hands like daggers up yours. Flechette

would pounce for the door to thump it shut again or to fling himself betwixt the shadow and the overnighter, to protect her—but for her stillness. By her stillness, Flechette knows time for sleep. And so sleep rescues Flechette from his fear of shadows.

At one-quarter to lunch, the overnighter snorts from her dreams. She pinches Flechette's mutton chops. She squeezes his paw. She massages the spot behind his withers. She wraps the blue and green around herself and steps into the hallway, down the staircase, through the kitchen to the one-and-one-half bathroom with Flechette pawing after. She shuts the door behind her so Flechette raps on the in-between.

“What's doing, Jeannette?” asks the cat. “Scrubbing your reds?”

“Private matters, Little Meow.”

By this Flechette knows time to mind the yard. He makes a soggy origami of the red and grey rhombi. He tucks the parachute into the eastern wing's armoire. Last night he coughed hairballs on the chair for passing out on, so her grabs the spray bottle and toothbrush from underneath the kitchen sink to wash the leather.

In the middle of the eastern wing sits Flechette's broken mini-organ, which he's planned for months to mend. The reeds have cracked from dryness and the valve spring has uncoiled. The depressed ivories grin crookedly. A smell ago, the mini-organ's tilted crown of pipes could thunder the din of rainclouds or babble the gab of quicksand. Through harmonic resonance, the mini-organ could jingle the chimes that Ashley Clay hung in the belfry above Clay Manor's spiral staircase. One key in particular could kindle or altogether light the fireplace at the eastern wing's far corner. Lately though, the mini-organ's disrepair has wintered noises in the manor.

Flechette loads the kitchen sink with water and with dirty crystal. He wipes last evening's goblets, cups, and glasses down to the twinkle of his own reflection. Now he bags the empty cans

and bottles. Garbage trucks cannot maneuver down Clay Manor's private driveway so the black and blue bins sit on the crescent road above. Flechette grips the clinking bag. He makes music backwards through the kitchen. He bumps his rumpus on the counter.

His bungle clatters pens and papers, vegetable shears onto the floor. Besides the portraits shindiggers drew of each other to hang alongside Ashley Clay's old paintings, in addition to the origami mobiles strung from the kitchen ceiling—not counting Möbius strip after Möbius strip cut down its middle then tossed in the saucepan—a papier-mâché diorama of Clay Manor teeters on the kitchen counter. All the paper for these arts and handiworks, of course, came from the stack of letters in the greeting room. Flechette crawls onto the marble top for a closer gander at the littler version of what Vincent Clay entrusted to him.

Paper loosestrife blooms from a little garden behind the miniature manor. The shindiggers borrowed Flechette's charcoal to paint the flowers black. A stack of tiny envelopes addressed to Pallas Briefman clutter in the smaller greeting room. Taxes, thinks Flechette. A taxman strolled by before my shindig. He shoved us a letter. Vincent only said to mind the yard. Nothing about taxes. Flechette peers through the kitchen proper to Clay Manor's proper door. The mail slot inches open and a letter drops onto the sentence festered high. And as it happens, the tiny letter slot in the papier-mâché diorama opens too.

The shindig's overnighter joins Flechette at the kitchen counter. She flips open a story. The cover skin spells *Shiny Day to Sr. Lamp*. That's odd, thinks Flechette. He only unlocked Vincent's library for Siobhan. So why was the overnighter looking into Vincent's books? Moreover, because Vincent handed down Clay Manor and all its things-to-do to him, *Shiny Day to Sr. Lamp* is actually his. In any case, by her turning pages, Flechette figures time for reading. He hops to the greeting room and skips back with a mouthful of envelopes addressed to Pallas

Briefman. Although he calls himself Flechette, the taxmen have addressed their mail to him. It follows that the shindiggers who glued the littler house together have likewise addressed their smaller letters to a papier-mâché mini of Flechette who must have pattered from the smaller manor, no doubt to tend his folded kittens. Pallas Briefman, thinks Flechette. My master called me that the way that Siobhan calls me “Aeolus” while Marie says that other word and the overnighter names me after my testicles. The overnighter leans over. She reads the name across his mail and says, “Why, Little Meow, you can’t read an other person’s matters.”

“Says you.” Flechette blinks one eye then the other at *Shiny Day to Sr. Lamp* clutched in her fingers. “ ‘An other person’s matters,’ says you.”

“What’s that?”

“That *Shiny Day*.”

“My book?”

“*Your* book? Vincent’s book then mine. Remember?”

She claps shut the story. “ ‘What cat’s as on strong?’—indeed. My book.”

“Surely Manticores. Only the lucky are privy to their poisons.” He gestures at the house around him, not realizing the overnighter has already stepped through the back door into the yard.

She shuts the back door only partially. February invites itself to glimmer through Clay Manor’s kitchen and to ease open all six of Ashley’s ovens. The smell of Marie Lévi-Bosko’s cooking colours the air ripe with mangos and cold apple. The recipes that Marie follows, Ashley Clay wrote down as stories: with casts of iron, measured characters, churning points followed by the oven door slammed shut then opened, ending finally with a dessert. The scent of Marie Lévi-Bosko’s cooking tunes Flechette to *Once upon a time* as did his overnighter’s reading *Shiny Day*

to *Sr. Lamp*. He chews open and unfolds a tax letter—which, as he understands it, is a different *sort* of story and demands an *other* kind of reading. The blizzard air from the garden glimmers to the greeting room and Clay Manor inches its front door ajar. The chain: clink. The papier-mâché front door of the smaller house atop the kitchen counter inches open also, as it happens.

The tax letter begins with: *Who fathered Vincent?—Ashley never told Marie. Ashley never told Marie on two occasions: once, because they promised one another neither would have children; and twice, because Vincent’s father is James’s father—which makes James and Vincent brothers. Ashley Clay prefers that everybody thinks of Marie Lévi-Bosko as Vincent and James’s other parent.*

Because the letter mentions Ashley Clay so often, Flechette flips ahead. He never did meet his former master’s mother. He prefers, in any case, that when others mention Vincent that they never mention James. The letter ends with: *Ashley doesn’t need to see Marie Lévi-Bosko’s face to know how Marie feels about Vincent or James any longer. Ashley only needs to watch the purple loosestrife standing tall and blooming on the windowsill at the infirmary.*

Flechette follows that a tax letter should demand some form of payment. *This* letter, however, seems to him to close with the punchline to a joke untold. When *Flechette* watches the loosestrife, he doesn’t think of Marie’s face at all. He thinks to mind the yard and mind the yard he has—yet taxmen and their letters. Flechette’s family received no tax letters at all. They owned no mailboxes. They could not read. All Flechette did back home was chase the harvest. He bites open and unravels a second letter, hoping this one might explain better how to mind Clay Manor.

*Mister Himself, bored of warring, overturns the earth with thunderclaps. “I’ll scare up a centipede,” Mister Himself bellows, “to throw rocks at Clay Manor.” But Ashley built Clay*



*Manor without glass. One hundred and another stones tumble off Clay Manor onto February meltwater. "It's not just the house that teeters," Mister Himself hollers, "but also the weather."*

Flechette takes "Mister Himself" for his former master. The rest he does not understand. He thinks the scary part, the centipede, definitely stands in for "James Briar". Flechette flips to the second letter's ending: *Had Clay Manor one hundred tongues to whisper, "Listen," it might whisper, "never mind."*

Never mind *what?* wonders the cat. What do either of these letters even mean? It seems neither are finished, as though both ask questions for which their words are jumbled.

Revenue's red logo glowers from the letters' upper corners. A sigil. Of a creature, maybe, flanked by a madam and missus. Or of a smudge. Flechette sniffs the papers and the envelopes they came in, both stinking of something owned by others. Smells of white, of noon precisely. He tastes Revenue's red logo. Sour. His saliva smudges the colour even more. The creature and his madam and missus blot across the cardstock. Flechette decides to send a ringaling to one of them to help him read his taxes. Either Marie or Siobhan. And where was Siobhan in all the taxmen's writings, anyways?

While dialing the number with his claw in the rotor, Flechette thinks about his name. Where he was born, no cat named itself. Perhaps I've called myself improper, he wonders. On one hand, the letter says that Pallas Briefman owns the house, while on the other, I have thrown my shindigs. Pallas Briefman and Flechette cannot both own the manor. Clay Manor can't be shared because there stands no shared wall.

Flechette confers with the papier-mâché to confirm his last conjecture.

But maybe a shared wall stands inside of *me*. Half the cat, head and withers, lived-in by the name Flechette. Tail and haunches lived-in by Pallas Briefman.

Or perhaps, he thinks, the shared wall runs along my spine. Nonetheless, the pictures hanging on the wall face *my* half of the cat—which is to say, the pictures in me might belong to Pallas Briefman. And what of Aeolus? Of Pussy and the rest? No shared wall runs through Clay Manor but the bedrooms upstairs number nine.

Flechette quivers with thoughts of chores danced out by an *other* cat or minding the come-what-mays of some cat named Pallas Briefman. Last time he looked in a mirror, he didn't see a Janus cat but maybe he would now. He glances at the thermostat. Not red enough, he thinks, to bake the letters in the greeting room.

Flechette mutters to himself. He says, "I call myself Flechette. I call myself Flechette. I call my—*pfft*—self . . ."

#### 4. She in the Sunhat, or *An Afterword*

Marie Lévi-Bosko prefers the version of herself that other people blab about when they tell their stories. *That* Marie Lévi-Bosko never spends a day downtown—never seems to work at all, in fact. That Marie Lévi-Bosko others talk about never files taxes. She never stands aghast at the mirror for the weeping chancre by her lip not does she sit for hours on the toilet for her stiffness. In other people’s stories, her bathroom never gets a mention. As if a home could stand without one. Plumbing sized too clunky. Wires only rumours. Marie Lévi-Bosko “keeps no house”, so to speak, in stories. She only writes across the shared wall of her duplex. She scribbles: *Marie Lévi-Bosko prefers the version of herself that other people blab about when they tell stories of Clay Manor.*<sup>†</sup>

From where she stands beside the wall shared with her neighbour, Marie Lévi-Bosko flips over, through the story’s pages, onto McHugh Bluff. She lands kilometres away from where she started right into the footprints of the passersby. She stares down upon Clay Manor from the crescent road as though a reader simply turned onto a different paragraph, one about the house, in which Marie Lévi-Bosko is already there. In stories of Clay Manor, no one tells how Marie drives from one house to another. In drawings of Clay Manor, Marie Lévi-Bosko wears her sunhat so it follows that Marie Lévi-Bosko, standing now on McHugh Bluff and staring down on purple loosestrife blooming through the snow, puts on her sunhat. She prefers the version of herself in other people’s stories because that Marie can flip ahead through the story’s pages.

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<sup>†</sup> I’d say, “Marie Lévi-Bosko once let a wasp into her duplex accidentally. She left the door ajar so that the wasp could leave and in the meantime Flechette, Vincent, Siobhan and another wasp let themselves in for dessert.

“ ‘Would you like tiramisu or an almond compote?’ Marie asked her guests.

“Siobhan whispered to Flechette, ‘It’s dangerous to answer that. With Ashley in the hospital, Marie is the one who whips those treats together. If you answer one over the other, she’ll hear it that you don’t prefer the other dessert at all. She hates when people say they don’t like her desserts. She’ll send us to Clay Manor and we’ll have to eat something prepared by *you*. You can turn a dial to three-fifty, but you’re definitely no Marie. And certainly you are no Ashley Clay, Aeolus.’ ”

I’ll add, “It’s good to tell a story of Clay Manor that happened outside of Clay Manor.”

“I like my ending better,” Marie Lévi-Bosko says into the cold. “And I would have started it with me and Ashley hopping up and down across Clay Manor’s garden.”

Kilometres away again, Siobhan glances up from a bowl of sherbet in her living room, then towards her apartment door. The brim of Marie Lévi-Bosko’s sunhat drips slush on Siobhan’s kitchen. By now Siobhan has learned she doesn’t need to lock her house because Marie Lévi-Bosko can always flip inside.

“I don’t follow what you’re on about,” Siobhan tells Marie. “Hopping up and down across the garden when? I hope you don’t expect dessert from me, Marie. It’s just the butterfat for one. Unless you flip into the grocer’s.”

Marie helps herself to a bottle of honey wine from Siobhan’s cupboard. She steals a book off Siobhan’s shelf, which Siobhan in turn borrowed from Clay Manor. The book is titled *Purple Loosestrife* and is addressed to Ashley Clay. Marie hides Siobhan’s car keys in the freezer because she worries Siobhan’s tipsy then she flips ahead, once more finds herself inside her duplex, beside that wall. She uncorks Siobhan’s honey wine and looks herself over in the bottle. The chancre by her lip left a sore on Marie’s face. In summer that scar rises, flushes pink. Marie in the cold of February doesn’t hold a grudge, though—but *she does*. Her house has no fireplace so she lights the stove.

Marie Lévi-Bosko skewers that book *Purple Loosestrife* with a roasting spit. She shuts the book inside her oven where the goatskin crisps. The illustration on its title page is of a sunhat, wicker frayed, a younger woman under it. The younger woman hops across the garden while next to her a friend tramples the dirt flat as a picture. The caption reads: *Marie and Ashley hid stones inside the potbellied burner*. Marie Lévi-Bosko has already redrawn this picture on the shared wall of her duplex with herself and Ashley as adults. A caption underneath this second

drawing, with the older women, reads: *Marie and Ashley found other things to tuck inside their own potbellies.*

Marie Lévi-Bosko presses her hands on the shared wall. She strains, strains, wishing she could shove that wall one inch and live in one inch more than half her duplex. She wishes somebody could uproot or cook the loosestrife. She strains again. Her hands smudge across her writing. Her feet scuff against the floor. “What grudge is there to hold, in any case,” she huffs.

Marie Lévi-Bosko’s buddies think her ramblings hang off outer narratives to which odd few are privy. That her mid-thoughts uttered out loud must fit neatly into thoughts uttered aloud by others elsewhere. Even Ibid Jarry, who shares the duplex with her, eavesdrops on strangers, just waiting for someone to finish saying what Marie mumbled yesterday. Marie writes on her side of that wall, but from chapter to chapter she sleeps under Ibid’s blankets. She brings baklava. She shuts her own crystal stemware in his cupboards for their sleepovers.

“That is how a taxman writing chapters for Clay Manor would describe it,” Marie Lévi-Bosko says, to which Ibid Jarry answers by turning over and snoring the other way. After their trysts, the woman in the sunhat marches back to her half of the duplex and once again she strains against the wall between them.

Marie Lévi-Bosko snatches up her phone before it even has a chance to ringaling.<sup>‡</sup>

“Why point out the footnotes?” says Marie.

“How do you mean by ‘footnotes’?” asks Flechette.

“I’m at dialogues aplenty.”

“Hello?” says Flechette.

“Hello, Pussy,” says Marie.

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<sup>‡</sup> Marie Lévi-Bosko explains her and Ashley Clay’s agreement that neither would have children by mentioning how characters in stories who tickle one another are not touchy-feely at all, what they do is only shove the narrative onto the paragraph that follows. She says the same of characters who told each other neither would have children.

“Never said this was Flechette.”

“Michael<sup>‡†</sup> told us.”

Flechette murmurs through the line again. Marie gathers—based on smells flapping from her earpiece—that Flechette’s either passed gas or he has someone inside the house to blame it on. Marie feels the winter air on Flechette’s side of the phone call whiff across her cheek.

“Bang those doors,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

“Do you remember the mister in a blue noose?” asks Flechette.

“Dress tie, you mean? Sea-coloured.”

“That’s a one.”

“Gaspard Hobbes,” Marie tells us, “but let’s call a taxman a taxman.”

Flechette clears a hairball. “Perhaps. Anywho. Loosestrife pokes up from the garden. Storybooks go missing from the library. A manor carries on without its master. And when to bungle might have been . . . in my favour, so to wonder, I have failed to bungle. Thus I’ve strolled my doldrums—‘strolldrums’—into troubles.”

A doodle on the shared wall of the duplex shows Flechette sitting at Clay Manor’s kitchen counter amidst a stack of envelopes, beside a papier-mâché diorama of the house, a telephone receiver pressed up against his mane and a bowl of ice cream sprinkled gory with pomegranate seeds before him. Marie Lévi-Bosko drew that doodle years ago with Ashley watching. The doodle’s caption reads: *The doodle’s caption reads.*

“Tell it better,” Marie tells Flechette. “Push aside dessert. Cull this chatter.”

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<sup>‡†</sup> “A taxman, so to speak,” says Marie. Michael might have written Marie Lévi-Bosko out had she not pressed her hands against the writing. Inch-long scratches mar the floorboards and the ceiling on her side of that wall, marking the distance she has shoved the partition. Indeed she lives in one inch more than half the duplex.

The grind of Flechette’s dessert sliding on the marble top scratches through the line. Flechette slaps his tongue over his mouth. The picture of him on the wall chews its wrist, sweeps back its pompadour. It peers over its shoulder, then whines through the receiver.

“I have to mind the yard, so to speak,” says Flechette.

“That’s not what you have to do,” says Marie.

“I have to clear the dishes. Scrub the cups. Tuck away the red and grey. The floor’s already mopped, but I could have swept beforehand.”

“That’s not what you have to do *either*,” says Marie. “You have to pay your taxes.”

“Never said that I owe taxes.”

“You will.” The book in Marie Lévi-Bosko’s oven starts to burn. It turns forward through its pages on the roasting spit. “*I owe taxes,*” says the cat. “*Remember?*” says the book.

“How do you mean ‘You will’? Is that ‘You’ ‘Me’?”

“Did you know that you can butter someone up with jam?” asks Marie Lévi-Bosko.

“Orange jam? Or lemon?”

“I meant to say ‘I’ve read ahead.’ I liked my ending better.”

“Why should I pay taxes on Clay Manor? The letters say my master named ‘Pallas Briefman’ owner of the house. I call myself—”

“Come what may who *Vincent* gave the house to, Pussy. *I* should own Clay Manor. I should get to tell the story.” Marie Lévi-Bosko thinks the garden looked much cleaner without loosestrife. Her oven fills her side of the duplex with the smell of dirt. She turns the dial down.

“I don’t know where you’ve taken me, Marie. How do you mean ‘hopping up and down’?”<sup>‡‡</sup>

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<sup>‡‡</sup> A stronger dose of medicine.

“Come what may from the garden.”

“The garden? The overnighter stepped through the garden. Do you remember the sleepover? She called me ‘Little Meow’.” The doodle of Flechette on Marie’s wall twists inwards to his belly. He pokes his nose against his testicles and sniffs.

“Does doing that not ruin your next dessert?” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

The doodle of Flechette uncurls. He peers over his left shoulder then his right.

“We all know about your overnighters, Pussy.”

“Was the overnighter chummy with Siobhan at all? Earlier, she flipped through *Shiny Day to Sr. Lamp*. I lent Siobhan Vincent’s print and maybe Siobhan’s sharing it.”

“Siobhan doesn’t talk about her other friends with me. And by the by, did the overnighter flip through *Shiny Day* or *Shiny Day*? Perhaps whole years go by of *Shiny Days*. Just because she had a *Shiny Day* doesn’t mean she stole it from you. More than one *Shiny Day* goes around, you know.”

The book in Marie Lévi-Bosko’s oven slams its pages shut. The cover skin reads: *Purple Loosestrife to the All Business One*.<sup>†††</sup> Revenue’s red logo glowers at the upper corner.

“Never said she stole it. Only asked her ‘what’.”

“Well, in that case,” is how Marie Lévi-Bosko says she’ll supper with her friends. She and the cat agree: between the three of them—Flechette, Siobhan, and herself—Marie Lévi-Bosko is most well-read. They pick her to write a letter back to Revenue. To champion Clay Manor’s books, so to speak.

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<sup>†††</sup> Just because she already jotted one *Clay Manor* doesn’t mean that Marie Lévi-Bosko cannot jot another.



“Not that kind of book,” she tells Ibid later over tea and pecan tarts. “That kind of book you give away. In my new collection, every book you stack on shelves with glass doors and locks.”

To which Ibid replies, “This kind of tea I put in my belly.”

Some afternoons, after tea and treats, Marie and Ibid kiss. Ibid has one leg to wiggle and a peg to run on. His titanium prosthetic has toes, so nobody mistakes him for a pirate. Yet Marie prefers her version of him. In Marie Lévi-Bosko’s version, Ibid lost a leg to the shark inside his mother’s womb.

Marie plays footsie with his metal. Sticky come the summer, but cold and biting now.

“Does that tickle?” asks Marie.

“Tickle *you*?” asks Ibid.

“Yes.” Marie says, “It tickles me a lot.” Without her socks on, Marie’s biggest piggy dithers with shiver.

Rather than steal kisses from her plunderer tonight, Marie Lévi-Bosko flips over through the story, back to Flechette’s ringaling. “How did you mean again, by ‘footnotes’?” Flechette asks over the phone.

“Let that walk off. It’s something I thought about, about a month ago. It’s something about Michael.”

“How do you mean ‘Michael’?”<sup>†††</sup>

Marie lays down her phone. She puts her hands on the wall and turns the page. The story sets her in Clay Manor by the fireplace. A cup of bitters on the table. A serving of sponge trifle.

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<sup>†††</sup> Michael must have wiped his ass thirty times at least before making up his mind to stay indoors and jot. Which is to say he strolled up Clay Manor’s walk.

She wonders why Flechette didn't ringaling her months ago when Revenue first sent its letters to Pallas Briefman.

When he was young, Vincent Clay would ask his "Aunt Marie" why she wore a sunhat rather than a wristwatch. It's one spoonful of trifle for Marie to think of Vincent as though she herself was the other parent alongside Ashley Clay. It's a sip of bitters that she spent so much time inside Clay Manor, keeping track of go-a-rounds between Vincent and James Briar.

*James*, thinks Marie Lévi-Bosko. Then by rote she starts counting the days from Wednesday. *Thursday, Friday . . .*

## 5. Siobhan Frye is Marie Lévi-Bosko's Daughter

Siobhan thinks twice at once. She thinks on Vincent Clay and she thinks on that word “No.” It is uncommon, Siobhan has heard, to carry friendship from child- through adulthood. The one who told her this, of course, was none other than a woman in a sunhat. “Well maybe it’s that way for *you* Marie,” said Siobhan, to which the woman in the sunhat replied, “No.”

In Siobhan’s mind, that word “No” spins thoughts of Vincent Clay into thoughts of James, the one who years ago told Siobhan “No.” “Even more uncommon,” the woman in the sunhat tells Siobhan, “to carry friendship from girl- through womanhood. Particularly if your friend is Vincent Clay. Or James.”

Siobhan still thinks of James, and sometimes Vincent, the way unmarried characters think on other single characters. How they might sit down at the table for a tumbler full of—*what, exactly, does one pour Vincent Clay*, she wonders, *or for that matter, James?* She preferred Vincent Clay for looking at while eating, but wanted James for conversation and for passing time behind that house. The shape of Siobhan’s mouth, James told her, gave her the upper hand in bouts of snap-dragon.

Marie Lévi-Bosko told Siobhan she’d never have to choose between them, but then James told Siobhan that word. “Well,” said Marie Lévi-Bosko, “I would have picked a different man-versus-man.” Siobhan thinks that word now while driving to Clay Manor wondering: If only I’d have asked to pour a tumbler full of “*what, exactly?*” for Vincent—not for James.

“Follow me.” A proud-breasted raven named Edith rides a birdcage on the bed of Siobhan’s truck. The raven cries out “Follow me.”

Siobhan remembers Vincent breathless on the chair for passing out on. He lay supine, the zipper undone on his corduroys. A razor burn scalded the spot under his belly button. He

gawked, as he often did, at the spiral stairwell. Tiramisu curled inside a wine flute on the coffee table near a cross of polished forks.

“Hello yourself,” said Siobhan.

“Well,” Siobhan thought Vincent told her. She swears that Vincent’s eyelids inched closed then slammed open.

Flechette paced back and forth through the greeting room. He peered into the eastern wing between his snuffles while he whined, pawing at his pompadour.

Siobhan sat down beside the body, shuffled nearer, then she forked a dabble of the tiramisu into Vincent’s open mouth. Vincent liked the ladyfingers, so Siobhan pushed one deep enough into his mouth for him to swallow. Siobhan gave Vincent the entire serving of dessert. All the while thinking it was not as difficult or creepy to be her friend as the woman in the sunhat said it was.

Siobhan zipped up Vincent’s corduroys, peeking, as she did, at his member. She shaved the tiramisu off his stubble. She preferred him even better, for looking at while eating, when his skin was clean. She brushed his teeth.

Siobhan’s watch stopped clicking that afternoon. Three-fifty. The same time and Fahrenheit that Ashley used to raise her cookies. Siobhan never wound that watch again. That watch was a present from Marie.

Siobhan would have stayed inside the eastern wing until Clay Manor filled with cookies had Edith not peered through the window. The raven blinked at Vincent, whose mouth seeped cream—and blood from Siobhan stabbing his throat with tiramisu. Vincent still was gawking at that spiral stairwell, his eyelids snapping open each time Siobhan pushed them closed.

Edith clapped her wings against the windowsill for Siobhan's attention. Then Siobhan followed Edith out Clay Manor's door.

Edith led Siobhan to the city zoo. Lions coughed into the night while rhinos rocked this and that way with worry. An eastern wolf sprinted loop after loop in its enclosure; faster, then faster still to overtake some alpha it chased after. And Flechette, the cat behind Clay Manor, who stalked Siobhan that evening, leaned over a terrarium and prayed for rain. Flechette whimpered because he thought the tadpoles swimming in that tiny pool on the bromeliad were living shallow. The piercing in Flechette's ear had healed so he could not wear his tracking tag. Because of this the elephants did not recognize him and thus he could not join their soccer match. Flechette was not strong enough, in any case, to roll their wrecking ball. "I can play the referee," said Flechette, to which the elephants shook their heads "No."

"Where is those tadpoles' mother?" Flechette called out to Siobhan.

Edith led Siobhan to a bridge. She gestured with her wing to the mayflies three-months-late to the water. She pointed out a duck that capsized itself for mouthfuls of dirt. All the while, Siobhan watched something else upstream. Flechette was so in need of looking-at that evening, he floated down the water on his belly, snapping at the clouds of minnows in the riverbank. He set his tail above himself as though it were a sail and "caught wind", he said, towards them, even though they saw clearly that he paddled closer with his maulers.

Flechette already waited for them at the next place Edith brought Siobhan. He lolled on Siobhan's sofa. He gawked at the doorway, winked when they came in. "Don't know what you're on about," he told them. He had poured himself a glass of whipping cream from Siobhan's fridge and he had outlined his peepers with Siobhan's mascara. He winked and winked. Brown eye then the yellow. "Well?" he said, "Hello?"

The evening Siobhan stepped in on Flechette already inside her apartment was the first time Siobhan raised her voice at the cat. She yelled a resounding “Maybe” and she slammed her apartment door. She left the building and she travelled through—really visited—the city. Ever since, Siobhan thinks this itch of land is wonky; every moment a flurry of pity, loneliness, and innuendo worthy of its own once-upon-a-time.

Siobhan knows where to park along the crescent road because the shock of conifers behind Clay Manor glitters. In one hand she hauls a book bag down Clay Manor’s driveway. With the other, Siobhan shoulders Edith’s birdcage. The wedding gown Siobhan stretches over the enclosure has loosened at its seams and so Siobhan staples it now to the coop at the boobs. Edith flaps her wings for balance underneath the fabric while Siobhan teeters beneath. The gravel ices over in the winter so Siobhan tiptoes through the footprints of others. She chooses one track as her favourite. Off to one side barely. Each step groovy as a fingerprint and not too forward from the last. At the bottom of the driveway, her favourite track scribbles back and forth over the rest as though whoever left it wanted many different ganders at Clay Manor’s face. Unlike the other shoe marks, which draw the way around Clay Manor’s eastern wing and to the yard, this favourite track of hers strolls up the walk, ending where—for some reason—the taxman stands at the door again.

The taxman pokes the doorbell. He knocks the doorframe. “Hello,” he says into the greeting room. “Pallas Briefman, you have to pay your taxes. Hello. My name is Gaspard Hobbes.”

“Hello,” says Siobhan.

The taxman peers over his shoulder. He tucks his briefcase underneath his arm and slides a letter through the letter slot.

“Again?” says Siobhan.

The taxman lurks down Clay Manor’s doorstep. Siobhan looks away while he strolls past and up the driveway. His shoes chew the snow, each mark groovy as a fingerprint. Since he says nothing, Siobhan worries that this taxman is afraid of her.

“You and me both.” Flechette peers out Clay Manor’s letter slot. “You and me both.”

Edith squeezes through her birdcage, hops from the wedding dress, and flies ahead. She claps onto Clay Manor’s doorstep. The door inches ajar, clinks its chain rigid, and Edith wiggles through the inch between door and doorframe. Siobhan follows, but like most everybody Siobhan has to step into Clay Manor from the back.

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Two weeks before the aforementioned, some days after that shindig, Flechette stood by the post box wearing Marie’s sunhat and a checkered shirtdress he borrowed from Siobhan. He said, “It sure is fun to pay my taxes,” while Siobhan peeked inside their envelope before kissing the letter shut.

“If your raven was here, I wager she’d say that I’ve tricked you into paying the wrong taxes,” Marie told Siobhan.

Siobhan slipped their envelope inside the post box, and guffawed with Flechette, even though Marie stood off to one side, not laughing at all. Of every random thing Marie Lévi-Bosko did “behind Clay Manor”—as she put it—Siobhan figured paying Pallas Briefman’s taxes was most random of everything. That Marie’s plan seemed to work at all left Flechette in fits of giggles.

“It sure is fun,” Flechette said again. The cat told Siobhan, “Your mum sure is a one.”

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The day after the three of them dined over tax letters, some days before the post box, Marie trolled directories for anyone named “Pallas Briefman”. She found four last names “Briefman”, but only two with first names “P”: neither of them “Pallas”. Paddington Briefman lived just three hours from Clay Manor, but he owned no cats (“That is a shame,” Marie Lévi-Bosko said).

Siobhan chaperoned Flechette through a morning and an afternoon over mountains to where Peter Briefman lived beside the ocean. Under the pretense of courting a neighbour’s tailless Manx, Flechette lurked nearby for long enough to sniff out Peter Briefman’s social number, which Flechette scribbled on a scrap of paper. On their way back, Siobhan dropped Flechette off at the registry, where he changed what he called himself.

Meanwhile, Marie Lévi-Bosko applied for a joint account. The undersigned in this order: *Marie Lévi-Bosko, P. Briefman, Siobhan Frye*. When Siobhan and P. Briefman returned from their part of the caper, Marie stood in line with them at the money house to sign their names. She lent P. Briefman her sunhat to hide away his pompadour, mutton chops, and face. Siobhan lent him a checkered shirtdress to cover his testicles when he approached the counter on his hind-ers.

“Greetings, ragtag,” P. Briefman said to the clerk—who looked him up and down after he autographed the line and said, “At least you’re not one of those creatures who wants property in town.” Because for the clerk, it seemed, the face was not the difference between creature and otherwise, it was the sunhat and the checkered shirtdress.

Once the joint account was opened, filing taxes was as simple as transferring the troubles due from Clay Manor’s treasuries to the joint account then mailing a note to Revenue alongside a statement that spelled: *A lot and lots more money*. The three of them then walked that envelope up the crescent road, two laughing and one not. Still disguised as the inheritor, the cat then signed ownership of Clay Manor to Marie Lévi-Bosko, Flechette, and Siobhan Frye. “To



simplify the tax procedures,” Marie Lévi-Bosko said. And so Siobhan dropped off P. Briefman at the registry again, where once more he called himself Flechette.

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Siobhan sets down her birdcage on the kitchen counter over the open dishwasher. Lemon fillets wrapped in tinfoil line the washer’s upper rack. Flounder. Siobhan tightens the wedding gown’s ribbons.

She happens on Flechette in the eastern wing, hunched over his mini-organ. He clenches a socket wrench in his tail and wears a star-head screwdriver behind his ear. He paws the keyboard. The mini organ’s crown of pipes groans a noise that Siobhan winces to listen to. Flechette hums along but purrs too low.

“Fixed? Or forced to play?” asks Siobhan.

Edith claps into the room and perches on the mini-organ. With that star-head screwdriver, Flechette tightens a valve and paws the keys again. The mini-organ makes no sound at all this time but Edith shoves her beak down the middle pipe and toots. “Whoop.”

Siobhan thumps her book bag on the floor. She lays her hand on Flechette’s shoulder.

“The taxman was just here,” she says.

Flechette sneers at Clay Manor’s door.

“What happened to our letter?” asks Siobhan.

“Post box. Remember? Mailed it.”

“What about the taxes?”

“I owe taxes,” says the cat. “Remember? The taxman was just here.”

Siobhan gazes at the spiral stairwell. She asked James Briar once how it sounded when Ashley keeled over the railing and cracked her spinal coil. James told her, “ ‘A thing to miss,’ I’d say.”

Siobhan asks Flechette, “What’s happened?”

“Middle C. Off tune.” Flechette mauls the keyboard twice.

“*The taxman.*” Siobhan points at the letters in the greeting room.

“Put this what and whatness down. Have I told you that my master always asked me ‘what’ and ‘what’? Such glee he gained; that I can speak. He’d point to birds. To bugs. Then to windows. And finally to blue and green, always asking ‘what’ of me. And what? ‘A bird,’ I’d say. ‘Bug.’ ‘Windows, *remember?*’ Then he’d point. Birds again. Bugs. Windows.”

Flechette drops the socket wrench from his tail and paws the keyboard. The mini-organ clunks. Flechette’s belly swells then shrinks with sigh.

“You’re upset with Vincent,” says Siobhan. She rubs Flechette’s withers in the spot that knots. She rights a fold-over in his tie. “I’m sometimes still upset with Vincent too,” she tells him. Her wristwatch catches the light when she turns Flechette to face her.

When her watch quit clicking six months ago, Siobhan scratched off its glass and flicked away its face. All except the numbers three and ten, its arms. She lost a fingernail to do it.

“Is it three-fifty already?” Flechette frowns at the timepiece. His nostrils flare. “It doesn’t *smell* of cookies o’.”

“In your time or mine?”

Flechette sniffs at Siobhan’s menses. Heavy as a book bag. The book bag Siobhan set on the floor falls over.

“*Once-upon-a time*,” says Flechette. He offers his back to mount, but Siobhan only walks alongside him to Vincent’s library where Flechette asks her to look away. Flechette sneaks a key from underneath the heat register once Siobhan closes her eyes.

“She’ll flip her way inside here too,” says Siobhan.

Flechette leads her through the reading room. The library adjoins. “Your mum, you mean? Marie?”

Siobhan slides her thumb across the dusty heads of Vincent’s books, her fingerprint groovy like a shoe mark. Flechette helps her shelve the books she has returned, their goatskins brittle. He lets Siobhan ride the ladder while he shoves it one way then the other round the room. In a ledger by the armchair, Siobhan writes down which books she borrows this time. She strikes out the titles she’s brought back. One story has gone missing. The rest she returns—including *Shiny Day to Sr. Lamp*. The one gone missing is called *Purple Loosestrife*.

“I can forgive one,” Flechette tells Siobhan. “Did you also want to borrow crystal?”

Siobhan passes the day behind Clay Manor. She helps Flechette pluck purple loosestrife from the snow and afterwards they loll on the verandah. Since her shirtdress is not warm enough, Flechette curls over Siobhan’s lap. They gawk at the loosestrife, sprouted new already, doubled, standing tall, and Flechette recounts the story of that letter they sent off to Revenue.

Revenue cares not for Clay Manor’s treasury, it turns out. At least not in the way that Marie talked of “troubles due.” Revenue mailed the bank note back. In the meanwhile, between chapters, Revenue sent *more* letters to Pallas Briefman asking for a moral, lesson demonstrated, do-over, or *what it means* but Flechette did nothing with Clay Manor’s mail besides sketch pictures on it with his charcoal.

“Of all the things that would go wonky with our caper, that is what went wonky,” says Siobhan.

“If only,” says Flechette. “ ‘Pallas Briefman’ still owns Clay Manor. When I signed over the deed, I signed the deed at odds. Where I should have signed ‘Flechette’ by accident I scribbled ‘Pallas Briefman’. Where I should have scribbled ‘Pallas Briefman’ I wrote ‘Pussy’. It’s hard to think too hard about the thing you call yourself.”

“You’d think Marie would be the one to crack those taxes,” says Siobhan, “given how long she worked for Revenue. What if, actually, she doesn’t want to help you pay your taxes?”

“Then why would she help pay my taxes?”

“What did her caper accomplish at all?” Siobhan asks.

“Nothing,” says Flechette.

“Must be how she likes it,” says Siobhan. “Maybe because Marie *prefers* you talk about her as though she helped you pay your taxes. As though she’s been helping all along.”

“But your mum’s not helping at all.”

“Exactly,” says Siobhan. “She is being a centipede.”

## 6. Marie and Siobhan visit Ashley at the Hospital

Purple loosestrife rises from a bread pan, dropping *still-she-loves-me-nots* onto the windowsill at the infirmary. Ashley Clay nibbles her lips on the bed. Making faces. Best she can fake now is a smile. Nurses knead her body every morning while she smothers laughter underneath her frown. She used to feel so ticklish. Ashley blows raspberries across her breakfast crepes. This food never sweet enough. She snaps the bite her nurses fork at her then blows another. Raspberry after raspberry, then another forkful until she gives up on it and says, "Pour more syrup." Ashley practises her smirk to deal with bitterness from visitors. She needs another pair of hands these days to read her recipes. She eyes the loaf of garden at the window. Cooking done so long ago. A raven claps its wings and perches just outside the glass. The raven pecks at its reflection. It cries out. "Look at you."

Ashley guesses at the rate those nurses knead her body that her body will become a heavy strudel. No yeast. Won't rise. She prefers her nurses put some raisins in her. Different kinds of wine would also do. Her body half the serving it was forty years ago. So thin under the sheet. Certainly no seconds now for someone close to nibble. She eyes the loosestrife standing on the windowsill and figures that she must have hopped crosswise there too—with none other than the woman in the sunhat, of course. On mornings after Ashley made her bed inside Clay Manor, she'd stare out the window. The shock of conifers with dragonflies twinkling in its fingers. Vincent screaming from downstairs or James for thirds. Despite avenues betwixt her and her house on McHugh Bluff, Ashley still stares to the window hoping for that twinkling. She gathers that she *still* makes bed inside Clay Manor because suddenly a sunhat, then a woman underneath it, flip over in the room with a poof that whooshes *loves-me-nots* off the purple loosestrife and

onto the bed. A rustle sound follows, as though a shuffle through the pages of a book echoes through the hospital.

Marie Lévi-Bosko bends her knees on her landing. She spans the window to startle off that raven. Blue ink smudges from her dirty palm onto the glass. The bird outside gawks in through the smear of colour. It tilts its head and blinks. Ashley Clay remembers fondly how Marie once smeared a bruise like that across her ham when they played piggy. The raven outside points its beak towards the snow and gobbles down a flake of March. Marie spans the glass again and this time with applause the raven flits off in a panic. Marie tilts her sunhat up. She sticks her tongue out at the crippled woman and she pinches her “pfft” inky.

Marie Lévi-Bosko sticks one arm forward and with the other she shows Ashley the nothing up her sleeve. She follows with the opposite; a slip of goatskin tucked up her other cuff. Marie slaps both hands to her face. Her cheeks smear blue. Eyes wide, jaw dropped in a fake expression of scandal that Ashley knows by now is Marie asking “Is this slip of goatskin real or story?”

Ashley giggles in her bed. She’s lost her hunch of what the woman in the sunhat goes on about this time. If her topple down the spiral stairwell hadn’t left the chain of bone inside her choked to pieces at its throat, then Ashley wouldn’t want to hunch at all, she’d want to play along.

Marie creeps nearer. Tippy toes and huddled over with a feigned hush-hush. Ashley has no tea here, she regrets. Clatter goes a purple ramekin onto the over-the-bed table and Marie leans close enough to count the liver spots that pepper Ashley’s temple spicy. After all these years together Marie hopes their faces share a flavour. Marie points at the purple ramekin she set

down on the over-the-bed table. Marie narrows her eyes and shakes her head ever so barely with an I'm-not-telling-you-a-damned-thing smile.

Ashley chuckles, "Is this purple ramekin for real?"

Marie Lévi-Bosko breaks character for long enough to chuckle back. The goatskin she pulled from her cuff she flips face-down beside that ramekin. The two women trade blinks until Ashley guesses what's been jotted under. A recipe, of course. Boysenberry cayenne soufflé. Marie flips the goatskin up. One glance from the crippled woman and, of course, a burgundy dessert rises out of nothing but a flame too yellow from that ramekin because Ashley Clay needs only a recipe—the written language—to bake a treat.

The stove-hot dessert steams, breathing fevered as it settles just a little taller than the purple ramekin that carries it. Not one wrinkle cracks the soufflé's cap. A flourish of icing sugar rides it while it lowers.

"Is that soufflé for real?" asks Marie Lévi-Bosko, then she vanishes as quickly as she poofed; flipped over, no doubt, to some other page of *This Letter*.

Ashley grins at the boysenberry soufflé. Happy as potbelly. The recipe beside it. Flechette has scrawled his name across the ramekin in yellow charcoal. "Hey," says Ashley. "That's mine."

Ashley recalls Vincent screaming for thirds and how, because it was so easy, she would bake them. By the age of two, Vincent could at least pretend to read but never would he cook dessert his mother's way. Ashley remembers how the last time she asked Vincent anything, she was in a wheelchair, at Kingdom Park Cemetery over Vincent's grave, and that it was Marie who answered for him. "Vincent said he would grow Jacob's ladders in the garden but the best he could pull off was that bread pan full of dirt at the infirmary. And we all know what happened

there,” had said Marie. Ashley reminds herself that nowadays she can no longer eat the soufflé on her own. Ashley chews the smile from her mouth and stares, frowning for an hour and a little more at that soufflé cooling before the woman in the sunhat flips back into her room with another poof.

This time Marie tilts her sunhat down. Now she stands as still as a window, beside the purple loosestrife in that bread pan. Ashley wishes she could point her friend away. So quick how Marie Lévi-Bosko could turn into this other Marie Lévi-Bosko who, despite herself, Ashley likes as much. This other Marie seemed at times to not even have a face to make. Just that sunhat. Ashley turns her eyes away. She never dares to guess the places Marie flips from when she comes back in such a bummer. Ashley wishes she could clasp Marie’s hand the way they clasped hands when they hopped behind Clay Manor. Ashley knits her brow sorry for ever having toppled down. The woman in the sunhat grips a stalk of loosestrife in her fist and crushes it. Knuckles as white as a sucker punch.

“*Loves-me-nots*. That’s what Michael calls them,” says Marie. She unclenches her fingers. Flower petals tangle broken in her hand.

“ ‘Michael’ now?” says Ashley. “Not ‘Hildegard’? Not ‘Thalia’? Not ‘*Marie Lévi-Bosko*’? Siobhan tells me it’s ‘Gaspard Hobbes’ who writes our letter now. Siobhan says now we have to worry, if this taxman’s letter gets to goatskin. She says Gaspard wrote something about why we hid James.”

“Michael calls them *loves-me-nots* because *loves-me-nots* sound not as messy.” Marie wipes her hand clean on her sleeve. “Michael won’t write *Ashley and Marie hopped behind Clay Manor to abort their babies*. It’s sillier to write out womb if the word you choose is potbelly. It’s wonkier to say someone wants more *hors d’œuvre* at a thirty-odd course dinner than to say that



person is crazy. We said we aborted our babies because nobody should shove a wee one into a house where life is letters only. But Michael made us do it. He wanted ‘*loves-me-nots*’ already seeded. So Clay Manor would seem lush with itself when Gaspard Hobbes strolled up the walk. So rich that Gaspard would lurk twice around to see it all. And it is a lively house, I’ll give Michael that. All those parties. That Pussy.”

“ ‘Michael’ now?” Ashley repeats. “I stopped thinking my house isn’t real. This taxman you call ‘He Himself’ never showed a symbol to me. Bogus. All of it. Who would make believe me bedridden? How would the chapters go with me just lying here? It makes no sense our babies would sprout weeds. It makes no sense to me for anyone to keep on writing this far later. What words are there after ‘Kingdom Park Cemetery’?”

“It all makes sense if this means nothing,” Marie answers. Marie slips another goatskin from her sleeve and turns it face down beside that soufflé and the recipe from earlier.

“I’ve already flipped through all of it, you know,” Marie continues. “When I turn to the end of things, five months from now, on the last page of our story, Vincent stands on McHugh Bluff. He touches his face. Come August, Michael brings Vincent back. How He Himself brought Vincent back *every* August. Remember? That means nothing also.

“You say He Himself never sent a symbol. You don’t believe in Michael,” Marie carries on, “but ten chapters from now Michael drops by for a shindig. Our story, *This Letter*, is so set-out even a dead person could jot it. That tidy.”

“What face does Vincent make on McHugh Bluff?” Ashley asks. But Marie Lévi-Bosko has already flipped away again. Ashley eyes the second slip of goatskin on the over-the-bed table. She wishes she could breathe hard enough to blow that goatskin over and read its underside.

Ashley starts counting the months already. August down to March. It is that easy for the woman in the sunhat to tickle her into believing that she is a character inside a story and that the story makes no sense. But at least in the nonsense Marie Lévi-Bosko talks, Vincent stands on McHugh Bluff again. Still watching the slip of goatskin, Ashley nibbles at her smile. Her lip tastes as giddy as a raspberry because a dry spot on her lip has started to bleed.

The raven claps onto the windowsill again. It preens its leaders, left wing first. Feathers on its breast ruffle when it sucks in a gasp. That raven peers through Marie Lévi-Bosko's handprints on the glass. "Look at you," the bird tells Ashley. "Follow me."

Siobhan knocks her elbow on Ashley's door. "Hello?"

"Shut up your raven," says Ashley.

Siobhan strangles the bottle in one hand and with the other she carries the birdcage. Crystal stemware rattles in the coop. The skirt off that wedding gown hangs onto the floor. Ashley thinks Siobhan should have measured herself something sleeveless. The birdcage clashes against Siobhan's checkered shirtdress, the arms of its wedding gown always flailing limp.

Siobhan inspects the bottoms of her ballet flats, prancing from one foot to the other, then she walks on in. Siobhan notes the goatskins and the soufflé on Ashley's table. She sets the birdcage down with a clatter and she overturns that second skin.

The illustration is of Vincent staring himself up and down at the bathroom mirror.

"Marie's goofed you," says Siobhan. "If she 'flips ahead' the way she says, why did she not tell us Aeolus was flubbing taxes early in our story? Or way back when: that James kicked inside of you until Vincent crawled through the yard? To what my mother tells you, I say no."

Siobhan reaches into her birdcage for a wine flute. A wipe of chiffon skirt against the glass until it twinkles. Clink onto the table. Siobhan drops a straw in it. The straw as bendy at its

neck as someone's spine. Ashley thinks that Siobhan has the ideal shoulders for that shirtdress. Broad. Freckles to show at the undone buttons and arms pink enough to pass for a full-bodied blush. Eyelashes and irises darker than the makeup drawn across them. Silver nugget earrings just behind her earlobes. Small wonder, his livelong; Vincent.

Ashley says, "He used to say to me that he would marry you. If only you'd asked."

"Well I asked James," replies Siobhan. "Can you guess how James answered? James said 'No.' "

"When was this?" says Ashley.

"Probably while Vincent said that he'd say 'Yes.' And I bet Vincent carried on saying he'd say 'Yes' until we buried him. Didn't he?"

Ashley frowns again, *really* sorry this time and a bit confused at that illustration of Vincent in her bathroom. Siobhan not looking Ashley's way makes Ashley think a chancre scuttles back out from her mouth again. Same way as Marie's.

"Could you show me my mirror?" Ashley says.

The raven at the window cries out "Look at you."

Siobhan pops open the bottle with her teeth. She dribbles a sip of wine into the flute. She says, "I think if you sat Marie down for a thirty-odd course dinner, right away she'd ask for more of *hors d'œuvre*. I bet Marie's told you 'It all means nothing.' "

Siobhan lifts the wine flute to Ashley's face. She stabs the bendy straw into the mouth. Although the honey wine is sweet as always, Ashley says, "This is biter."

"I think what you mean to say," says Siobhan, "is 'This is a centipede.' "

Ashley catches sight of Siobhan's finger.

"Your fingernail," says Ashley, "looks much better. Could you feed me my soufflé?"

## 7. Interestman: a Name the Taxman thinks up for Himself

Jobs and hobbies; Gaspard Hobbes obsessed them. We skip backwards two chapters to haunt him while he leaves Clay Manor after sliding that second letter through the letter slot. He ambles up the private driveway, halting, unnerved suddenly by an urge to verify whether someone *actually* lurks behind him. Taxmen call this feeling “the narrator”. The superstitious amongst them reckon that the taxmen nearest to the narrator have already jotted letters from the future. Gaspard peers over his shoulder.

“Hello?” he says.

Since Gaspard’s first visit, Clay Manor has donned a slip of snow drift, one side sparkles off the roof onto the ground. Icicles catch sunlight over the windows, beaming silvery. What Gaspard Hobbes mistook back then for etched glass now he squints at, the glare too strong to meet directly. Ashy timbres stack behind Clay Manor on the sure spot for a gazebo. The trees across McHugh Bluff all nod slightly towards that house under their burdens of flurries. Glitzy, the whole city under a gleam of heat wave.

Gaspard shifts his briefcase underneath his arm. Extra weight today in art supplies; papers he stole from a wasp nest, wax pencils in glossy variety, two stinky baggies stuffed with different breeds of marijuana packed inside a jam jar. Sudden cheddar with crackers to match. All alongside tax letters. Gaspard Hobbes rewrote the early chapters of Clay Manor’s letter after Revenue rejected Pallas Briefman’s first return. The new version of Clay Manor’s letter begins with a drawing Gaspard coloured black and yellow of a centipede. A caption underneath the centipede reads: *He says, ‘I’d say, ‘Time enough with the underground,’ ”*

Gaspard earned no February payday because He Himself (who founded Revenue) decreed that Pallas Briefman’s letter never answered *What it means?* He Himself jotted in the

margin that “*A lot and lots more money*” does not explain the relationship between Vincent Clay and James Briar. That Gaspard Hobbes had jotted the first chapters didn’t seem to matter, and as far as Gaspard Hobbes could fathom from that margin note, He Himself read only Pallas Briefman’s answer to *What it means?* and nothing else. He Himself autographed another commission for Clay Manor’s taxes and Gaspard volunteered to stroll across McHugh Bluff again. Unlike his predecessors’, Gaspard’s intrigue in Clay Manor only grew when he learned he earned no payday from it. He thinks it wonky, that Pallas Briefman cannot jot taxes in accord with exhorting morals, lessons demonstrated, or do-overs.

“Is that not weirdo?” Gaspard asks himself. “How hard is it to write *Once upon a time?* How difficult to answer ‘*How’s it—the who, wherein, this when and why, what it means?*’?”

Gaspard’s girlfriend, Ladidah, sighed after he told her that he earned no February payday.

“You’ll just have to eat less cheddar,” Ladidah told Gaspard Hobbes.

When Gaspard said he’d stroll across the bluff again and maybe miss a second payday, Ladidah said, “This is how it happens.”

Gaspard Hobbes discovered when he started jotting the beginning of Clay Manor’s taxes that some whatness tinkers with what words mean in that house: “fingers”, “taxes”, even “what”. His own writing puzzles him, as though he fumbles through the midst of quips between good buddies, picking up but never fathoming their turns of phrase. “Mind the yard”, for instance: *What it means?* Seminars (where groups of taxmen gather to bicker over how to return tax letters, how to answer *What it means?*) taught Gaspard little about how to understand taxes as perplexing as Clay Manor’s. Gaspard baffles himself, nitpicking his sentences while wondering if Pallas Briefman will return the letter. Gaspard hopes he’ll read *What it means?* before Revenue evicts the characters and seizes Clay Manor. And in the meanwhile Pallas Briefman earns

interest on back taxes (the answer to *What it means?* surely is *some* answer now). And on this matter Gaspard finds his name ill fit. A taxman is not omen of taxes but of interests, he thinks. An interestman. He who packs his paperwork alongside art supplies calls himself a man of interests, jobs, and hobbies. He strolls the remaining distance up Clay Manor's private driveway to the sedan parked on the crescent road.

The interestman stoops down at the curb to pat a dark and blotched kitten.

"Hello," he says, "my name is Gaspard Hobbes."

"Meow," replies the dark and blotched kitten.

The lighter-coloured bristles in the kitten's fleece are rigid and hollow. They prick the interestman's finger.

"Ouch," says Gaspard Hobbes. He pulls back his hand. A pair of the kitten's quills stay hanging from his skin. Gaspard pulls them carefully out of his knuckle. The quills resemble sewing needles, complete with holes at their blunt ends to carry ribbon.

"What species are you?" Gaspard asks the dark and blotched kitten. He steps backwards when the kitten lolls closer. The kitten doesn't answer, but red, purple, and blue threads braided through its mane and the little dress tie—sea-coloured with double four-in-hand knot—in place of a collar answer where the kitten's daddy lives: Clay Manor.

Again the kitten, "Meow."

Gaspard sets his briefcase down across his sidekick seat. He buckles in. A jab at the ignition and the sedan chortles to a stillness. That's not funny, thinks the interestman. He jiggles his key again, tickling a belly laugh from the engine which then whinnies itself quiet.

His sedan will not giddyap.

“I’m in no hurry either,” the interestman tells his vehicle. “I’ve booked this afternoon for Ladidah.” He steps back onto the crescent road and locks the sedan door. His briefcase cozy inside. The car acts this way often during heat waves. Usually, after Gaspard takes a walk, the engine cools itself and quits its shyness. When Gaspard himself was eighteen years old, he also turned unmanageable when daytime twinkled shinier than he expected. He peers through the window one last time at his briefcase then he strolls along the crescent road, keen to give this place a once-over as interestmen rarely visited this area outside their commissions.

Gaspard had forgotten how these houses on McHugh Bluff stand so offbeat from their neighbours. Unlike the matching brick-and-shingle street pieces where Gaspard spends his afterhours, homes along the crescent road look uprooted from across the city, mismatched here to hassle one another over how to be a house.

The first house Gaspard strolls past answers, “Double A-frame, red, and weathervane.” The cockatrice atop the weathervane spreads its wings northeast to south.

Another draws its windows blind at Gaspard Hobbes’s approach. “Astronaut family. One mother or other overseas.”

The third house is flat on top. Crown of balustrades and plinths. A four-poster bed on the roof, in the open, as if that bed’s tangled sheets were meant to showcase evidence of coitus on it. A gargoyle plays panpipes on the lawn, the air funneled through the panpipes in the key of shimmer, as if its unheard song is even hotter than the Chinook wind. Icicles from the lip of a downspout grow straight upwards. This third house, when asked *What is a house?* apparently answers, “Clay Manor.”

On the far side of the block, the interestman passes a curling club. “DANCING CLASSES” spells the sign. He thinks about the woman with that birdcage behind Clay Manor and he

wonders whether they might click as dance partners. Ladidah told Gaspard twice she was not fond of lessons. She would not sit down with a teacher. “You don’t sit down in dancing class,” Gaspard said to her. To which Ladidah replied, for the second time, “I will not sit down with a teacher.” Ladidah can dance just fine without instruction, she says, and often jitterbugs near Gaspard in public, which only makes him shy about having to “Move your feet,” as she says.

Gaspard blushes back onto the crescent road, moving his feet quicker to his car. He nibbles the slobbery part of his grin, thinking about Ladidah, who should be on her way to his bungalow by now.

“I can’t wait to let her sniff my jam jar,” says the interestman out loud.

He hurries to his sedan’s door and jingles the key out of his pocket before halting suddenly, unnerved again. Gaspard peers behind himself, certain this time to find the narrator who lurked after him all around the block. Meanwhile, tiny geometries twirl from the sky, ending the city’s streak of gentler weather with snowflakes.

“Hello?” says Gaspard Hobbes. He turns to face his car again and peers in through the window. He glances to the curb where earlier he met the dark and blotched kitten that lanced him. Tumbled off, no doubt, by the accelerating wind. Gaspard leans forward and stares through the glass into his car a third time, cupping one hand over his eyes to better see inside.

A hundred little dice twinkle across his sidekick seat, each one having landed on a face with zero dots. What a bad gamble, thinks the interestman. He glances to his left then upwards. I don’t believe those dice are mine, he thinks. The clouds close in on grey.

The interestman steps around his sedan to find a weathervane on the sidewalk near his tire. No wonder it’s starting to snow, he thinks. That weathervane is broken. The cockatrice’s



rooster-head smashed in. Gaspard leans to gander at those hundred dice and finds his sidekick window missing. He opens the door and several of those dice click out onto the curb.

Fractured glass. His briefcase is gone missing.

The taxman rushes to the driver's seat. The engine giddyaps immediately and Gaspard gears along the crescent road towards his office and the copies of his paperwork in his desk drawer. The yearning to write something numbs his chest and fingers. He peeks at his rear-view, catching sight of whatness behind him.

"Hello?" the taxman says.

"Well," replies Clay Manor from across the bluff. "Hello."

## 8. Ouaknin: his Kitten from Earlier, Who Does *Not* Speak Our Language

Flechette gnaws a hand of Cavendish bananas. Three green fingers fit inside his mouth at once from tip to knuckle. Peel and all. No time for ripeness. Not with bananas. He munches down. Swallows. Gnaws some more. Flechette drops the telephone receiver back onto its cradle. No answer.

“Mind the yard,” says Flechette.

Again he dials Marie Lévi-Bosko. The jingle tone rings its lings. Over and over. Now Flechette has no more bananas. Marie Lévi-Bosko does not pick up when he dials to ask about his taxes. She does, however, whenever he invites her over for a shindig. Flechette puts down the phone.

“Mind the yard,” says Flechette.

He lifts the receiver. Now he pretends to call about a shindig.

“You can’t fool me that easy, Pussy,” answers Marie Lévi-Bosko. “You had a shindig only yester eve and now you have to clean. Mind the yard, why don’t you. Mop *after* you sweep.” Marie Lévi-Bosko hangs up her end of the ringaling.

“Mind the yard,” Flechette agrees. He sets down the receiver.

Flechette celebrates the leftovers of the heat wave by lumping his shit on the garden. His turd shines moist in the loosestrife. Flechette crumbles a clawful of litter from his sandbox on it. He sits beside his work and nods. Mind the yard, he thinks and so the turd stinks under the litter. Flechette licks his wrist and rubs his chest. He tells himself, “Good work. Best duty.” That shit tells him he is the biggest. “What is dessert without turd afterward?” he says.

Protozoa float in Flechette’s gut. Species: *Toxoplasma ratatoskrii*. Flechette poops on mouseways so rodents sniff his parasites. The protozoa pinch a rodent’s nervous system tight

with cysts. When these cysts flower, the rodent's brain floods with water. The rodent stumbles to Clay Manor in a stupor, huffing for Flechette's musk. "Squeak": an urgent message for the cat, who that rodent thinks is friendly. A squirrel runs through the garden now, yelping loud its message. Flechette pins the squirrel under his paw. The Toxoplasma, back in a cat's stomach, will start its seed all over. Other places Flechette lumps his turds are on the crescent road, the private driveway, and on his sandbox in the closet. Three-quarters of the shindiggers who visit Clay Manor suffer from minor encephalitis and sensitivity to light, brought on by breathing Flechette's parasites.

The squirrel twitches under Flechette's maul, then stops kicking. Its bushy tail curls limp. "Beseech," says the squirrel. "Beseech." Its eyes flicker blank with quit.

Flechette gathers the catch in his teeth and rears up on his phalanges. He winks at every corner of the yard then saunters on his hind-ers to the verandah, where a dark and blotched kitten bats a chunk of charcoal back and forth over a scrap of paper. Flechette drops his squirrel beside the scribbles.

"Ouaknin," Flechette tells the little cat. "Ripen. Mind the yard."

"Meow," answers Ouaknin. Ouaknin munches the back of that squirrel's neck. Too gently. The squirrel twists loose from Ouaknin's claws. The squirrel jumps to the slush and sloshes to the higher grasses of the bluff, shrieking. Splotches of auburn blot the snow behind it.

"Never mind," says Flechette. "To mind the yard we sketch the schedule." Flechette snatches that chunk of charcoal from his littler. The ashes change to terra cotta-colour in his grip. Flechette circles a clock's face on the scrap of paper. All twelve numbers cluster to the right. Its arms gesture at three-fifty. The clock's nose leaks sideways onto the cheeks. Eyes high on the

forehead, blinded by a misalignment of the pupils. Flechette writes the name “Siobhan” underneath his scribble.

“With my own maulers,” says Flechette. Flechette brings his portrait inside and hangs it on the dining hall beside his other renditions of friends.

“To mind the yard,” Flechette tells Ouaknin, who pitter-patters after, “we grow the yogurt.”

An ages-old culture Vincent looked after grows inside a gold-rimmed teacup at the back of the refrigerator. After Ashley moved to the infirmary, Vincent was in charge of supplying the bakeries. If a bakery ran out of yogurt, Vincent would dollop a drop of sour batter from that gold-rimmed teacup into a saucepan filled with milk and simmer it atop the oven. Two bakeries have ordered a box of mason jars each.

“ ‘Super easy,’ Vincent told me,” Flechette tells Ouaknin. “And we get to save a saucer for ourselves.” Flechette lifts Ouaknin onto the counter for a proper look.

Ouaknin sniffs the stovetop. Ashy as a chunk of charcoal. He bats the orange hot spot then darts backwards, arching his spine with a hiss. Embers wilt the fur on Ouaknin’s paw. That gold-rimmed teacup filled with yogurt topples to the floor and sings its shatter.

“Never mind,” says Flechette. Pointy bits of gold-rimmed teacup sprinkle through every dollop of that yogurt. Flechette drops it in the garbage. Where does the yogurt that was what the other yogurt grew from grow from? he wonders. He wanders back into the eastern wing and ringalings Marie Lévi-Bosko. She does not pick up.

“Mind the yard,” says Flechette.

The blue-green bed sheets in Clay Manor feather. Flechette rolls across the floor, pushing all the dust, mites, bugs, litter and feathers into the fireplace. He sets it bright with a match and tells Ouaknin, “We trim the trees to. Mind the yard.”

Ouaknin limps out the back door with his father to the shock of conifers. Branches scrape the house paint and the rooftop. Flechette clammers up. He bites the fingers that scratch Clay Manor. Dragonflies tumble from the needles to the ground. Ouaknin nips the slower ones to pieces. The big cat and the littler drag the clippings up Clay Manor’s private driveway together and they dunk them in the garbage bin.

“Hello,” Flechette tells passing neighbours. “Good day.” The big cat gestures to the littler. “Look. *Ouaknin*. My small from earlier. See him ripen. Good day. Hello.”

“Well,” his neighbours giggle. “Good day to you, Flechette. ‘*Ook-nin*’?” they nod.

“ ‘*Walk-né*,’ I say,” says Flechette. “French.”

Flechette leads Ouaknin down the private driveway. Ouaknin makes for the doorstep and Clay Manor’s front door.

“No,” Flechette says. “That door clink must clank shut.” He paws his small ahead of him around the eastern wing towards the yard. To which Ouaknin asks, “Meow.”

“Because I’ve gone missing,” says Flechette. “And spearmen stalk me. Did you know you are a prince and I a king?” Flechette sweeps back his pompadour. He shows Ouaknin the crown of antlers hidden underneath his fleece to prove it. The prongs of Flechette’s crown grow velvety except for one, over his brown eye, which chips at the tip with a black cavity.

“Tore it in a scuffle,” says Flechette. “One of your sisters tried to wear it.”

Ouaknin reaches up to pet the velvet.

“I will bite you once you ripen,” says Flechette. “If you could speak, I’d keep it secret. Haven’t even told Siobhan. To Marie it is no matter. Back in my home, if no prince ripened, the king would keep his antlers. Fishes in my river grew their scales bejeweled. Bamboo branched high. Wild fires culled the grasses when they grew too lush. Candles floating at night through the water, tributes from farmers for my holding vigil on their paddies. What king minds paradise as I? I asked myself. And so I swallowed my kittens as they ripened.”

Flechette tugs Ouaknin closer as they round the eastern wing. Although the burn on Ouaknin’s paw blisters, the flesh beneath it still is raw.

“Spearmen lived downriver,” says Flechette. “They worshipped deities other than me. Heresy, they decreed, my swallowing my babies. Their heroes have hunted me across mythology. They want to end my story. Here, I gather, they say, ‘I have to pay my taxes.’ That is why I clank shut the door clink.”

Flechette leads Ouaknin through Clay Manor’s back door.

“I don’t know who owns my river now, but what cat stands behind Clay Manor? And why shatter tradition?”

“Ouaknin,” Flechette carries on. “To mind the yard we—”

“Meow,” answers the dark and blotched kitten.

And Flechette turns his grin on the kitten, very surprised. “That’s right,” he nods. They then spend hours lolling on the beds in every room together, yanking blue-green bed sheets taut across the mattress afterwards.

At day’s end, Flechette dumps a box of raisins on a china bowl beside the fireplace. He fills the bowl with brandy. “You’ve never played this game before,” he tells Ouaknin. “Because Vincent and I stopped playing this game when we torched down the gazebo.”

Flechette touches a lit match to the brandy. Ghostlights erupt over the raisins. Ouaknin darts backwards, arching his spine with a hiss. The smell of ghostlight as orange as a stovetop. Ouaknin runs from the eastern wing and out Clay Manor's door into the yard.

"Never mind," says Flechette. Of all his children, Ouaknin visits the most. The others become strangers so soon, skulking through the crescent road afraid of him and everything he touches.

A raven perches on the windowsill. It blinks its milky lids. Flechette knows this raven, Edith, speaks our language. Siobhan's been teaching it. Flechette doesn't know what stories this raven would trade with Siobhan so he says nothing. And so the raven says nothing in return.

## 9. James Briar, the Centipede, is This Story's *Hecatonchire*

Although her wristwatch points to just three-fifty, Siobhan strolls through Kingdom Park Cemetery gulping honey wine. She bends down to rummage through the flower bunches gifted to the headstones. She chooses just the brightest to scavenge for herself. This night is black and yellow, it turns out, as all the other colours have grown wilted. Because the heat wave—raindrops, even, shushing on the snow—Siobhan sets out to gather as big a bouquet as she can carry. Last time not so much. Last time she left early for dinner plans. Tonight Siobhan has no plans for dinner.

Siobhan has no plans for dinner because Marie Lévi-Bosko cancelled this night's dinner plans. Before the aneurysm, Siobhan mostly had supper with Vincent in Clay Manor during winter. She spent summer evenings curled up against James Briar, having rinses in that triple bath, James's body so much firmer and more muscular than Vincent's. Marie never told Siobhan why she cancelled this night's dinner, but Siobhan figures that Marie somehow just knew that tonight's bottle of honey wine was bitter or something.

Siobhan kisses the bottle. Really deep and honey as ever. "Shows her," says Siobhan. She picks another daffodil off another headstone. The smell of her bouquet leans towards a sneeze. Even though the heat wave, Siobhan's checkered shirtdress really should have sleeves. Siobhan can sneeze as loud as she pleases on nights when Edith and her birdcage stay in the apartment. Siobhan never told her raven that Marie had cancelled dinner plans, only stepped into the hall and said, "In a few."

Edith perches in the cemetery, as it happens, right over Siobhan in an evergreen. Lesser-breasted ravens Siobhan has never met flank Edith on either side; three ravens to Edith's right



and four on Edith's left. "Follow me," Edith says. Two out of her murder repeat "Follow me" while a third one utters "Some stuff."

"Says you." Siobhan sips her honey wine. "I've been creeping here for months." She pussyfoots the other way, sniffing her flowers. She sneezes. It would take Marie Lévi-Bosko to explain how the girl and her pet raven bumped into one another independently at Kingdom Park. Siobhan hides from Edith how she mumbles over Vincent's marker because she wants the bird to think she has already followed on with things. Edith, meantime, snuck out to make nice with her murder. To not have to pretend fellowship with people and their language for a while. Table manners irk a bird who wants to fill the wine bottle with pebbles. If the other ravens understood the words that Edith traded with the woman in the checkered shirtdress, they might suspect the two of living in the same apartment. Edith leads her murder in the opposite direction. Some nights, a bird cannot be bothered with the proper names for things.

"There are no words," Edith cries as she leaves.

Siobhan learned proper names at eleven months old. Rather than a bassinet, Marie built a little theatre at the corner of the nursery. Three walls and a curtain. "Once upon a time" Siobhan would say when she was hungry. If Siobhan started to weep, Marie would take it as a curtain call and drop the blue velour. Outdoors was a different backdrop. Doodles of the countryside, the river valley, or McHugh Bluff. Other people, only puppets; schoolteachers and classmates hanging on the strings pulled by her mother. On Siobhan's first day of "school", Marie said, "Your new friends tangle their wires at the bus stop. The teacher has no wires at all. Instead the teacher has a hand inside her. What happens onstage this year is up to none of these puppets because anything they will is me." When Siobhan was old enough, her mother would sit front row with ticket stubs for story after story. "Beginnings, middles, and the end are what the world

is,” Marie said. A flip of the page forward through the programme and a shake of her head at Siobhan’s matinées that were unclear on *what it means*. Marie collected letters for her paydays and she wanted Siobhan to tell it better. Siobhan came closest when she punched herself repeatedly in the mouth and face from loneliness. If she had a nosebleed then Marie *had* to let her take a fifteen minute break from stories. Siobhan learned to find the bitter taste that she suspects has been inside her since she was eleven months old by clenching her teeth hard enough.

Siobhan rinses her grimace with a gulp of honey wine. She spits onto the cemetery. James once told her that when *he* felt most shut inside *his* theatre it helped to rub the soreness in his knuckles and his maw. Siobhan touches a finger to her cheek and yawns. She sniffs her flowers. Dinner plans feel more and more like blue velour since Vincent moved to Kingdom Park and left Siobhan with no one to go to shows with. She stoops down to pluck another dahlia for her bouquet.

A marble likeness of Vincent pinches itself at the lapels under a poplar. It sports a new loosestrife boutonnière (*Who was here?* Siobhan wonders). His full name “VINCENT ASHLEY CLAY” engraved with laurels at the statue’s base. The epitaph reads NOTHING WITHOUT RECIPES. That this likeness does not start to fidget after she stares right at it for a jiffy says to Siobhan that this statue is not modeled on Vincent after all but rather on his face and stature. It bothers her, this statue wears no glasses. Siobhan snatches the loosestrife boutonnière and steps on it. She picks snow off the statue’s hair and flicks the raindrops off its shoulders.

The poplar behind Vincent’s likeness reaches seventy feet up at its fingertips. The tree bends slightly over with the burden of a knotted and arthritic spot high up on its spine that crinkles down the better part of its rusted backbone. Branches from this gnarl clench the sprigs

around them. Inflammation at their black and yellow, splintered hangnails. Unseasonable flowers of every other colour tremble all around it, snapping motionless when Siobhan notices. A shiver of moths quiets itself likewise against the bark. Raindrops through the cemetery hush themselves to a stop. A stuffed, pink elephant doll tangled up there holds a greeting card signed *Happy Seventeenth*.

Not even a jiffy passes and those moths begin to shiver in the cold again. The flowers go on trembling. The poplar's knotted spot twitches stiff, the branches clinching their grip tighter. Now the tree bends slightly over in another way, towards Siobhan this time. The tree trunk heaves with splinters, leaning further.

Siobhan sips her honey wine. She sniffs her bouquet of stolen blacks and yellows. She says nothing yet an answer nonetheless timbres from the branches.

“ ‘Very quirky,’ I'd say. ‘Even worrying.’ We'll need Marie to sort out this bizarreness. Where is she?”

James Briar—the thirty-two-foot centipede, of course, whose handlebar moustache reaches farther to each side than Siobhan's arms—untangles himself from the poplar. He slithers to the ground, yanking all those flowers down. The moths flutter after, diving on and sipping wax that glosses James's black and yellow carapace. James scuttles through the snow towards Siobhan. His knuckled legs and armour plates, each wider than Siobhan's shoulders, clink against each other as he coils near. He passes all those flowers backwards through his knuckles, ending with a big bouquet clenched in his left and hindmost foot. He rears the front links of his body from the ground so that he can address Siobhan set to face. A cluster of spider mites lives inside an ulcer on his lower mandible and weaves a film of silk across the left par of his mouth.

Siobhan sips her honey wine. “Don't you dare tell me that I've been following you.”

“ ‘Following me?’ ” says the giant centipede. “But . . . the *grave*. I mean—that shirtdress, by the way. Where is that sheath you own? Even colder. I mean, is it such a haunt I’ve come to? But you’re just leaving, no? Then yes, I will be following you. I’d say, ‘Time enough spent underground.’ ”

The centipede’s bouquet of flowers is larger six times over than Siobhan’s. Siobhan’s has no stuffed, pink elephant and instead of every other colour is just black and yellow—just like James.

“Did you pluck those flowers for me or Ashley?” says Siobhan.

“Did you pluck yours for Vincent?” says the centipede.

Before he had the aneurysm, Siobhan imagined Vincent as her husband, but it was James the giant centipede who told her “No.”

“I didn’t really think it through, I think,” Siobhan tells James. She sniffs her daffodils and dahlias. “I’m a bit surprised to find you.”

“But, the grave. Shirtdress and such.”

A tattered rabbit, caged inside James’s yellow knuckles, sleeps against his belly. The rabbit’s ears are nibbled to stumps and a fracture in its face leaks bunny stew. From its nightmare, the rabbit loses an unconscious squeal.

“Stormed its warren. Then came up with it,” says James. “You still recognize me after I’ve plundered the bunny hole?—or am I so grown? Shall I reintroduce myself? I am, of course, James Briar.”

“I’ll stick with my dessert.” Siobhan sips her honey wine.

“I’ll say, ‘It’s not what you’ve eaten. It’s what you’ve done that dwarfs you.’ ”

“And what’s the tiny thing?”

“You compared yourself to Ashley.”

“Don’t follow. You made that up.”

“You asked, ‘Is that bouquet for me or Ashley?’ ”

“Not that way.”

“Well. What difference; can’t tell it. But it’s *how* you tell it, you see. Just follow me: *It’s how you said it*. And so much about it.”

“Where is Marie indeed?” says Siobhan.

The links of James’s body slide against each other soundlessly as he steps forward. He passes his batch of flowers back and forth between his hindmost legs.

“How many feet are you now, by the way?” asks Siobhan.

“Thirty-two.”

“I didn’t mean like that. I meant legs.”

“No? Well, in that case—thirty-two. That one I lost grew back.”

“But still a centipede,” says Siobhan. “Aren’t you, Gaspard.”

James curls his moustache into a pair of disks he holds across his face, producing the illusion—even though he has no eyes—of prescription spectacles. More than anything, James dislikes when others mistake him for someone else; for “*Gaspard*” or for “*Cottus*”, for “*Gyges*” or for “*Vincent*”. He and Siobhan stroll to Kingdom Park’s main pathway where, with her hand outstretched, palm up and quivering, Siobhan says, “After you.”

“Now who’s following?” James steps onto the pavement. He bumps his rabbit on the ground, painting a harebrained cauliflower in the snow. The rabbit squeaks but does not wake. James clutches his batch of flowers high, lest it drag, and the gang of moths chasing him drink from his varnish. He twists around and says, “I’ll need those dragonflies. To rid me of my itches.

You don't suppose, Siobhan, that they're out already. I'd say, 'But for my last time round, I'm never January.' ”

Sipping from her honey wine, Siobhan follows James between the cemetery's empty places and towards the gate. All the way, the thirty-two-foot centipede twiddles the legs at his neck and hums to himself. He turns away from Siobhan and then turns back, only to avert his face when she glances over. He whips his moustache about, tasting the air in all directions.

Vincent Clay once told Siobhan, when they were very young and looked-after by their mothers, that he wished some other part of him would finish conversations that unsettled him. “Why,” Marie had told them both, “then you'll never end a once upon a time. Things will happen twice. Then twice again.”

“I'm ill fit here,” James tells Siobhan of Kingdom Park. He tears a lump of hock from his rabbit and he passes it, leg to leg, up his body to his mouth. He points his moustache upwind. “I'm ill fit here,” he repeats. “The reek. It puts me in dismay.”

“Yet here I found you squirming up a tree.”

‘Well why hid me?’

“You're upset with Vincent?—with feeling shut-in again. You'll be glad to hear the house inches ajar.”

James body snaps rigid as a door chain. The gang of moths drinking from him bounce against his armour. He curls his legs slowly inwards and he says, “I've always wished for proper fingers. To turn a knob or handle and to open doors just so I could slam them closed myself for once. I'd say, 'If you've ever found yourself locked out, perchance the keys were in the house.' ”

“A taxman's been stopping by, you know? And writing things about you.”

“I know it now you tell me.” James unlatches his body from its stillness and resumes his marching to the gate. Twiddling his legs, he hums. “Flechette is the one. The one to visit. ‘Mind the yard,’ I’ll say.”

“You tell him. You tell him tonight.”

“Tonight by your watch or by mine? Oh, and this bouquet. It was for Ashley. But then you mentioned. Now it’s mine.”

Siobhan considers for a moment how James always smells of ocean. She thinks maybe moths about him are for salt. She can’t decide on any more to say to him and so they part ways at the cemetery gate. Siobhan strolls her honey wine back to her truck while James steps directly from the cemetery, it seems, into Clay Manor’s upstairs hallway without touching a spot of the city in between.

Siobhan sniffs her flowers and remembers how she forgot to leave them at the headstone. It turns out she picked them for herself, like James. Her truck lurches backwards at first when she taps the pedal. She fumbles with the gear shift. Backwards again. Siobhan shuts the engine off. She finishes her honey wine and plants her bouquet in the bottle. She shuts her eyes against her drunkenness and, for a third time, backwards.

## 10. Marie Stole Gaspard's Briefcase; She Flips Through His Paperwork and Explains

### “Mind the Yard”

Marie Lévi-Bosko sits with Flechette in the eastern wing. She twists a second, not as stinky doobie on the coffee table while Flechette lolls sideways by the fireplace. A honeyed ham, groovy with tattoos, spins on a rotisserie above the kindling. Meanwhile, ghostlights flutter over Flechette's china bowl. One by one, the cat plucks flaming raisins from the brandy, snapping them into his mouth. He licks his fire moustache to extinguish it again, asking, “Why won't you help me pay taxes?”

Marie Lévi-Bosko licks her skunky em-dash—rice paper from the kitchen, fuzzy bud from the baggies that were in a jam jar. The sudden crumble of cheddar on crackers to match in Marie Lévi-Bosko's mouth is so much sharper when she clenches her teeth. She rubs the stiffness in her collarbones, rolling forward one shoulder then the other. She weaves her hair into a fishtail and lays the braids over her bosom. The yellow hairpin belongs to Flechette.

A bruise smudges the knuckle Marie accidentally smashed into the window when she slammed that weathervane against the sedan parked on the crescent road.

Flechette nibbles his own paw with worry when he notices the sore spot on Marie's knuckle. “Ooh,” he says as though his knuckle, and not Marie's, wears that mouse. “Ooh.” He catches one last ghostlight from his bowl and he slinks over. He climbs onto the couch beside her. His weight on the cushions pulls Marie towards him. He sniffs her knuckle. Smelly as the colour green. He lays his paw on Marie's shoulder. “Why won't you help me pay taxes?” Ghostlights flicker purple form inside Flechette's mouth. Marie Lévi-Bosko lights her doobie on his whiskers.



She flips open the taxman's binder filled with tax letters. Flechette mimes rummaging through pages of his own. Marie flips backwards to an early chapter. "Look here, Pussy." She points to a spot on the paper. "This chapter is titled 'Mind the Yard'."

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Ashley Clay thinks James was born because all the other times that she was pregnant she said "No." She believes that giving birth to him, the thirty-odd-foot centipede, was her body's way to tell her that it holds a grudge. Ashley's friend, Marie Lévi-Bosko, on the other hand thinks Ashley Clay birthed James because Michael (who jots *This Letter*) *wanted* Ashley to give birth to James. Marie nonetheless helped Ashley dig under the conifers behind Clay Manor because otherwise Ashley would have held another grudge. The reason Ashley grabbed her spade in the first place to stab it in the earth, or course, was James, the thirty-odd-foot centipede.

Ashley dug under the conifers because she buried plates of chitin after James shucked off his husk. She convinced herself that nobody would eat her desserts if they knew she lived with a centipede. Even with a carapace as glossy as James's, a centipede will always make another person itchy, she believed. So she snuck everything under the conifers. So she latched the door chain. James could creep out the clerestory windows or the chimney but others could not visit through the door so long as Ashley clinked the clank shut. Ashley Clay pretended that she never even had James. Only Vincent.

Ashley Clay discovered James's husk would not decay under the dirt unless she scrubbed its lustre dull. She used the upstairs bath. The triple one. She scraped and scraped until the drain flushed yellow black. Every August James would shuck. After thirteen winters atop James's armour, the conifers behind Clay Manor sapped whatever poison had deformed him. They

started hatching tawny dragonflies from inside their pinecones. Ashley thinks those dragonflies are just another way her body tells her that it holds a grudge.

The other thing left over besides the husk was Vincent, who incubated in James every go-around. Vincent would climb from the armour's mandibles and run upstairs, naked but for fluids polishing him yellow and phlegmatic. He would hush himself inside the bathroom, washing himself raw while Ashley rushed to find the husk so she could scrub and bury it. Ashley handed down the house alongside all her bakeries to Vincent even though she knew that during every go-around something grew inside him too.

Come February, Vincent moulted. James would climb from Vincent's mouth, folded somehow into the smaller space. Unlike Vincent, James was unafraid of Vincent's husk shucked off. James, the thirty-odd-foot centipede, would curl round and eat the hollowed Vincent left behind. Ashley would clink the clank shut. Six months after *this*, Vincent would come back. And back: James. Again and back again. Vincent and James shared the year, nesting doll-like in each other, trading off in August then again in February.

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“How does the taxman know all this?” Flechette asks Marie. “Who told him? You told him? Why won't you help me pay them?”

“Michael told him. The questions that you should be asking, Pussy—and these have really set my stones—are: If the taxman knows *this* much, how does he not know Vincent left the house to *you*? Stopped by twice now asking for ‘Pallas Briefman’; and, How might this chapter ‘Mind the Yard’ read now that James has climbed from Vincent's grave?—I'll tell you how it looks, that's how. How it looks is Vincent back inside the house come August.”

Flechette pitters after Marie to the greeting room. He stops nodding his head and he says, “I don’t know where you’ve taken me. How do *you* mean when you say to ‘mind the yard’?”

Marie huffs her stinky doobie. She loves it and turns the sipping end towards Flechette. Flechette takes a sloppy kiss. His mismatched brown and yellow eyes now matching bloodshot.

“When I say ‘mind the yard’, I mean grab a spade, stand behind Clay Manor underneath the conifers. I’d say I’ve kept James a secret longer than any other character. Longer even than a centipede.”

Clay Manor’s door clinks open. The chain.

“Do you know why that door clinks, Pussy?” says Marie. “Because when Michael jots *Clay Manor*, he writes that chain rigid, that’s why. When *I* wrote *Clay Manor*, I wrote this all means nothing. Hildegard thought Ashley Clay was named *née* Dowry, that *née* Dowry married four-and-twenty times. In Hildegard’s first chapter of *Clay Manor*, *née* Dowry waits on the doorstep—for Hildegard, it seems, and not some other taxman—to stroll up the walk and drop the letter in the letter slot. And Thalia wrote to Vincent. Do you suppose that Gaspard’s letter—to *you*—will gather readers outside? Tour guides? If so, then everybody will have heard that you swallow your babies. Everybody will have heard of James. Everyone will read that letter and know *what it means*.”

“Wait,” says Flechette. “‘*James has climbed from Vincent’s grave*’, you say?”

Marie Lévi-Bosko wipes Flechette’s slobber off her stinky doobie and she huffs it again. She strolls the grand staircase. “If you still wonder if I read ahead and if Vincent climbs back into the house come August, ask yourself how many things you’ve done this March. The month is nearly over and you’ve only done as much as someone can jot down.”

“I’ve mind—muh . . . minded the yard,” says Flechette.

Flechette paws upstairs after Marie, yet somehow she drifts further ahead and farther still as though, instead of climbing up the steps, Flechette actually does Lindy Hops on spot, too stoned to follow. He quickens his footwork.

“I’ll tell you what, Pussy. Vincent said to mind the yard in exchange for your keep. How long this story keeps you is a matter of how long you clear the dishes, scrub the cups, tuck away the red and grey. Grow the yogurt and the like. Catch snap-dragon. Host your shindigs. If you mind the yard come August, as you say you ‘mind the yard’, then meanwhile you can stay inside Clay Manor. And conversely, if you just left right now, then you could either ‘mind the yard’ or not. If you just left. Right. Now.”

“Who taught you to be a landlord? Did ‘Michael’ teach you? I notice how you never mentioned that I stay inside Clay Manor yet *not* mind the yard,” says Flechette.

Marie Lévi-Bosko stomps to the top of the staircase while Flechette dances at the bottom, not one pitter closer. He quits and curls up on the floor. He shuts his matching bloodshots, one half of the cat already lolling in his dreams. He says, “The readers will read *what it means*. Jot down *what it means*. Remember. *What it means*.”

Clay Manor’s upper hallway leads at one end to the spiral stairwell that drops into the eastern wing while at the other, the hallway branches to the bedrooms. Marie walks to the open doors. Last night’s sleepover rests under the blue-green bed sheets inside bedroom one. Her bedroom hair halfway to truly messy. Blonde across the sleep-talk she whispers over her pillow.

“Yes, sir. I’ll have one more fritter to share. Strawberry, please,” says the sleepover.

Marie Lévi-Bosko gently shuts the door. She strangles the doorknob at its throat then wrings the door back open. This time, the bedroom opens on a memory that Marie has of sixty-three years ago. Planks of hardwood now meadow grass jazzy on the floor with summer

dewdrops. Dandelions clock the wind with sidelong fluff behind that bedroom door. A youngster version of Marie sits with a littler Ashley at a picnic table for dessert. Behind the girls, black and orange bricks stack a pattern from grass to ceiling. Past the windows on this brickwork lies the inside of a townhouse where Ashley Clay grew up in. Marie Lévi-Bosko can step through that bedroom door, of course, and stroll across the meadow grass. She could join her youngster self and littler Ashley but she does not want to frighten them. Instead she leans against the doorframe and she sips on her doobie. She hoots a plume into the bedroom.

“Just tooted? You?” Marie asked Ashley sixty-three years ago. Marie swung one rain boot underneath the picnic table while in the other she wiggled her tootsies. She nibbled on a ginger snap so big she needed both her hands to grip it.

“I tooted a cookie ago,” said Ashley. “But that toot has left the garden. This one isn’t mine.” Ashley sniffed the air. Ashley was saving her last cookie. She wanted Marie to finish first. That way she could turn her friend grumpy with envy while munching on hers later. There were no more cookies in the kitchen.

“‘My snap sure could use a splash with it’,” the Marie Lévi-Bosko in Clay Manor remembers Ashley saying. Again Marie kisses her stinky doobie.

“Well it wasn’t me who tooted.” Sixty-three years ago, Marie bit another nibble. She sniffed and giggled. “It’s *so* skunky.” Ashley’s whole and crumbly cookie sat on its dinner plate. Marie pointed at it and she said, “Are you saving that for me?”

“That’s my snap and my snap sure could use a splash with it,” littler Ashley answered. She showed Marie the bottom of her empty cup of milk and she said, “Can you please?”

“Of course I can.” Marie snatched up Ashley’s cup and put down her ginger snap. She stood from the picnic table and she walked through the bedroom door right into Clay Manor.

“Excusie me,” she told the woman in the sunhat standing at the doorway—who *clearly* was the one who tooted—and then she tracked her dewy boot prints down the corridor towards the spiral stairwell. She gripped the railing with one hand while she stepped downstairs and with the other hand she wondered why Ashley couldn’t pour the milk herself. Marie’s boot prints carried her down to the eastern wing. She glanced to her right. Inside the adjacent room, a fluffy critter the size of a bicycle lolled on its belly by a stack of papers. The critter widened its eyes with surprise, mumbling “Jot down *what it means*. Remember. *What it means*” then it fluttered its eyes shut and snored. Marie glanced to her left, where Clay Manor’s eastern wing opened to a kitchen. She rummaged through the fridge. Skim milk in a jug. The lid too tight to open so she filled Ashley’s cup with clotted cream instead. She also found an urn that brimmed with bubbly and white slime. She brought that slime and Ashley’s *can-you-please* up the stairwell and through the corridor. “Excusie me,” she said again to the woman in the sunhat, who kept on tooting outside the bedroom. Youngster Marie stole through the bedroom door back to her childhood behind Ashley’s mother’s townhouse.

“Look Ashley,” said Marie. “I brought icky. Two varieties. One of them smells savoury,” she set the cup of clotted cream atop the picnic table, “and the other one smells sour.” Marie flipped upside-down that urn of bubbly and white slime. Ashley’s age-old sourdough starter, which she would churn twenty years later and for which she would turn famous, slipped from its vessel and slapped onto the meadow grass. Marie giggled at the noise it made. “Smack,” she said. “Also, I’ve discovered who’s been tooting. There.”

Littler Ashley squinted at the spot where her friend pointed, unable to see the way that Marie Lévi-Bosko did into Clay Manor but not saying a word about it.

Marie Lévi-Bosko shuts the door on memory. If she knew back then that littler Ashley ate a nibble off her ginger snap while she refilled the milk then maybe Marie would not have turned so bitter over who Ashley gave Clay Manor to. Marie carries on down Clay Manor's upper corridor. Another hit from her twisted filter and the cherry slides close enough for her to feel the ginger on her lips.

Behind the second bedroom door, of course, lies Kingdom Park Cemetery, so when Marie flips it open, James Briar, the thirty-two-foot centipede, scuttles on through. His knuckles thunder to one hundred knocks across the wallpaper while he squirms into the snug fit of the hallway, dragging a bouquet of every other-coloured flower except black or yellow with him. A flurry of moths tumbles after. The shiver of their whites and greys inside the hallway frosty as a cold snap. A picture frame drops off the wall but James catches it before it shatters. He scratches the doorway to a slam behind him. His front part coils up the wall as high as Marie Lévi-Bosko's face and sideways, with the back end of him tapping its feet in an agitated writhing. He twists his moustache through the tooty smell that curls from Marie Lévi-Bosko's doobie.

"I'd say," says the giant centipede, reorienting himself to the house. "'My *Aunt Marie*'."

"Welcome home," says Marie Lévi-Bosko. Marie holds out the cherry end of her doobie to him and he nibbles the ember. A spider mite from the silky ulcer inside James's mouth scuttles onto Marie's finger. The tattered rabbit James found in the cemetery finally has woken from its nightmare to Clay Manor. It groans in horror. James wraps his leg around it tighter, crushing the rabbit's ribcage and juicing a shriek from it. He passes the rabbit forward and he spreads his mandibles around its pulp, slurping.

Marie Lévi-Bosko says, "You're just in time for honeyed ham with that."

## 11. Beast Features: starring Vincent Clay and James, with Ashley and Three Others

“Detective. Smidge on then. It’s your turn at the go-a-round.”

The year is twenty years ago. The house: *this* house. Marie brings her daughter Siobhan for board games outside, inside the gazebo. With Ashley Clay and Vincent.

They play minus their board game now. Siobhan has flung their game board to the snow. Vincent gawks out the gazebo door. All those pieces. That little, haunted mansion Ashley built atop the table fractured into matchsticks and scattered through the flurries. Detective Blue, who Vincent was, lies frosty out there buried. Windswept game cards flip their honey-coloured clues towards Clay Manor. Vincent’s teacup and Siobhan’s, having rode that game board yonder, splash orange and then pomegranate on the purple loosestrife.

Ashley Clay, who happened to be reaching for her pudding wine as Siobhan upended their game, hugs that goblet to her bosom now. Ashley suckles her frown back into the mouth. Clue cards all over her table. Matchsticks all across her flurries. Glue from when she built that little, haunted mansion still tacky on her fingers.

Siobhan takes her seat again and Ashley flinches. Flushness drains from Siobhan’s cheeks then she blushes a different and mottled rosy—*this* rosy owing to the coldness rather than to having flung a game board out the door of a gazebo.

“Detective,” Marie says again to Vincent. “Smidge on then. It’s your turn at the go-a-round. Or are you waiting for James?”

Vincent glances at his mother. The two of them sit on the table’s sunny side. Teammates. Vincent, the Detective Blue; his mum, the All Business One. *Happy Good*, according to the rulebook, against Marie and Siobhan’s *Grumpy Neutral*.



Vincent squints at his one clue card. The clue titled *a Change in Language Use. Evidence of spookiness*, the card reads at the bottom. Vincent knows not how to play it. The picture, of a book with words crossed-out, gives him a gloomy feeling. He glances at his mum again, who sips her pudding wine and sneers across the table at the facing team.

“Does the Detective Blue need his mum to show him what to do again?” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

“The Detective Blue is frosty out there. Buried,” replies Ashley. “Cherry job of it. Definitely he’s not tossing anything.” Ashley says to Siobhan, “Is something more flipping out that door?”

To which Siobhan responds, “A resounding maybe.”

Ashley slaps the tablecloth. Both hands firm. She stands up from her chair so that her hands are slapped down on her table stronger. Her arms quiver with her weight down. She says, “On my turn I make sure you don’t upend my table on your turn.”

Marie Lévi-Bosko smirks at the bare spot where the board was. She nods—as though Siobhan’s outburst and Ashley’s playing Vincent’s go-a-round a second time have notched her team a tally, scoring them another point closer to solving the mystery of: What haunts the mansion?

Marie sets down her player token. The Prophet Duchess. She plucked it somehow from the game board as it vaulted upside down in pieces out the door. Marie antes a pair of clue cards from her hand.

Marie reads the clues out loud. “On my round the Prophet Duchess uncovers *a Gloomy Feeling* and *an Old Gallows*. Both are evidence of spookiness.” She winks Vincent’s way then continues. “Even if the little, haunted mansion is upended, the things-to-do to put the ghosts

away still want their doing. What do you do then, Missus Valkyrie?—to put those ghosts away,” she asks Siobhan.

Siobhan picks through her clues. She puts forward a ghost card: *a Witch*.

“Who would think *a Witch* bothers the house?” Siobhan asks her mother. “What is *a Witch*?—a word, that’s what. Who writes it?—a writer. A writer jots down ‘*Witch*’ of women whose homes the writer wants to live in. *She says hocus-pocus bogus*, jots the writer of that woman. The writer strips the woman naked. He says, *That nipple spells out ‘TOUCH ME HERE’*. *That freckle spells out ‘WITCH’*. And so he fondles her. He says, ‘Witch’.” Siobhan raises her mittened fingers. Ashley flinches, straining all her heaviness onto her tablecloth. Siobhan flaps black and yellow, zigzagged air quotes with pompoms hanging off of them on either side of that word “WITCH”.

Siobhan follows on, “*This witch’s cleft spells ‘HANG HER’*, claims the writer. So he dangles women from his gallows. He says, *What else swings so rickety?—their front door swung open for me, that’s what*. The writer moves his silverware into her house and he misplaces his knives and forks on purpose in the fireplace. *A gloomy feeling looms*, he lies.” Siobhan’s enactment of a writer speaks with *la-di-dah* tuned through their blah. Siobhan pretends to jot down letters on a binder stuffed with paperwork. She blahs, “*The gloomy feeling is a clue. Those witches have come back*. And so the writer exhumes the woman’s body. The woman having gone to mushrooms stinky as a dinner, he says, *Where has her face gone? The nipple? Freckle?—gone home, of course*. And the writer points to his own words ‘*GLOOMY FEELING LOOMS*’ as proof of that ‘witch’ having said ‘hocus-pocus’. A writer,” says Siobhan, “uses the word ‘Witch’ to evict a woman from a house he wants to live in.”

Siobhan plays the clue card titled *an Unearthed Coffin* from her hand.

“But really what this proves is that the writer used the woman’s body as a prop for story,” furthers on Siobhan. “A woman called a ‘Witch’ can’t go from gallows home. I should know. I play Missus Valkyrie.” Siobhan’s player token lies somewhere in all that snow under those matchsticks with the Detective Blue. Missus Valkyrie’s familiar raven tucked in Siobhan’s pocket for the go-a-round she’s needed most.

Siobhan finishes, “Me and my mum have won the mystery. What haunts the mansion?—*a Witch*, says the game. But actually the house is haunted by a writer’s thirst for some bizarreness. There is no ghost. No one comes home from the underground. The haunted mansion all along was burdened only by a jotter’s want to stock it with his props for story.”

Marie Lévi-Bosko nods her head again.

Siobhan goes on—to just her mother now, “Do you know what else writers use as props for once upon a time, *Marie*?”

Marie Lévi-Bosko peers sideways at her girl. Siobhan balls her black and yellow zigzags with pompoms hanging off of them into mittened fists. Her mottled rosy freezes pale and her lips chap.

“What are ‘Taxes’?” says Siobhan. She darkens her eyes narrow. “‘Taxes’ is a word. Who writes it?—taxmen, that’s who. You. *How’s it?—the who, wherein, this when and why, what it means?*’ And such,” says Siobhan.

Marie says, “You’re not on about your clue cards any longer, are you?”

Half of what Siobhan just said she said with words that Vincent has not learned yet. The rules of this game have confused him. His mother stands there, pressing her hands on her table. Just as well, that his team lost. Vincent has not uttered a mumble since Marie insisted they play their game outside. He has yet to put forward a clue card. When Siobhan flung their board game

from gazebo to the snow, Detective Blue had only just begun to snoop inside the haunted boot room. Vincent figures that this game—at least the way Siobhan and Marie play it—is a closer fit for the centipede James Briar.

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When Marie swings open the bedroom door for James after he scuttles from Vincent’s grave and wanders home, she tells him about the time they played without him twenty years ago, minus their game board, behind Clay Manor inside the gazebo.

James says, “You’re not telling me about that board game, are you anymore?” He answers himself, “Nope. You’re telling me about *Clay Manor*.” He says, “I’d say, ‘I can’t even fathom what you think *I’m* a prop for.’ What with my ‘from gallows home’ inside this story.”

The thirty-two-foot centipede creeps bottoms-up along the ceiling in the second-storey corridor. His armour shines by starlight from the windows. He clacks his knuckles up there, hundred-odd upon the walls. Looming after Marie Lévi-Bosko, he lurks into the eastern wing.

Marie steps down the twisted stairwell. James coils above. His flutter of moths clusters on his hind parts, featherlike. He hangs his front half upside-down and swings his head next to the fireplace where Marie Lévi-Bosko bakes chapter after chapter from Clay Manor’s tax letter. The ashes blacken Flechette’s loaf of pork on its rotisserie above the glow.

“I’d say,” says James. “ ‘You *would* say ‘Nothing’.’ ”

Marie folds another page into the fire. She likes her ending better than the one this taxman’s written. In her ending of what happened in Clay Manor, Vincent signs the house to *her* rather than Pussy—or “Pallas Briefman”, “Flechette”, or “Aeolus”—in his last testament. That way, when Gaspard Hobbes strolls up the walk with tax letter in hand, his letter is addressed to

*Marie Lévi-Bosko* and *she* answers to Revenue, saying that whatever happens in Clay Manor—*What it means?*—means nothing.

Marie nods at the flap of ashes where the story was—as though burning paper scores her that much closer to owning Clay Manor. Marie Lévi-Bosko puts on her sunhat. She turns from the reflection she sees of herself inside the fire. She doesn't like reminders of the syphilitic chancre she took turns wearing with Ashley. The scar aside her lip reddens in front of the fireplace. The woman in the sunhat says:

“Here comes the go-a-round.”

“I have a story too,” says James. “Will you listen? More ghoully than that board game.” He shifts nearer. The spider mites nested on his mandible might be confused for caviar if he would stop nibbling them and scaring them into a scurry.

James opens his bits for eating. The grasping claws that frame the underside of his helmet stretch wide. Black as bruises, thumb-like in their structure and as long as Marie's arm. The petals and the stamens of his mouthparts altogether resemble a wet, eight-fingered flower, pistils licking from its middle. He has no breath to smell, because he doesn't suck air through his mouth. Instead he breathes through sphincters that yawn in succession along his flanks. These blowholes, one above each of his legs, are from where James speaks.

The woman in the sunhat says, “On your go-a-round, you'll take back the house. You'll give the house to me.”

“Who do you mean?—‘you will’. ‘*Vincent* will’? He and I look nothing similar. Why would I share his go-a-round? Anywho, I happen on a dozen sourdoughs cooling at the windowsill beside the devil in my story. I get thirsty only thinking of how sourdough smells

grilled under a sheep's cheese. I grill that cheese—in my story. I use all the skilletts and I swallow that devil.”

“The extra loaf in Ashley's dozen is named ‘thirteen’,” says Marie. “Not ‘devil’.”

The faucet drips a slow song from the kitchen. Orange light from the refrigerator open. Flechette snores in the greeting room. He stutters, “*Wah . . . wah . . . What it means. Re . . . meh. Wah . . . uh . . . muh.*” He rolls over on his belly and stretches his dream.

Marie says, “Pussy will try to answer *What it means?* without me seeing. Pussy will try to pay those taxes.”

“So much sheep cheese melts that devil,” goes on James about those sourdoughs. His voice lowers. “The morning following, the ghosts of those loaves sit bitter on the windowsill. They wait for me, as though to relive that grill. I fiddle with them first, their crusts rough, and I wonder, ‘Does bread even *have* a soul to become ghost?’ But for my hunger, I eat the dozen. Tastes of yesterday, that devil.”

Marie says, “But what does Pussy know? About Clay Manor little and of taxes nothing. How he sees it is just shindigs. Says he minds the yard. But really what he does is hide here from his other taxes.”

James coils his body in the style of a spiral staircase hanging from the ceiling. He wriggles his legs up and down the length of him. His back half twitches with the itch of having moths perched on it. He says:

“The devil squats upon his trivet then on every morning aside the dozen ghosts.”

“Do you not realize who your mother is?—or something?” Marie Lévi-Bosko says. “Ashley baked new sourdoughs. Nothing ghastly of it. No wonder sometimes she fell orders short. You kept eating baker's dozens.”

“The devil,” slurs James. “Sourdoughs.” By a twiddle of his legs he mimes the motion of those loaves sliding through his body. “How those sourdoughs go from my stomach home each time I eat them. *What it means?*—that morning and morning still I hunger for ghosts.”

“With all that nothing Pussy knows, he’ll never say what happens in Clay Manor means nothing,” says Marie. “He’s bound to tell some other nonsense.” She tilts her head to James. “You will take back the house though, won’t you, Vincent? You will give the house to me.”

“If *you* say it, Aunt Marie—that ‘I will’—then I suppose I will. You should know. You are the woman in the sunhat. ‘Already handily,’ I’d say of what you say, ‘with so many fingers at it.’ And I won’t even mind if you mistake me for someone else. Sure. I’ll sign the house to you. Yes?”

James loops his moustache above his head, giving the illusion that he wears a sunhat too. Marie Lévi-Bosko turns away. She doesn’t like to notice her own face—even if that face is actually not her face at all, but James’s.

Marie says, “Do you truly think those sourdoughs were haunted?—or something? Or are you poking daggers at my story of that board game?”

To which James answers, “Would it really be so sour for Clay Manor if Flechette paid his taxes?”

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Siobhan flicks Vincent’s scrotum in the shower. She likes how his testicles flush pinkish in hot water. She pokes Vincent’s asshole. He exercises oft enough to look the way he does while naked, which for Siobhan makes this game jigglier. He says “Eep”. He says “Oop”. He kicks one knee up and covers himself with his hands. But still he has those nipples and that grin to pinch.

He lets Siobhan help shave his gobbledygook. She steps over him and orders that he give her witch's cleft a lick.

Siobhan trains Vincent for years in how to pinch her clit. To grip the mound *around* it between his thumb and knuckle then to knead her not too gently. A puckered sip. Crumpled suckle. Siobhan and Vincent stagger their shaving. One plays hairless while the other shaggy. Never fuck when one has stubble.

Nearing Siobhan's twenty-three, she visits the doctor. She's learned from Vincent's mother about something called an intrauterine device. She wants to have one for when Vincent overwinters. She lies supine on the examination table, her heels in those stirrups. She wishes she wore brighter shades of sock or showered better. Once she has that copper T in her, she'll have more fun pinching Vincent's testicles and shaving him smooth, she reckons. A curtain wrinkles blue between Siobhan and the door. She clenches her teeth, coughs up a bitter flavour from her throat.

“Woof.”

“I wish *I* visited the clinic when I was twenty-odd.” Vincent's mother holds Siobhan's underwear and snoops into the doctor's cupboards. She pulls out a beaker, half-empty with cotton balls. A carton of rubber gloves, unopened, and a box of different-sized brushes. “There's so many arts and crafts in here,” she says. “Are you sure you won't reschedule again so Vincent can have at all this?”

The doctor knocks twice on the door. Vincent's mother flinches. She shuts the cupboards then pounces to her chair, pretending to have been studying the polka dots on Siobhan's underwear.



The doctor steps in. She clips a little pair of binoculars onto the middle of her eyeglasses. She draws back the curtain and she sits beside Siobhan's vagina. A clacking of her tools, a fidget with her spectacles, and then she lifts the cloth draped over Siobhan's lap.

The doctor says, "Please scoot to me. Back up *juuust* a little." She aims the duck-billed spreader and she says, "Deep breath. Deeper breath than that."

"Woof," answers Siobhan.

At the corner, in her chair, Vincent's mother still pretends to study Siobhan's polka dots. Siobhan's body will spot her panties red. Just as the doctor says. Her periods will run thick and biting.

The morning Vincent comes back for overwinter, Siobhan will join him in his upstairs bath. She will help him scrub and scrub. She'll pinch. She'll prod. But that day he won't make a peep. He'll cover his face and lean against the bottom of the bathtub. His scrotum and his asshole will have regrown curly since his time away. He'll shake his head when Siobhan reaches for the razor.

Just as well, will think Siobhan. Neither am I in that state of mind.

They will do nothing, together, on their backs across the blue-green bed sheets. Vincent will flinch away when Siobhan grazes her finger on his elbow. She will roll over when in his fidgeting he bumps against her leg.

Siobhan spent more than one year asking that doctor to jot the letter T inside her. The first time she lay in those stirrups, the doctor turned Siobhan away. The doctor would not put that copper T inside her uterus that first time because Siobhan, back then, had a pelvic infection. She had caught the spider mites. Vincent's mother *actually* studied Siobhan's polka dots in the corner during *that* appointment.

When Siobhan starts talking to Marie again, Marie will say:

“You caught those spider mites from James, didn’t you? and not from Vincent.”

To which Siobhan will reply, “A resounding maybe.”

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A pair of city workers wander near Siobhan’s apartment building. Their reflector vests mark their backs with silver Xs. They circle opposite directions, meeting behind in the parking lot then in front at their truck again. One carries a chainsaw while the other speaks to a transceiver. “Here? Not here.” The city workers are on an adventure for a reported, toppled conifer. The conifer, of course, was actually James Briar, the thirty-two-foot centipede who has since crawled into Siobhan’s tenth-floor apartment through the balcony’s glass door.

James folds into a quarter of the living space. He rummages through Siobhan’s shelving. He spirals his moustache around her knickknacks and her houseplants. Many of her books are missing. Packed into storage bins or donated to the library. Siobhan’s bookends are in the shape of a lion and an elephant. A pair of squid-shaped hats, red and blue, knot their tentacles. Siobhan sewed those hats from fabric left over from when she burned her curtains on purpose. Puppets dangle from the ceiling, dancing when James touches their wires. James flicks on the television with his middle knuckles and he channels the static. Hairs across his armour rise on-end while with his moustache James tastes his way through the doodads on Siobhan’s shelf.

James stops at a mason jar. The lid twisted tight. He taps his moustache on it. Rattle. Copper inside. He can smell it through the glass.

“You yanked it out yourself,” says James. “ ‘Yikes,’ I’d say. The string was long enough?”

One shoulder off Siobhan's wedding gown has started to rip. The birdcage Siobhan prettied up in its is too red-brown at the bust. Rusted. The birdcage sits on Siobhan's kitchen counter next to the sink. Edith, the raven, swings on her perch under the chiffon. The raven blinks across the apartment at James. The raven says, "There are no words."

"But there is copper," James answers. "And it is savoury."

James points his moustache around. He tastes the air. Siobhan has taken down her photographs. Pictures, paintings, pop-up cards that James made her all in cardboard boxes. James can hear fresh plaster setting in those nail holes. He can smell most of Siobhan's clothing in the other room packed into suitcases.

"Where are you off to?" James asks.

"No where," Siobhan answers from the bathroom.

"What will you do there?"

"No what?"

Siobhan drips her footprints to the kitchen. The kettle cool enough to touch now. The salt in Siobhan's teapot fizzes when Siobhan pours in the water. She dips in her finger, tickling the mixture.

Siobhan says, "I've wondered if you dream while you're away or if it's over in just a blink—or rather a whisper. Whatever."

"It's as though I'm about to vomit. Then he utters me. It feels as though I'm no more than letters Vincent reads out loud."

Siobhan says, "Vincent put it: Winter follows him. He winds the clock back an hour. He hoped that you felt as though you had less time than him. An hour less each go-a-round."

Siobhan carries the teapot to the bathroom. She nods her head over the sink. The teapot's spout fits up her nostril. She smiles wickedly while the hocus-pocus pours through her nose and salty out the other side.

"Do you think Vincent and I are at all similar?" says James. He fiddles with the puppets that hang off Siobhan's ceiling, making them clutch at each other and twirling. He recognizes the puppet wearing the wicker sunhat. Another, a checkered leotard. James lifts the sunhat off one puppet and fits it on the other.

"Why did you make a puppet of your mother and of yourself another?" James asks Siobhan. "Do you enact stories of revenge? One August, I swam into the river. Holding down my cough. I moulted underwater so that Vincent had to flail ashore and so my mother had to paddle out into the wetness to fetch it. How much of my armour do you figure she gathered from the water? All of it? But just as well; if someone else had found it they would mistake it for *not* my armour. This was during the day, of course, so people on the sunny side I hope saw Vincent's dingle."

The city workers outside step into their vehicle and truck their tools away.

"When he mumbled me into that coffin, I figured it was his revenge. So I refused to flail aground. 'To play along,' I figured, 'no.' I waited a month inside that carton. 'He won't get me,' I thought. But for my hunger. I wanted a loaf of sourdough. If not for that marble likeness of him, I'd still say he tricked me back for that one August. But maybe his aneurysm is the funny thing. If we believe Marie, then Vincent's talked himself from Styx. He'll be back this coming; if we believe Marie."

Siobhan blows her nose into the toilet. Her teapot's place is a less-dusty spot behind the mirror. She steps to her bedroom and she dresses herself for the afternoon.

“That sheath,” James says. “There you have it. I’d say, ‘It’s not what you wear, but what you wear again.’ I’ll wear Vincent. He wears me.” Siobhan’s checkered shirtdress hangs over the hamper.

Siobhan picks the silver nugget earrings from her set of brassy things and stabs them just behind her lobes. The circlet she bought James for their engagement has fallen behind the trinket box. She had hoped it might fit over his knuckle. James can hear its luster from the other room. He can smell that Siobhan ran her shower cold. He nods for a moment, thinking he was right to have said “No.”

“Marie says I’ll give her the house,” says James. “I told her ‘Yes?’ But really I’d say ‘No’ without a question if I weren’t so afraid of her. She called me ‘Vincent’ again, you know? I wish *I* could flip ahead. I would peek at where you’re off to.”

Siobhan looks herself over in the mirror. She touches lipstick to her mouth, then thinks otherwise. She plucks a hair from the side of her nose. Her eyebrows are a shade lighter than her tangled crop cut so she touches them black with mascara. She’s flush enough, from her shower, so she forgets the blusher. Honey wine, in any case, shines her skin.

“No pancake? I’m hungry,” James says from the other room. He writhes a bit. His feet clatter. He tips the mason jar against his mouth as though to sip the copper from it. The strings on the IUD inside are slightly bloodied.

Siobhan gathers her bird cage; wedding gown, raven, and all. A bottle of honey wine from the cupboard and she steps into her ballet flats. Her silver nugget earrings twinkle as she leaves, the raven crying out, “There are no words.”

When James swam out into the river that one August, it was actually Siobhan and not his mother who paddled out into the wetness to fetch his armour.

James says to himself, “No.” He and Vincent spent so many of their go-a-rounds saying “Yes” to Marie Lévi-Bosko. For good measure, he stays in Siobhan’s apartment saying it again and back over.

“No. No.”

James borrows the checkered shirtdress from Siobhan’s hamper. He drapes it over his head and sniffs it. He passes it down in his legs towards his hind feet where he rolls it tight and keeps it.

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Shortly after Flechette moves into Clay Manor, his master tutors him to win at bouts of snap-dragon. Vincent trickles brandy over raisins and ignites their purple fire with the flint from a match. They play in the gazebo. The black of Flechette’s mouth is flame-retardant, as is his whole body, so this game is cat’s advantage.

Flechette stands at one side of the table, his paw on the drawing he made of a river on his placemat. Vincent sits across from him and slouches forward to that glowing bowl.

Vincent’s go-a-round is first, because he’s lived for longer in the house. He pinches a raisin from the flames and quickly chomps it down.

On Flechette’s turn, the cat scoops up a splash of brandy. He mashes it against his face. Clamping shut his eyelids, he laps at the ghostlights. Embers drip down from his mutton chops onto his placement. Flechette wipes his wrist across his head and smoothes his bouffant rouge with fire. He shakes the brightness off himself, tossing brandy to the walls and ceiling. Purple-coloured exhaust from his nostrils slinks onto the ground and snakes its way into the yard. Nigh-on-twenty-year-old matchsticks poke up from the flurries outside the gazebo door.

Between their go-a-rounds, Vincent points to near and yonder whats. The shock of conifers, for instance. That clutch of loosestrife. Vincent points at overwintered magpies and noises from the crescent road. “What,” says Vincent. “What and what.”

And what? “The needled trees,” answers Flechette when his master points to conifers.

“Your brothers and your sisters,” when he points to weeds.

“Passersby. My dapperness. I’ll mind the yard. Needled trees, *remember?* Your brothers and your sisters.” Flechette scowls at this last what, his master having already pointed out the loosestrife three times in one go-a-round.

Such glee Vincent plunders, that this cat can speak. He smiles each time Flechette answers. Wider when the cat accidentally recites poetry. Vincent played this game of ‘what’ and ‘what’ when he first met the cat and never stopped. Never mind that ‘what’ and ‘what’ gives Flechette a bellyache—really grabs his goat. Flechette would rather mum himself sometimes than speak.

Flechette gives up on snap-dragon. He figures Vincent would rather hear the ‘what’. Flechette splashes another grab of brandy over his back. A whole inferno smoulders on his withers. His fluffy tail seethes. Vincent didn’t even bother explaining *Why the bowl?* or *Why raisins?* That paw Flechette puts up for snap-dragon scorches the placemat. Embers on his moustache spark with brightness while he scowls ‘what’.

“This game,” says Flechette.

Vincent snatches a raisin from the bowl. He points.

Flechette swipes brandy to the floor. “Wednesday,” he sighs. “Marie Lévi-Bosko and her sunhat again. This gazebo. ‘Snap-dragon,’ you said. Brother. Sisters. *Remember?*” Flechette grits his fangs over ‘remember’. ‘What’ and ‘what’ have stolen his total goat.

“My goat,” Flechette whispers when Vincent points out yonder.

Flechette splashes more brandy. This time, the gazebo’s wall ignites red and yellow. The fire flaps to the ceiling, roaring as it heaves through wood. Vincent tumbles backwards. The brandy bowl fractures in the sudden stuffiness. A column shatters and the roof caves inwards, clonking Flechette on his bouffant. The cat collapses on the table, crushing their game board while huffing “*Remember?*”

Vincent scrambles out the door just as the walls domino onto the cat. Vincent flings his suit, which has caught fire, to the snow. The gazebo’s red and yellow flames fade blue. Snow melts around the pyre in a circle. Some patches of grass underneath still are green.

A fuzzy piece of the inferno lumbers from the wreck. It pitters through the cold, mumbling to itself, “This game. *This game.*” It lolls down on its belly and turns its face from Vincent. A breeze calms the cinders dark and fleecy. The browns and yellows of its eyes narrow.

Vincent kneels down by Flechette. The rosettes flatten where the roof fell on the cat’s pompadour. Embers pop and sparkle through his fur. Vincent lifts a finger. He points to the fire.

“What.”

“Was gazebo,” sighs Flechette. “*Remember?* Now is tinders.”

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Flechette dons a ruffled clown collar. For his master’s homecoming. He’ll serve a side of pork with nothing, he’s decided. He lost Ashley’s ages-old yogurt so he could not fold tzatziki. The sourdough has rolled *who knows?*—so Flechette blundered Ashley’s pumpernickel recipe. That crusted batter he mixed up stinks of molasses in the garbage on the crescent road. The pita breads Flechette bought from the grocer have gone green. “Super easy,” his master told him of having hands inside the kitchen.



The side of pork that Flechette serves wears tattoos and honey. Flechette inked its wrinkles. He tugs it off the fire and he mauls it to pieces. The lion's share is for himself, but he nibbles down the extra before James can know the difference. He slaps his master's half on one end of the dining table then he smuggles his share to the other. While he waits, he licks the pudding wine left over inside a crystal from yesterday.

James crawls in from the kitchen. "What's this?" says the centipede.

Flechette answers, "Not *this*. Already with the 'what' and 'what'."

"'Honeyed ham,' I'd say," says James. The centipede's armour measures through the dining hall and more. The table creaks as James clanks the front links of his body on it.

At his middle, James clutches a heap of gewgaws. Cedar he chewed off a neighbour's roof, newsprint salvaged from recycling, flyers and scissors. He found a weathervane knocked over on the crescent road. James is making pop-up cards. He ruffles through his gewgaws while he inspects his dinner.

James wipes one side of his moustache then the other across his side of pork. Because he has no eyes to see, he says, "What's this?"

"Honeyed ham, *remember?*" Flechette answers.

"No. This."

"Needled doodles. 'Tattoos,' they call it."

"Of what?"

"*Hanzi*."

"What's that?"

"That's writing," says Flechette. "From where I come from. Remember? You already asked what '*Hanzi*' is, once upon the times. Remember?"

“Double checking. I’d say, ‘It’s not what you say, but what you say *and say*.’ One time,” says the centipede, “I asked you ‘what’ and you said ‘James’. Next time ‘Vincent’ and then ‘Master’. Do you think Vincent and I are similar?” asks James.

Flechette sniffs his side of dinner.

“ ‘Pussy’,” says James. “ ‘Aeolus’. ‘Pallas Briefman’.”

“I don’t know where you’ve taken me, Vincent,” Flechette says.

James’s spider mites give Flechette the creeps. He can’t eat. From this distance, the reddish nest could pass for a blemish if bits of it did not clump onto the table and swarm over the dinner. Flechette scratches at his mutton chops and rubs his pompadour. He itches when a moth from James’s varnish flaps onto his fleece. The nibble of dinner Flechette already swallowed tumbles over in his stomach now and blisters warm.

“What’s that?” says the centipede.

Besides the mishmash at his middle, James clenches his hindquarters around something other than his gewgaws. The knuckles at his tail end form the vision of a titanic, human fist. A rosy syrup clots between its fingers.

“Have you spoken to Marie?” asks James.

Flechette’s ears flip forward. He perks up. *What it means*, Flechette reminds himself. Remember. *What it means*. Marie accidentally taught Flechette how to pay taxes when she read him the taxman’s paperwork. He needs to meet the taxman in his office and tell him *what it means*. Flechette peers side to side, his mismatched eyes shining with scheme.

“You will pay those taxes, won’t you,” says the centipede.

Flechette blinks his eyes “Yes.” A mismatched, brown and yellow “Yes.”

“You know Marie can see the future,” says James. “She says ‘Flips ahead’ but I’ll say ‘Plays that Prophet Duchess.’ Do you really think you can outshine her in our story? Do you really think if she says ‘Yes’ you can say ‘No’?”

Flechette blinks his brown and yellow. “Yes.”

“I’ll make you a trade,” says James. He curls his back end over Flechette’s side of the dining table. He squeezes whatever he has in his hind feet so tightly that the cuticles under his knuckles show. Fluid from his grip leaks onto Flechette’s placemat. The drips change colour from rosy to brown. James says, “Give me your half of the honeyed ham and I’ll let you munch what I found prowling through the yard.”

The thirty-two-foot centipede loosens his grip and a broken tabby cat splashes in pieces to the placemat. Minerva, whom Flechette sired ten months earlier. Still wearing her bowtie and her bell. The contents of her head and stomach juicy as the inside of a pomegranate. The M-shape on her forehead crushed into a Q. Flechette’s mouth waters at the smell of his kitten’s ripeness. He had forgotten it was time to eat Minerva because she had estranged him during Christmas.

“Even,” says Flechette. He flings his slice of honeyed ham across the table and starts licking this better supper. Too bad about that yogurt, Flechette thinks. And that sourdough. He nibbles on Minerva’s bell. Jingle. He sputters up a hairy raspberry.

Flechette scampers to the kitchen. He yanks open the freezer and he skips back to the dining hall with ice cream.

At the dining table’s other side, James prods the pork. He matches up its halves. “Some of this is missing,” he says. “Where is the lion’s share.”

Flechette giggles with pride at the flavour he's begotten. It makes more sense to him to eat his kittens so that they don't usurp him and mind Clay Manor's yard than it does to explain what Vincent Clay and James Briar mean.

Flechette's charcoal sketches on the dining hall catalogue the characters inside this story. Flechette draws his friends as different timepieces. The clock broken at three-fifty is meant to stand in for Siobhan while an hourglass, its sand yellow black, depicts both James and Vincent. A sundial beneath a raincloud lies in bed at the hospital. Flechette's version of Marie is a wind-up metronome with its pendulum set to swing back and forth a hundred times at every chapter.

"You'll need to hide under her sunhat," James goes on, "so Marie won't want to look at you while you pay your taxes. What she hates most is seeing herself and she sees herself as that sunhat. I will fetch her sunhat for you. 'Have it out,' I'd say. 'Throw a stone.' Pay those taxes."

## 12. Gaspard Hobbes and Gaspard Hobbes

The assistant wobbles on her stool in the taxman's office at the corner by the door. That suit of hers smells grey. Silky. Measured to her chest. Shoulders flush. Her shoes wear yellow laces and her suspenders hold on blue. The taxman dreams of one day fitting such a costume. Often in those dreams he grabs a tree branch and he bites the final leaf off it in the dark and on a holiday—much as the assistant does right now on her stool at the corner.

A caterpillar's chrysalis hangs from that branch of hers. The assistant winks. A smile for the chrysalis's wiggle. Any moment now a flutter.

The taxman wakes up on the floor. He rubs his bothers. The bum. His head at the back. Such a stumble. He spanks the trundle off his pinstripes. He had dreamt, on the floor, of the assistant's wire-rimmed spectacles. Shortsightedness in the taxman's family saw four generations squint into middle age yet the taxman worries at this rate he'll never earn his lenses. Still jittering, he switches on the brights. He blinks his eyes and he massages them.

"Hello," the taxman says to the assistant. "You scared me and I fell over. Knocked myself out."

The taxman stuffs the letters back inside his briefcase. Ladidah bought him the briefcase when his older one was stolen. Gaspard worries the assistant might confuse him, with this new briefcase, for some other Gaspard Hobbes so he says, "Hello. My name is Gaspard Hobbes."

The assistant flits her gaze away. She ogles the city through the window. Her tree branch, with its chrysalis, she leans against the wall. Her spectacles slide lower on her nose.

At night and on a holiday, the taxmen on this storey number only Gaspard Hobbes. The seminar and break rooms quiet and empty. On his way to the coffee kettle, Gaspard pauses outside every office. He listens at the door for sounds of an assistant on the other side but all is

stillness—much as the assistant in the office plaquered “GASPARD HOBBS” and numbered fifteen-sixteen.

Gaspard brews his coffee three spoons murky. Extra cup if the assistant wants it. He sets the kettle on the hot spot where its bitterness mingles with a gurgle.

While the beans are steeping. Gaspard rides the elevator to the archives as he does when deadlines cross his writing. Clay Manor’s tax letter is due again but not even mid-way handy. Gaspard fixes to jot the whole thing on his own now, He Himself (who founded Revenue) and Pallas Briefman both be frozen, yet still Gaspard scribbles only part-way to the middle. Only now he wrote what characters inside Clay Manor want (to pay their taxes) and why they do what they do (because Marie). Gaspard hasn’t even thought to answer *What it means?* instead he jots down carefully what characters inside Clay Manor eat.

Language in that house. The taxman yearns to find nouns fitting of what happened in Clay Manor. The centipede, for instance, of which he’s never seen the ‘—much as *truly what?* Loosestrife. *Hecatonchire* too. Certain verbs said things inside Clay Manor apart from what they said to him. The taxman found that in their fear and grief over—*what noun to use here?*—the characters often said nothing even though they hungered to speak. This nothing troubled him, and to the degree where when he sat down to write, instead he worried about words and scribbled nothing on end for hours at a time. The taxman’s bother in these hours would root through his chest, shooting up and down his arm and clenching every breath.

The taxman huffs. If he misses this third deadline, he’ll have to ask his girlfriend to give him a cuddle. He grabs himself at the knee inside the elevator. The back of his head in the mirror he sees when he glances at the mirror to the other side of him seems as though he’s fallen on it. Gaspard worries the back of that head belongs not to him but to a character inside his letter and

that if he can watch that head in the mirror turn then he'll know for certain that the characters inside his letter can see him. He reminds himself that even so—if indeed he is a character inside a letter—he can still write his *own* letter and answer *What it means?* for himself. The taxman breathes easier believing *he*, and not language, is jotter of his destiny—

—you see, at least in Gaspard's tax letter the characters have served dessert.

*Croquembouche* stacked to the ceiling, leaning, and knotted in butterscotch. Custards and blancmange ordered first by density and second paired with pudding wine. Cocoa-dusted pick-me-ups. Candlelight fondues held for the missing cake. Meantime, Gaspard Hobbes has brewed the coffee. Three spoons murky.

Midway to the archives, a second taxman joins on Gaspard's elevator ride. They know each other. They sit together in a pair of seminars. This other taxman cradles a pygmy goat. The pygmy goat smells of shampoo and is blindfolded.

"*Clay Manor,*" says the other taxman. "*To Pallas Briefman.*"

"*Payload. To Castor Bixby.* Hello."

"Deadline?"

"Yes."

"Me too."

"Of course." Gaspard lets go of his knee. He stands slightly shorter than his colleague. He ignores how frightened he is that he can see the back of his own head in the mirror. The other taxman's pygmy goat grinds its teeth on nothing.

"Printers?"

"Archives," answers Gaspard.

"Shelves, then?"

“Trolley, actually.”

“Full of whom?”

“Marie Lévi-Bosko.” Gaspard points at the lit-up “ARCHIVES” button on the elevator’s button panel.

“ ‘Such nothing,’ ” says the other taxman about Marie Lévi-Bosko.

Gaspard lowers his voice. “What it means?”

“Are you alright?”

“What it means?” Gaspard repeats.

“ ‘*What it means?*’ Well. She hasn’t told me,” the other taxman says.

“Neither either.”

The other taxman pats his pygmy goat between its horns. He says to Gaspard, “How is Hoity-Toity?”

“Ladidah.”

“How is Ladidah?”

“See my new briefcase? Look. Brand new briefcase.”

The other taxman says nothing for a moment, then, “Nearly didn’t recognize you with it.”

“*So sharp.* Suppose who bought it for me. Ladidah.”

The other taxman carries his pygmy goat out of the elevator at the printers. He says, “So long, *Clay Manor.* Are you alright?”

“Goodnight. *Payload.*”

The door closes and Gaspard grabs his knee.

Gaspard clutches his brand newness to his chest. He sniffs it. Leather smooths his headache. Such a fright from the assistant earlier. He cradles his briefcase through the archives.



He feels so—*something*—when he thinks of Ladidah; forgets his deadline and how he knocked himself asleep inside his office. He squeezes the briefcase nearer.

“Oh,” Gaspard whispers to himself. He peers backwards with worry. His lips feel as though they swell but he has no mirror now to see them. “This is how it happens,” he says, touching his mouth. “I’m *actually* scared of *language* right now.”

Shelves and shelves of it. Facsimiles of all tax letters ever cram the shelves here. For study. Taxmen borrow them. Some goatskins are thrown away, when the letters on them fade. Gaspard wants to cite one taxman in particular. He has reserved a trolley stacked with tax letters by Marie Lévi-Bosko, who no longer works for Revenue but whose writing—much as Gaspard Hobbes’s of Clay Manor—braves its language.

The letters Lévi-Bosko on his trolley are heavy to wheel. The taxman sets his briefcase down on them. He shoves and shoves the Lévi-Bosko’ses to the circulation desk. He looks them over. Nothing odd-sort. Too bad.

Rumour whispers Marie Lévi-Bosko was the first taxman at Revenue to jot another character’s taxes all herself and file them for payday.

Lévi-Bosko has become in vogue for taxmen to study. Superstitious taxmen believe that she is chic to read only because other taxmen have been stealing Lévi-Bosko’s letters from the archives. Superstitious-taxmen-of-an-other-sort-from-those-who-believe-in-thieves believe that more and more Lévi-Bosko appears on the trolleys, having been reserved for study but never having been read before nor endorsed for storage in the archive; their tickets empty at the back and with no filing numbers on their spines. These unnumbered letters are whispered of as ‘odd-sorts’. Yet-another-sort-of-superstitious-taxmen believe the reason more and more Lévi-Bosko appears in the archives is because Marie Lévi-Bosko actually still is working for Revenue and

that by stealing her letters from the archive more and more of her will appear quicker. These taxmen believe that one day Marie Lévi-Bosko will write a tax letter addressed to He Himself (who founded Revenue): *This Letter*, and that *This Letter* will hold all taxmen in it as mere characters, their total archive of all letters and itself only props for some larger story. By writing *This Letter*, Marie Lévi-Bosko will answer *What it ALL means?*<sup>†</sup>

“Oh,” Gaspard whispers to himself while he signs out his Lévi-Bosko’ses. “A taxman becomes scared of language when they become superstitious. This is how it happens.”<sup>‡</sup>

The taxman wheels his trolley by the break room on his storey. All this bother about language has made him forget his coffee. Even though the coffee smells three spoons murky. Gaspard sniffs the goatskin from one of Marie Lévi-Bosko’s letters. The Marie Lévi-Bosko’ses smell of sourdough.

“Hello,” Gaspard says again to the assistant in his office.

From here, the lights on McHugh Bluff give the illusion of a circlet sitting on a shadow. The taxman wonders if the owner of Clay Manor, Pallas Briefman, has hid himself on purpose. Why was Pallas Briefman never home when Gaspard strolled the walk? Who was Pallas Briefman and for what reason did he have that name? Gaspard never heard of anyone named Pallas outside make-believe.

Gaspard steps nearer the glass to see Clay Manor in the distance better. The see-through Gaspard on the other side of the window steps closer to the glass in tandem.

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<sup>†</sup> And if we believe in what Marie Lévi-Bosko says about which ending she likes better, then Gaspard had better grab the knee again.

<sup>‡</sup> You see, Gaspard Hobbes has suspicion number three while the other taxman, writing *Payload* and carrying the goat, has suspicion number three as well.

Marie Lévi-Bosko herself has a fourth suspicion. Marie believes that *Michael*, not Marie, writes *This Letter*. Michael *Yip*, that is. And Marie Lévi-Bosko insists that he is well on his way to Clay Manor and well on his way to showing up a dead man.

Marie believes *This Letter*, though it holds within itself all tax letters ever, answers *What it ALL means?* with nothing.

The taxman notices, in the reflection, that the assistant is no longer ogling the city. She wobbles on her stool staring at *him*. Gaspard glances at the corner by the door. The assistant jerks her gaze away and smiles, fidgeting. She picks up the tree branch leaning on the wall and pretends to study the chrysalis on it.

The taxman scared of language or Gaspard Hobbes who thinks of Ladidah and feels so—*something*; both worry which of them the assistant looks at.

Gaspard’s office overlooks the parking lot. Empty except for his sedan. Again he notices, in the reflection, that the assistant is staring at him. Gaspard glances at her corner. She blinks away her ogling again. She pushes up her spectacles.

Gaspard’s *something* spot throbs with thoughts of Ladidah.

“Oh,” he whispers. “This is how it happens. It happens when I come here on a holiday at night instead of going home to play with Ladidah.”

Gaspard says goodbye to the assistant by leaving on the brights. He cradles his briefcase to the elevator and he jabs the call button. A woman in a sunhat sits in the break room and sips Gaspard’s coffee.

“Hello,” says Gaspard Hobbes.

“I don’t remember you *either*,” says the woman in the sunhat.<sup>‡†</sup>

The taxman’s sedan is already stolen by the moment he steps into the parking lot. Bits of glass twinkle in his parking spot. Right away he knows exactly this time what has happened to his window.

The taxman calls Ladidah and tells her someone broke into his car and stole it.

“Oh,” she tells him. Gaspard Hobbes can almost see how Ladidah would open herself for a hug. She leans in, in his mind. He eyes wide with—*something*—one brighter than the other on

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<sup>‡†</sup> She strikes Gaspard as a taxman with suspicion number three.

her oval face. Angled eyebrows. Ladidah's nose points sharp and barely crooked to her smirking side. Lips wrinkled with a constant pucker. Barely yellow tint of teeth. Her smirking side, but not the other, wears a laughing line.

Ladidah tells him, sweet as a face over the phone, "This is how it happens. I should give you a ride."

And Ladidah is over in her cruiser. The car sweeps its blue-red lights across the parking lot and screams its siren. Gaspard peers over his shoulder and gawks up at his office. Just barely, he can spot his assistant wobbling in her corner. Gaspard waves goodnight. The assistant flits her gaze away.

### 13. Marie Flips through the Outer Narrative and Loses her Sunhat

Marie Lévi-Bosko edits stories by throwing them off cliffs. If the story rises from its fall and flaps to safety, then its writing suffers from *deus ex machina* and Marie Lévi-Bosko fetches it to bake the pages in her fireplace. Marie Lévi-Bosko only ever reads letters that burn. The Bow River reads letters she drowns in it and spits them back as poetry when bagworms fold their cases downstream out of paper.

Certain bagworms never lay. Instead, children unravel from the parent's aged body.

"But wait one second," Marie Lévi-Bosko says. "Hold the story. That's not me."

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips to where those bagworms hang. She fills one of their cases with marijuana and she smokes it. Then she goes to dinner with her neighbour Ibid who she wants to fuck tonight, and she babbles their chatter full of thirty minutes ago.

"I'd wager some reader thinks I stole that sedan last chapter but I didn't."

"You've never stolen a thing in your life dear," answers Ibid to which Marie Lévi-Bosko lies "No." Every time she strains and strains against the shared wall of their duplex, she pushes that wall a little further towards owning a couple inches more than half the house. Ibid knows that she's been doing this, stealing house, but he doesn't care. He says "You've never stolen a thing in your life dear."

Marie skips tonight's boring part—where she and Ibid exchange "I agree" and "Yes or No"—and she flips Ibid to his stomach in the dark. His trouser's left leg has flopped loose all evening against his prosthetic. Marie reaches in and thumbs his anus while he says, "Gah" and "Huh" and "Aye" while Marie Lévi-Bosko tells him, "That's right. Gobbledygook."

"See?" says Marie Lévi-Bosko. "I'm just as twenty-odd."

Marie Lévi-Bosko puts on her sunhat. She flips over to Revenue. Gaspard's office. His trolley full of Lévi-Bosko's locked up with the assistant.

"That's not me." Marie tosses a letter out the window. "That's not me."

A second woman in a sunhat steps past Gaspard's office door.

"That's not me. That's not me," the Marie Lévi-Boskos tell each other.

The second woman in a sunhat strolls the corridor. The office doors number eighteen, another Marie Lévi-Bosko inside each writing a letter. Marie Lévi-Boskos fill the seminar room; each of them in turn raises their hand and says, "Such nothing." A Marie Lévi-Bosko in the break room sips coffee three scoops murky. After every slurp she tells herself, "That's not me." A gulp of coffee dribbles from her lips and tints the front her bodice creamy.

"In any case," the woman in the sunhat sipping coffee says, "this type of shirt is antique."

This other woman in a sunhat pees with the lights off and she laments that, during, she can't read.

The woman in the sunhat flips back, buys a lotto ticket. She stares hard at her winning numbers. "That's not me," she sighs finally. She throws her ticket off the bluff. It floats to safety through Clay Manor's door—which inches ajar—so the Marie Lévi-Bosko at the fireplace, she burns it.

Marie Lévi-Bosko quits flipping through the story when she can no longer stand the sight of herself. So much sunhat. She touches the scar aside her lip. Easter weather finds a rise inside that chancre. Marie tilts her sunhat down. She steps into Clay Manor, through the back, and she bakes dessert. The sous-chef knows the recipes but doesn't cook with Ashley's speed. Whipping up the mousse builds soreness across Marie's shoulders. Matching up the ratio for four-pound cake is pi. Marie tickles the ginger loaf, tastes her finger, clanks the oven. Baklava roasts over

the fireplace. Marie Lévi-Bosko showers in the one-and-one-half bathroom that adjoins the kitchen. Different colours of hair from Flechette's sleepovers tangle in the fixture. Marie could braid a whole fishtail from all that coil. She throws the hair into the toilet and she flushes. Afterwards, she blends a smoothie purple with blueberries.

Ashley's bakeries now number seven. One more since Vincent's funeral. It's up to Marie Lévi-Bosko to manage the books.

"Well he's not going to do it," says Marie. "Doesn't matter what we call him. He's not going to do it."

Marie Lévi-Bosko eats her syllabub with a slice of lemon sponge cake. Dessert comes with a goatskin. Her sunhat shields her face from wind while she eats on the patio with customers. She reads that letter, thinking out loud, "I like my ending better."

And who else should approach her table as she eats but the taxman Gaspard Hobbes who happens by, hand in hand with his partner, Ladidah.

"Hello," says the taxman. "My name is Gaspard Hobbes. Hello. Remember?"

Gaspard Hobbes appearing at her table proves to Marie Lévi-Bosko that she has to throw a story from a cliff. From McHugh Bluff will do. *Please*, thinks Marie Lévi-Bosko. *Please flap to safety*. She doesn't want to speak with Gaspard Hobbes. That Gaspard even recognizes her this go-a-round gives Marie the creeps. Marie tilts down her sunhat and she leans into her book.

"Gaspard Hobbes," he repeats. "Remember?"

"No," says Marie Lévi-Bosko. "No. Don't remember you *either*."

"Oh," replies Gaspard's partner. She touches Gaspard at his shoulder. "This is how it happens," she says. "We should find a different table." Ladidah leads him from that nasty

taxman in a sunhat and into the bakery. The two of them scalp kiwifruits together. Gaspard and his Ladidah have races to see who scalps the faster. Ladidah cuts her finger.

“That’s not me,” Marie Lévi-Bosko says to herself back in Gaspard’s office. She reads those Lévi-Bosko’ses again. “No. I do not remember you *either*,” she tells the letters. She wishes that she never wrote such bric-à-brac. She throws another letter out the window.

The letter flaps its cover and flies into an updraft. It glides over the parking lot and perches gently on a seventh-storey windowsill across the way.

“No wonder,” Marie Lévi-Bosko sighs. She wonders about *This Letter*, the one that Michael writes, and she flips the pages over to when she visits Ashley at her room in the infirmary.

Ashley Clay wilts even smaller underneath her bed sheet. This reminds Marie that she’s already visited after having thought she was accused of stealing Gaspard’s car and having smoked a bagworm casing filled with weed at least one time before.

The doctors, nurses, and the orderlies outside Ashley’s room rush one way then the other. One nurse, dressed as the referee, blows her whistle and fiddles with her stopwatch. “Quicker,” she says. “Quicker,” and she whistles. The doctors, nurses, and the orderlies rush faster down the corridor then back the other way.

Marie frowns at the sight of Ashley underneath that sheet. She sighs that in this story a thirty-two-foot centipede can unbury itself from the cemetery yet Ashley Clay will sure lie here to the end a heavy strudel.

“Is this real?” whispers Marie. She picks up Ashley’s hand and kneads it. The fingers rough as bread crusts.



Marie and Ashley stare at one another's faces. When they were twenty-odd, they passed a strain of syphilis between each other and their other friends. In those years neither could bear this staring from each other, so they make up for it now. Both of them have always seen themselves in each other, but better—with liver spots. Their other friends always said of them they could be sisters. Matching widow's peaks. Fishtail braids. Laughter lines disguised behind their frowns. Marie Lévi-Bosko tilts her sunhat up and she trades smiles with the crippled woman. They play a game. One tries to trick the other into talking out loud.

A raven perches outside Ashley's window. The raven tilts its head. It taps its beak against the glass to catch Marie's attention, then it cries, "Look at you."

"Why, I never. I haven't said a one," Ashley snaps. Then, "Damn," says Ashley. "You got me. It was that raven. Shut up that raven. And now I've started talking. To you. I said, 'Why, I never.' "

Ashley glances away for just a jiffy. She gazes at the ceiling. The ceiling tiles black and yellow, unlike yesterday.

"Why," says Ashley. "My baby. James."

James Briar, the thirty-two-foot centipede, looms on the ceiling over Ashley's bed. The orderlies, nurses, and the doctors—even his own mother and Marie—have been so busy they mistook him for plumbing. James swings down and snatches Marie Lévi-Bosko's sunhat.

Marie Lévi-Bosko's first thought isn't that she's lost her sunhat. Instead, she thinks she's lost her face. She snatches for that sunhat. All James has to do is put that sunhat on and suddenly Marie can't find him. She can't bear to look right at the person underneath the sunhat because she thinks the person underneath that sunhat also wears that scar.

Marie Lévi-Bosko hides her mouth behind her elbow.

James marches upside-down into the hallway. The nurses and all too confused, when he moves this slowly, to realize that he is a thirty-two-foot centipede. “The plumbing sure is rusty,” say the orderlies. The doctors: “I’m on my way to surgery.”

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips over to Clay Manor and she lashes sideways at the nearest sunhat.

“Hey,” says the woman underneath the sunhat. “That’s mine.” She smashes Marie Lévi-Bosko in the belly with a shovel. Marie crumples to the ground and crouches on the dirt. She flips ahead and lashes out again, this time at a different sunhat.

“Hey,” says this different woman underneath a different sunhat. This other Marie jogs to work yesterday beside her neighbour Ibid. Ibid’s prosthetic leg shines with skinniness. The shoe on it is cleaner than his other shoe. “That’s mine,” says yesterday’s Marie. She grips the sunhat to her head and jogs more out-of-breath, away from Marie Lévi-Bosko, who still snatches to steal that sunhat back from James.

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips all over this story, grabbing for every sunhat that she sees.

“Hey,” says the woman underneath the sunhat who sits in the dark to pee. “That’s mine.”

“Hey,” says the woman underneath the sunhat in the footnotes. “That’s mine.”

“Hey.” Marie Lévi-Bosko’s grimace bunches at her crow’s feet.

“Hey.” Marie Lévi-Bosko behind Clay Manor digs and digs.

“Hey.” Every person underneath the sunhat grabs their wicker then canters from Marie Lévi-Bosko. One person in particular, who wears a checkered shirtdress to clash, scampers with a pitter patter and flings coffee at her. This person in particular smoothes his pompadour.

“Hey,” Marie Lévi-Bosko says to herself. She slouches over and dangles her arms down. Sigh, she goes. “That’s mine,” she whispers. Marie skulks back into Clay Manor and she finally

decides to clean. She mops the floors. Flechette said he would do it but he could have at least swept before. Marie polishes the stovetops with sandpaper.

“Well he’s not going to do it,” says Marie. “Doesn’t matter what we call him.”

Marie skulks to her half of the duplex. She vacuums her ceiling. The spider up there had a name during an early draft of *This Letter*, but in this one it does not. Marie stomps on her floor hard enough to sound the footnotes. She strains and strains against the shared wall. A cabinet on Ibid’s side falls over. Ibid stands up from his sofa and he knocks on Marie’s door.

“Do you want to skip the boring part tonight?” he says. He runs after Marie to her bedroom.

“Hold on to your sunhat,” Ibid moans, even though he notes that Marie’s lost it. Marie looks to his peg leg leaning at the wall and she giggles at the noises he makes. Such a strange alphabet: *Uh. Buh. Ha. Ah. Yeah.*

Ashley never made noises at all, Marie thinks. But at least she didn’t mind a cookie in the bed sheets.

Marie Lévi-Bosko tickles Ibid’s belly. She says, “Now say, ‘*Woo.*’ ”

When they started dating, Marie Lévi-Bosko took it slow not because she didn’t want to seem a breeze but because she wanted to give herself the time to clean.

Meanwhile, James laughs to himself under the sunhat in Clay Manor. “Already handily,” says the giant centipede. He passes on that sunhat to Flechette. Alongside the checkered shirtdress he borrowed from Siobhan.

#### 14. Siobhan's Made Friends outside Clay Manor, she thinks Vincent is Gone for Good

Siobhan's made friends outside Clay Manor. She calls these outside friends "other friends" and they know neither threes nor fours about the house. Siobhan lets them ask about her wooers, though. Which she doesn't for Flechette nor for Marie. And certainly never for James.

"Well, we did bake dessert together but we haven't scrubbed the oven yet." Siobhan lifts her hands to frame the words for "dippity-do-*that-part-of-me-again*" in air quotes.

"Although," carries on Siobhan, "one evening he did bump his ruckus into mine while saying, 'That is all my ruckus. Want to study it?' "

What Siobhan adores of her new wooer is that he serves words on air quotes.

Siobhan wants to share other stories with her other friends besides who steals whose sunhat and who pays whose taxes. Siobhan goes to the theatre. She goes to the bistro. The pub called Winebar afterwards. With her other friends she laughs without a wonder if her breath smells bad. She lets them see her face when she tries on new make-up. Her freckles in a heart-shape face. Hair cropped short. Slightly wider nose, like Vincent—after the father, so she's told. A black spot right inside her dimple. Her lips thick with flummox and her sucking on it.

Siobhan thinks it's those dimples of hers that pull in the wooers. Her other friends think it's Siobhan's skin.

Siobhan and her other friends choose a booth at Winebar. By the window. They order crystals filled with primary colours.

"This one's not nearly tasty as Siobhan's," one says about the honey wine.

"Why does my *blanc-de-noir* look hue-ish?" asks another.

"It's only the lights dear." The one gulping blues orders in threes. She pinches Siobhan's elbow and points out the wooer staring from the corner.

Between the four of them, they order cheese. Nothing for Siobhan with matching compotes. Siobhan can't stomach dairy this far from the privacy of her own toilet.

Siobhan worries that she'll wreck these other stories, but she wants to wreck them better than she did with Flechette and Marie. And better, of course, than she did with Vincent. For the most part Siobhan forgets why she ever even asked if James would answer "Yes" or even if she really wanted a betrothed or to play one. Either way, she has none; is not.

A woman in a sunhat sidles next to Siobhan and her other friends. This uninvited one sips from a cup of bitters. Counting off her fingers, the woman in the sunhat says, "The symptoms of a wooer are as such: first, a gloomy feeling; next, unexplained phenomena; and last, a change in language use. A wooer and a ghost are much alike. A ghost says '*Woo.*' "

"Who?" says one of Siobhan's other friends.

"This is some sunhat," says another.

"It's only the lights dear," says the one gulping blue.

The woman in the sunhat lifts her bitters to her face. She raises her eyebrows at Siobhan, who answers nothing. Siobhan blushes. She wishes a little, matchstick mansion stood on the table to flip over. Why, of all the wheres, must that sunhat turn up here? she wonders.

From nowhere, a second uninvited one crashes through the booth, lashing for that sunhat. Crystals and cheese smash across the table. Siobhan and her other friends stand up from the splash. The two Marie Lévi-Boskos scuffle to the ground. The Marie beneath the sunhat wiggles out from under the other. The two shove their grabbing match onto the street, the one without the sunhat yelling, "Hey. That's mine."

Siobhan's other friends have deduced who wears that sunhat. Siobhan's other friends are savvy. Siobhan's other friends deduce that Marie Lévi-Bosko is a crazy person or a ghost. They

think Siobhan is haunted, but they'd never guess that Marie Lévi-Bosko is her mother.

Siobhan welcomes her other friends into the apartment. She serves honey wine in Flechette's crystals. Her friends tell stories of their wooers and their dildos. They notice how much Siobhan's home is missing but say nothing. That birdcage in the kitchen. Carbuoys in the cupboard. A mason jar on Siobhan's bookshelf. Instead of toilet paper, Siobhan offers the shower. Rather than on Siobhan's sofa, her friends sit on Siobhan's floor.

Siobhan's bed sheet feathers. The duvet under the duvet cover leaks. Her bedspring without the skirt on shows its stain.

To lighten her apartment, Siobhan's been setting bonfires behind Clay Manor on what's still left of that gazebo.

"Mine has a rabbit-shaped prong on it. I show it to all my wooers," says one of Siobhan's other friends.

"Does it not scare them?"

"It's only the lights dear."

Edith, the raven, swings on the perch inside her birdcage. She thinks the friend with blues splashed on her should lower her voice but she says not a one about it. Edith knows that Siobhan wants to wreck these stories better.

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In the morning Siobhan dresses the birdcage back inside that wedding gown. Another rip goes tatter at the shoulder. Siobhan's broken watch holds its arms at cookies o' and fits Siobhan the way she bites dessert. Siobhan bags the puppets that she fashioned of herself and her mother. She collects the chopsticks from the drawer. A pair of shorts that haven't fit since chapter five and

the television. She loads this all into her truck along with honey wine then sips while rounding the crescent road.

“There is such a thing as hand-me-down sales,” says Flechette as they watch the fire. The cat picks a chopstick from the light and licks its embers. Sizzle. He saves the charcoal to draw with.

Siobhan sometimes talks about Clay Manor to the friends she meets outside that house. She calls Flechette and Marie her “other friends” and they know neither threes nor fours about her woers. But Siobhan never says a one, not even to Edith, about how she thinks Vincent Clay is gone for good. And she should know who can go home; she plays Missus Valkyrie. A raven rides her shoulder and whispers:

“Follow me.”

**15. P. Briefman, Gaspard Hobbes, Gaspard Hobbes, and the Assistant. Also Taxes.**

He who pitter patters from the registry with his free cup of coffee also hides his pompadour, his mutton chops, and face under Marie Lévi-Bosko's sunhat. As before, he wears Siobhan's checkered shirtdress to cover his testicles, as he goes. To Revenue in person to pay taxes.

"I call myself P. Briefman," says Flechette. He puts on his new name.

P. Briefman crinkles a sound from the letter in his shirtdress. He has *what it means* right there in his pocket. He sips his free coffee. So much whipping cream.

P. Briefman sneaks down the street. He peeks from underneath his sunhat, smirking at the passers after passersby.

"Hello," he goes. "Good morning. I call myself P. Briefman."

Slurp goes his whipping cream. Just like Marie, "That's not me," he says. His coffee, so steamy.

Except for that free coffee and some help from a centipede, P. Briefman's scheme is a repeat of Marie Lévi-Bosko's own caper from February.

"Such poetry," says P. Briefman, "that she'll never even find me." He smirks wider, peeping from beneath his wicker. Neither does he think the spearmen will find him.

"Hello," he goes.

But—much as *such poetry*—the next passerby he peeks at happens to be Marie Lévi-Bosko lashing sideways for her sunhat.

P. Briefman flings his coffee at her. He scampers down an alley in a hurry. Marie Lévi-Bosko stands there slouching. She wipes coffee off her face. That coffee, so steamy, brings her blush up. Ouch.



“That’s mine,” says Marie. “Hey.” She doesn’t even gander to see the sunhat pitter patter round the corner. She stands there and touches her face, slouching. Ouch.

“That’s easy,” says P. Briefman. He holds onto his sunhat and he mumbles through the doors to Revenue.

The receptionist tells him, “Can I help you?”

“What cat’s as rapid. Behemoth might be.” He shifts his smirk on.

“Excuse me?” The receptionist tells him “Can I help you?” again.

“P. Briefman. For Gaspard Hobbes, please. Our appointment. Now o’clock.”

The receptionist squints at that sunhat. P. Briefman licks a spill of whipping cream off his checkered sleeve.

“Right this way, P. Briefman.”

P. Briefman capers down the corridor. Fifteenth storey. He peers into every office on his way. Some smell tramples here like menses, reddish—but huge. He’s never smelled the such. Always he thought *he* was biggest but this smell says otherwise. This smell is large enough to swallow. P. Briefman licks the big smell off his mouth. That smell tastes enormous and of a stomp.

“Is it very-large o’clock or something?” P. Briefman mumbles. He looks over his shoulder. That odour smoulders loud. P. Briefman stands there and he sniffs. What is that smell? he worries. Reddish. Huge. His claws have come out, because that smell. That smell makes him feel small. The fleece beneath the sunhat stands on-end. He squints over his shoulder. A wall clock at the elevator door confirms the time is *very* large. And shiny.

P. Briefman crinkles the letter in his pocket again. *What it means* right there in an envelope. He spent all evening scribbling it then reading it aloud to no one.

In the office plaquered “GASPARD HOBBS”, Gaspard Hobbes works at his desk. He stares out the window then he frowns with bewilder at the corner by the door. He stares behind himself at the city through the glass again and says to himself “Hello?”

P. Briefman lolls outside the office, sniffing.

“Is it very-large o’clock or something?”

“Hello,” says Gaspard Hobbes. “Come in. My name is Gaspard Hobbes.”

P. Briefman scampers through and climbs onto the facing chair. He unfolds the letter from his shirtdress and he antes it onto the desk. *What it means* between them.

P. Briefman holds onto his sunhat.

The taxman lifts the envelope up to the brights. One page inside. Only. The taxman squints at the cat beneath the sunhat. This wicker squishes that pompadour, deforms those mutton chops and face, but Gaspard nonetheless still recognizes P. Briefman—except he can’t recall from where. Those mismatched, brown and yellow peepers remind him of a letter slot. He’s been so busy lately, what with deadlines and with Ladidah, that he doesn’t even recognize one of his own characters. He can’t remember where he met P. Briefman, but he’s sure the two have said “Hello.”

“Hello,” says Gaspard Hobbes.

P. Briefman blinks his brown and yellow “Yes.”

The taxman stares at P. Briefman some more. The taxman frowns. He swivels in his chair to look out his window and he says, to someone other this time, “Hello?” Then he turns to face P. Briefman.

Gaspard fingers open the envelope. He peers in at *what it means*. He mouths the words while P. Briefman blinks his brown and yellow “Yes.”

Gaspard sets that letter down. He opens a desk draw then closes it. Again he glances with bewilder at the corner by the door. He pulls open a second drawer.

Stamp and ink pad. Revenue's red logo. Gaspard loads the stamp and slams that logo down on *what it means* with a bang. He misses his mark and stamps his desktop so, widening his eyes—glazed over now with *something*, he slams that logo down again.

P. Briefman's ears tweak outwards at that stamping sound. He sighs with relief when Gaspard hands him back the envelope.

P. Briefman has paid taxes. He has Marie beat.

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That smell though. Huge and reddish. Menses. When Gaspard hands back *what it means* he glances, for a third time with bewilder, at the corner of the office numbered fifteen-sixteen. And so P. Briefman peers behind himself.

Wobbly on her stool beside the office door, dolled up grey and silky in a custom-tailored suit and wearing shoes knotted with yellow laces, sits an elephant. Matriarch and shaking. Her suspenders hold on blue to her massiveness. Her nose wrinkles to the carpet. The greatest pair of glasses P. Briefman will ever see perch on her face and now he'll dream about those lenses. The tusks orange with plaque. That odor smoulders from her corner and reminds P. Briefman he is not biggest.

P. Briefman pockets his letter and he creeps past that elephant. She grasps a tree branch and she studies it, shaking her head with sorrow. A caterpillar's chrysalis hangs off that tree branch dead, if ever P. Briefman has smelled dead.

P. Briefman offers the elephant some whipping cream to lick off his sleeve. The elephant turns towards him then away. She shakes her head some more at that dead chrysalis.

“I guess,” says P. Briefman of that caterpillar, “that its spearmen have caught up with it.”

The elephant stops shaking her head. She considers for a moment the word “spearmen”, then it nods in accord.

On his way home, P. Briefman strolls through the schoolyard. He sips a brand new coffee. This one not free and with less whipping cream.

“What cat’s as clever?” he asks himself. “Perhaps Flechette.” He crinkles the letter in his pocket. “*What it means*,” he sings. “*What it means*. Remember?”

A goose swoops in to steal his coffee. P. Briefman flings the cup at it. He grabs that goose by its neck and slings it open on the schoolyard. The wits gush out from that bird’s body.”

“What bird out-wits me?” asks P. Briefman. “Perhaps—with tools—a raven. *One* raven, who speaks.”

The goose oozes from its stomach and it honks. P. Briefman unfolds it. He tears the squawking bird’s intestines from its anus. Crunch goes his lunch. The goose opens its mouth soundless now. It closes its beak and peers upwards, to the street, and anywhere.

Once upon P. Briefman’s lunch the school kids run onto the schoolyard. They flock around to gawk. P. Briefman crushes the bird’s pelvis in his teeth and some kids flinch while others ask him “Where’s its heart at?” to which he replies “Where is my stomach at?”

“A better question,” says P. Briefman, “would be ‘Where’s the pomegranates?’ ” He peels back the goose’s cranium and shows the children head fruits wet enough to share. P. Briefman wrings the goose’s body so its head honks.

Sneezing feathers, he lugs his leftovers up and down the crescent road. He greets his neighbours while he rubs the gore over graffiti that the smaller cats have scratched across the lampposts. He who is the only one who draws across the bluff is also biggest.

“Hello,” he goes from underneath that sunhat to his neighbours. “Afternoon. I call myself P. Briefman.” The innards of his leftovers drip down the lampposts to the ground.

P. Briefman’s kitten from earlier, Ouaknin, pitter patters to his father on Clay Manor’s private driveway. P. Briefman opens his mouth and puts it over Ouaknin’s head. “Not ripe enough,” he says and he shoves Ouaknin away with a lump of goose’s brain for lunch.

“Mind the yard,” says P. Briefman. “Ripen. Come back.”

And—much as *such poetry*—Marie Lévi-Bosko already waits for him behind Clay Manor. She crosses her arms at the door. Still blushing from when he flung his coffee at her in the morning.

P. Briefman’s never really looked at Marie Lévi-Bosko with no sunhat. He thought she would have wrinkles at the forehead or that under the wicker there maybe ticked a metronome. Marie’s braids fishtail down her shoulder with a hairpin speared into the tip. The hairpin belongs to P. Briefman; she borrowed it two summers ago without asking. Marie squints green. She leans forward to peer under the sunhat at him. Her lips shine from licking them. Who would have thought she smelled of whipping cream? thinks P. Briefman.

“So that’s how you did it, then. Bastard. You hid under my wicker.” Marie snatches back her hat. She points to P. Briefman’s pocket. “Well. Give it here, Pussy. Let’s have a look. At *what it means*.”

P. Briefman crinkles the letter over. Marie flips it open.

On the letter, P. Briefman has jotted in characoal: *James and Vincent are the same, much as me and Pallas Briefman*. Every letter in a different colour.

“Well.” Marie says, “I did like my ending better. Surely I did love my nothing.” She slides the letter back into its envelope and crinkles it back to the cat. “In my ending, at least

Vincent comes back. But I suppose . . .” and Marie stares out yonder to the loosestrife and then to the needled trees. The dragonflies are in full flap now, and they glitter over the timbres of that gazebo, which bristle with heat. One dragonfly crashes with a slap against P. Briefman’s face. Ouch.

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips farther through *This* Letter in her mind and she smiles.

She pats P. Briefman on his head. The antlers under his fleece branch. Marie and P. Briefman step inside together and they bake Pavlova with pomegranates. Enough to feed a shindig. P. Briefman spent all month thinking *What it means?* without hosting a single party.

The Marie Lévi-Bosko of this story doesn’t hold a grudge—*but she does*.

“Wait until you see who’s coming,” says the woman in the sunhat. “Wait until you see who’s coming to this and that party. Then you’ll *really* be thinking about ‘*What it means?*’ ”

## 16. Clay Manor Introduces Michael Yip

The detective thumbs her cap badge. She wants everybody to remember her shine at the mystery again. Underneath the overcoat, the detective holsters her semi-automatic. Aside her boot she stows a pepperbox. The detective thinks, I fire saucy bullets.

Clay Manor flips open the door. The detective stomps in.

“Well La-di-dah,” echoes the house. “Stomp to you.”

A shindig of overnigheters boogies through the greeting room. The hardwood jitters with their Lindy Hop. They twirl their ruffled dresses. They split their trousers at the groin. The air rips with cocktails, laughter. Here and there, dancers whip a polka-dotted handkerchief amongst themselves to wipe the glisten off each other’s brows.

Twelve musicians on Clay Manor’s staircase floss their violins. A saxophonist squeaks the melody. The chandelier joins with its jangle. Confetti twinkles up there but it won’t fall down. Two squirrels follow the detective through the front door of Clay Manor.

The detective thinks, This is how it happens. Shindiggers should not boogie Wednesday afternoon through morning.

Constables in uniform at one side of the Lindy Hop hide their appletinis. They point the detective to Clay Manor’s eastern wing.

That is also how it happens, the detective thinks. Constables should not sip from crystals.

The detective elbows through the Lindy Hop into the hallway. Here shindiggers play burlesque. Smokey merkins fleece their man- and womanparts, the crop of panties giving gander of the bump-and-shimmy. These burlesquers pass around that polka-dotted handkerchief from earlier. They dab it to each other’s smelly spots. One burlesquer flaps those polka-dots at the detective. The detective slaps those polka dots away.

The mystery unfolds in Clay Manor's eastern wing. Below the spiral stairwell. The dead Chinese man, naked. Crumpled at the neck. The black and plastic blanket keeps the body warm and free from confetti. Urine puddles under the.<sup>†</sup>

The shindig's host lolls on the chair for passing out on. He sniffs with a frown. For that puddle of urine underneath the dead Chinese man, the eastern wing smells orange.

"Why could he not bleed instead? Or perhaps only farted?" asks the host to no one. "It smells as though he owns the place. He doesn't own the place."

The dead Chinese man looses an ass babble on tune with the big band in the greeting room. A turd squelches from the rectum, ruffling the black and plastic blanket. The dead Chinese man splutters through the mouth.

"Ha," says the.<sup>‡</sup>

"They do that." The detective stomps under the police tape at the hallway. "Burp and flinch. Even smile. This is how it happens."

The detective thumbs her cap badge. "Ladidah," she says.

"That to you," replies the host. He licks his wrist and smoothes his pompadour.

"My *name* is 'La-di-dah'," says the detective. "And it seems he's not the first person to tumble down those spiral stairs. Is he?"

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<sup>†</sup> "The *what?*' you say? 'The "*thee*" ' I answer," one taxman says to the other.

"*Who* says? *You* says?" says the other taxman.

"The detective says."

"Well then," says the other taxman. "We '*should*'."

"Of sorts," says the first. "The detective is a taxman—of sorts. But her costume is shinier."

<sup>‡</sup> "The "*thee*" again' I answer."

"You should get out of the mystery," says the detective. "You'll confuse somebody." She shoos away two shindiggers who narrate her entrance into the eastern wing from the greeting room. She boots the one who says "The '*thee*'" on the bum. The two shindiggers dressed as taxmen fall into the hallway. The burlesquers flap those polka-dots from earlier at them.



“I call myself Fle—” the host winks his one eye, the brown one. He rubs his other. He says, “I call myself P. Briefman. Perhaps glad to meet you. Never met the other one to tumble. But I have heard the stories. She was quite the cook.”

P. Briefman brushes his moustache across his thumb.<sup>‡†</sup>

A shindigger in a sunhat drums bananas on a watermelon with the other musicians. She cries out, from the greeting room, “Dessert. Anyone?”

A burlesquer in the hallway has the raven on her shoulder clap its feathers on her breasts. “None for me,” cries this burlesquer and the raven on her shoulder screams, “Follow.”

A thirty-two-foot centipede hiding up Clay Manor’s chimney clacks its knuckles.

The detective glances to the fireplace. Ashes rattle out onto the hearth. Moths gather, aflutter at the flue, unbothered by cold air flowing down.

“There is a *lot* going on inside this house,” says the detective. She waves her hand at all the mystery.

The two squirrels that followed the detective in chirp at the edge of the hallway but they do not cross that police tape.

The dead Chinese man rolls over with convulsions, tossing that black and plastic blanket aside. The erection pulls the foreskin midway down the cap. The smile: the dead Chinese man smiles. A shimmer on his hip, having rolled in urine and the turd.

“This is how it happens,” says the detective. She flips open her notebook. She writes:  
*This is how.*

“Showed up that way,” answers P. Briefman. P. Briefman points at the boner.

“*Dead?*”

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<sup>‡†</sup> Polydactyly, in cats, is not enough to fool the pharmacist into jotting Flechette’s prescriptions. Flechette asks Siobhan to do it for him. To pretend that she is melancholy so he can get the medicine.

When Marie antes melancholy, her play is a triple bluff.

“And *Chinese*.”

“When?” says the detective.

“After hello o’clock. Before dance o’. You know, Siobhan’s wristwatch has hit menopause and always points to three-fifty.”

“Do you know *when is now*?”

“Question o’clock,” says P. Briefman. “Will you ask me ‘what’ and ‘what’?” P. Briefman rubs the pills inside his belly.

The thirty-two-foot centipede whinnies upside that chimney. “*Question o’clock*,” he chuckles to himself. Such glee he gains. This cat can speak. Another source of glee for the centipede is that, if he were *allowed* to speak, then *he* could solve the mystery of how the dead Chinese man tumbled down.

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Michael Yip strolled up Clay Manor’s walk at half-past-shindig. Not even wearing underoos. He stepped into the party, having already drank his share of mead alone in his apartment. He had already danced—again, alone—and spoken all he felt was needed to speak on his lonesome.

Michael drooped his eyes with waking snoozes. He had found an extra working day inside the week by staying up for fourteen hours only and then sleeping for seven. He found the extra day in order to jot his letter for Revenue. Unlike P. Briefman, the taxman who spoke with Michael didn’t jot first chapters so Michael had to write *what it means* from “Clay” to “spearman”. The name that Michael gave to the day that he unburied from inside his week was “James”. And James in this same manner, even though he loses an hour every year to Vincent because daylight-savings, earns back his bigger share of things-to-do inside Clay Manor.

Michael Yip invited himself through the door. He stood to one side of the greeting room, watching others Lindy Hop. He leered at P. Briefman dancing with an overnigher. The overnigher wore a skirt sewn from the dustcovers of goatskins. Michael let himself in through the kitchen.

Michael sat at one end of the dining table. He grinned at Marie Lévi-Bosko, who tipped her sunhat in his direction. Marie was telling the other partiers a story about taxes.

*“A lot and lots more money was not printed, but James and Vincent are the same, much as me and Pallas Briefman somehow explains what it means. Is that not weirdo?”* asked Marie.

“Taxes are actual?” asked one shindigger.

Michael shimmied closer to the partier beside him, who happened to be Siobhan Frye. Michael jiggled the side of his thigh against her fingers. Siobhan flinched back her hand.

“Would you like to see something? Interesting,” Michael asked Siobhan.

Siobhan looked to her mother, who pointed out P. Briefman’s sketches on the dining hall.

“Okay,” Siobhan told Michael Yip. “Show me something interesting.”

“It’s in the upper storey bathroom.”

“How do you know there’s an upper storey bathroom? The upper storey bathroom isn’t all that interesting. I should know. I’ve seen the upper storey bathroom.”

“Just so we are . . . on a page together,” Michael said, “the interesting thing inside the upper storey bathroom is my penis.”

“I can see your penis fine from here. Not that interesting. I should know. I’ve had a look at *James’s*. *That’s* an interesting penis.”

“How do you know I know James?”

“I didn’t.”

“Well,” said Michael. “I am going to the upper storey. If you’d like to be . . . on the page with me, I will leave the door ajar.”

“Wait.” Siobhan said, “You know James?” But Siobhan doesn’t follow.

Michael budged through the centipede of shindiggers queued up outside the bathroom. He knocked the bathroom door. “I need to bath inside the bathtub,” Michael said. He torqued the doorknob. He knocked again.

“Okay already.” From inside, a voice replied, “Handily.”

The bathroom door inched itself ajar.

The triple bath already brimmed murky. Michael flicked the light switch. The dark stayed in the room. Michael flicked the switch a second time. A bulb over the bathroom mirror shattered its fluorescent confetti into the sink. Michael blinked away his flash blindness. He wandered to the triple bath and dipped his finger in the water.

“There’s some dirty dishes in here,” Michael said. Michael closed the bathroom door partway. “Scoosie,” he said to the partiers outside. He stepped onto those dirty dishes.

James Briar reared up from the water. “ ‘Pardon me,’ I’d say,” he said. “The tub’s too skinny for us both. Even though you’re quite bony. And I am not dirty dishes.”

“Who are you?” asked Michael.

“James,” said James.

“Who?”

“ ‘I know James,’ you told Siobhan.”

“*James?*” said Michael. “You?”

“Yes,” replied the centipede.

“You’re actual, are you?”

Michael ran out of the bathroom in a panic. He hustled down the upstairs corridor towards the spiral stairwell where he slammed against the handrail and then tumbled over. He snapped his neck at the bottom then lay still with a smile.

And as it happened, constables arrived on scene about an unrelated noise complaint. They found the dead Chinese man in the eastern wing so they phoned the detective.

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“Who unlatched the door chain?” asks the detective. “Who unlocked the upper storey bathroom?”

“I did,” says P. Briefman.

The shindigger in the sunhat screams from the staircase, “No. I did.”

The burlesquer with the raven on her shoulder says, “No.”

It was the centipede upside the chimney, of course, who *actually* opened up them both. But he says nothing.

The detective steps to the fireplace. She sticks her head in, waves away the moths from her face. She says up the flue, “No *you* did. I’m not stupid. Last time I came here, the doors were closed.”

P. Briefman rubs his mutton chops. “I don’t know where you’ve taken me, detective.”

The detective flips backwards through her notebook. “The last time I was here, Ashley Clay was on the floor. Right where he is now.” The detective points her notebook at the dead Chinese man.

The dead Chinese man says, “Ha.”

“Ashley wrote a will,” says the detective. “And in that will she gave her son the house. When her son had his aneurysm,” the detective flips forward through her notes, “he gave the house to you.”

The detective pockets her notebook. She flashes her semi-automatic. “I know a *lot* about Clay Manor, you. You won’t fool *me*. About anything.”

“We’ll see,” screams the shindigger in the sunhat. “Dessert. Anyone?”

The constables finish their appletinis and they question the overnigheters, who the detective finally allows to leave. Medical technicians truck that dead Chinese man away. When just the three are left inside Clay Manor; P. Briefman, Siobhan, and Marie, Marie reminds us, “We’ll see. We’ll see if we can’t fool that detective.”

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Much as *such poetry*, a final partier arrives late for the shindig: Peter Briefman. Peter Briefman lives beside the ocean. The host stopped by in chapter five and sexed the neighbour’s tailless Manx while stealing Peter Briefman’s social number and his name. Peter Briefman now carries a bassinet up Clay Manor’s walk. He sets the bassinet on the doorstep. He knocks the door and leaves.

P. Briefman peers out through the letter slot.

“Who is it?” asks the centipede.

“Another kitten for me to eat,” answers P. Briefman.

The kitten sleeps inside the cradle. Blonde but with a pair of mutton chops. The kitten yawns and stretches awake. It winks its mismatched peepers and it says, “Hello.”

“Well,” replies P. Briefman. “A cat who speaks. Finally. Hello you, ‘Theophilus’.”

## 17. PAGES “SO AND SO”

“Click. Click,” whispers Gaspard Hobbes. He flips open his briefcase. He shuffles through and finds *Clay Manor*. The tax letter wears Revenue’s red logo. He Himself (who founded Revenue)’s autograph ties overhand and hitch knots underneath the title. An endorsement. Gaspard smiles that his own handwriting ties tighter knots than his boss’s.

Besides Hobbes in this seminar, a senior taxman adjudicates from one end of the table while two others fiddle with their papers at the sides. The rest stay home today with Mayfever.

“Sniff. Sniff,” whispers Hobbes.

“Sniff. Sniff,” whisper the others.

The senior taxman says, “This Mayfever has us speaking sickness to each other, does it? Do you think the reader says ‘Sniff. Sniff’ with us?”

The senior taxman drips half and half into her coffee. The slogan on her hot water bottle reads “WHAT IT MEANS”. Because the senior taxman now has no commission, no one knows what to name her. She screws the stop into her hot water bottle and she tucks the coffee underneath her shirt to warm her belly. The first symptom of Mayfever is shivers.

Hobbes flips open *Clay Manor*. To the foreword, entitled “Exegesis”. The page number (roman seven) lower case. He reads:

“ Through self reference and metafiction, *Clay Manor* enacts an allegory about melancholia: an illness set off by loss. At the onset of the novel, *Clay Manor*’s characters have lost Vincent Clay, heir to Clay Manor’s treasuries, while the text itself—as a work of self-conscious fiction—despairs from the beginning over its inability to depict social reality.

Metafiction is writing concerned with shortcomings of story. Patricia Waugh argues metafiction cooks its own critical capacity ‘*within* the form of the novel’, according to a recipe that lists its own systems of language and utterance as too thin to depict what is real (11). Metafiction churns one component of its medium against the other, pointing to itself as flawed, inaccurate, or sick and tasteless.

*Clay Manor*’s inward gaze culminates mid-way through the chapters, when a character pitches the novel’s foreword as though it is part of the story. The character, Gaspard Hobbes (who here refers to himself in the third), reads this exegesis as though he jotted it himself. This foreword exists within and beyond the plot’s events, as paratext, and so it muddies what Linda Hutcheon calls ‘the hermeneutic act of reading’ (71). ”

Hobbes lifts his fingers and tickles the air beside Hutcheon’s quote.

The taxman on Hobbes’s left, named *Taphonomy: Maps and Ruins*, scrunches up her face. “*Hutcheon?*” asks *Taphonomy*. “Hutcheon’s letters are old. Old—*ahem*—where fungus grows. Waugh too. Mushrooms.”

*Taphonomy* peels open a pudding cup. She plops an almond in. *Taphonomy* sighs, “Old.”<sup>†</sup>

“What it means?” asks the senior taxman. “Almond plops the pudding. How’s it?”

“No matter.” *Taphonomy* sniffs at her pudding. She chuckles, “Just baffle.”<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>†</sup> Dowker, David & *Taphonomy* 47.

<sup>‡</sup> “When Marie Lévi-Bosko asks, ‘Ibid. A question.’—*ahem*—What I meant to say when I said ‘When Marie Lévi-Bosko asks, “Ibid. A question”,’ was: ‘When Marie Lévi-Bosko asks “*Ibidem Jarry*”—her neighbour—“a question: ‘When taxmen wish to flirt with one another, they pretend to follow closely to one another’s tax letters and footnotes”: is that a question?’ is *this* a question?’ what *is* the question?’ ” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

Ibid replies, “I don’t even know what you’re on about, Marie.”

(This comes from David Dowker and *Taphonomy* as well, page 45. But *what it means?*)



Hobbes follows on.

“ If one reads metafiction, one distorts it because metafiction reads itself already (Hutcheon 6). A better way to jot this would be to jot, ‘If her “letters are old. Old [and] where fungus grows”, then metafiction is sourdough bubbling on the meadow grass for years now, behind that townhouse Ashley Clay grew up in (*Clay Manor* 79) and no longer sourdough but bitter batter.’

By orating this foreword, Gaspard Hobbes beseeches us to answer how one reads a story that already reads itself—as this kind of jotting aims to preheat readers’ analytical maneuvers. ”

*Half-Boiled Axolotl* giggles to Hobbes’s right. *Axolotl* tinkers with a goatskin hexaflexagon. He folds his contraption inside over. The hexaflexagon shifts colour from narcissus to daffodil. At the centre of its petals sleeps a fuzzy bumblebee. *Axolotl* folds the hexaflexagon again and now he holds a dahlia.

*Axolotl* lifts the goatskin hexaflexagon to his nose. “Sniff.” He says, to Hobbes, “*Clay Manor*, could you mention James?—the Vincent. The centipede, I mean. Or . . . or rather: *James*, the—*sniff* . . . *human being*.”

Hobbes presses his pinkie finger on this spot in the foreword. “Can it wait until the finish?”

*Axolotl* adds, “James and Vincent. Important. No?” *Axolotl* lowers his hexaflexagon. He tilts its petals to the window.

“The novel shucks off Vincent in favour of other characters to simulate a tragedy,” says Hobbes. “Something ‘gone’, as it were, from the plot. Even in the chapter where he appears in flashback, Vincent says and he does little. He lies face-down in the bathtub when Siobhan visits

for winter before they ‘do nothing, together’ on the bed (*Clay Manor* 90).” Hobbes’s pinkie whitens with the pressure of his holding this spot in the foreword.

“On the other hundred hands,” Hobbes carries on, “stands James. The centipede inside Clay Manor is several of many things. Characters sometimes wish their loved-ones back alive through ‘wishful psychosis’ (Freud 244). Failure by those outside Clay Manor to recognize James as a centipede (*Clay Manor* 91, 93, 114-5) and the surreal quality of James’s body perhaps testify to make-believe.”

“Sniff,” say all the taxmen in the room together.

“Another possibility is that James is Vincent’s ghost,” continues Hobbes. “Through James’s haunting, *Clay Manor* points out something-to-be-done, ‘something different from before’ to expose ‘what has happened or is happening’ but is hidden (Gordon xvi, 8). James crawls from Vincent’s grave, defying his mortal coil to say ‘Woo’; his mother having locked him in Clay Manor and forbidden him to speak (*Clay Manor* 74-5).

“My strolling up the walk provokes *This Letter*,” says Hobbes. “A ghost behind the door is an appeal to *jot This Letter* in a manner that gives speech to previously muted parties.

“Finally.” Hobbes still presses this spot in the foreword. His pinkie flexes, whitish over the words “A NOVEL”. Hobbes says, “A third telling of James hides in the word ‘*Hecatonchire*’. Myth attributes one hundred hands to three *Hecatonchires* each; brothers. These brothers frolic in the fracas between Titans and Olympians but for what team depends on in which text they battle. Zeus woos them with nectar and ambrosia to throw volleys of rocks at the Titans in Hesiod’s *Theogony* (trans. Morrissey 43, 47; trans. West 24), but in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, a *Hecatonchire* clanks fifty shields and fifty swords in combat *against* Zeus, from the Titan’s side (trans. Fagles 312; trans Lombardo 24). As a hundred-hander, James inhabits an indeterminate

position with respect to how one reads *Clay Manor*. Marie Lévi-Bosko and P. Briefman interpret his ‘from gallows home’ (*Clay Manor* 84-5) as a sign that Vincent comes back too while Siobhan and I read otherwise (120). James is an ambiguous ‘*what it means*’, so to speak.”

*Taphonomy* speaks to her pudding cup. “Eep,” she tells the almond. “Oop. Huge with mushrooms.”

The senior taxman untucks that hot water bottle from beneath her shirt. The coffee sloshes. The senior taxman then unstops the top and has a sip.

Hobbes lifts his pinkie off this foreword. He reads on:

“ A novel reads itself, and takes itself as subject, by snitching on the underlying processes of fiction. Metafiction implicates taxmen and their readers alongside ‘anything else which has to do with the way books and stories are written’ (McCaffery 183) as propagating *views* of reality instead of reality itself (Waugh 9, 11). So-called ‘realist’ novels naturalize power structures through which ‘forms of oppression are constructed’ (ibid.). Metafictive writers expose the language of the novel as contrived by turning story against its own traditions.

*Clay Manor* reads *Clay Manor* through Gaspard and Marie, taxmen for whom writing and reading are lifestyle. Taxmen work at ‘Revenue’, an institute that blends taxation with literary criticism (*Clay Manor* 11). Revenue solicits memoirs from homeowners and subsequently it critiques them. Taxes, in this world, perpetuate an economy of stories through which Revenue endorses or belittles differing worldviews in accordance to the jotting’s ability to answer ‘*What it [all] means?*’ (ibid).

When Gaspard is unable to collect a memoir from Clay Manor, he forges one himself. He jots a document called *Clay Manor [to Pallas Briefman]* which he intends to file in order to earn his payday (12-15, 103). Marie, on the other hand, *used* to work for Revenue and forged taxes in the past (14, 45, 106-7). Throughout the novel Marie declares that *what it means* is ‘nothing’ (50, qtd. by Siobhan 84, qtd. by *Payload* 105), having—as jotters of metafiction do—turned resistant against both tradition and oppression (Waugh 10-11).

Revenue’s asking ‘*What it means?*’ enforces systemic, semiotic discourse on every aspect of these characters’ existence. Marie Lévi-Bosko’s resistance posits her life is linguistic, a text within the novel called ‘*Clay Manor*’ which Marie and Gaspard call ‘*This Letter*’ (*Clay Manor* 49, 107, 127). Marie is able to ‘flip’ through *This Letter* at will (28-35, 110-6), reading forward and backward through the plot as one flips through a story. ”

“You forged *Clay Manor, Clay Manor?*” *Axolotl* asks. He glances to the senior taxman.

The senior taxman smirks, as if Hobbes’s foreword scores her closer to asking: “What it means?—‘*What it means?*’ ” The senior taxman flips forward then back through her stack of papers. She nods. She says, “Go on. This is not real.”

*Taphonomy* lifts her pudding cup. She sniffs it. “Pee-yoo. Smells real.”

Hobbes shivers and he coughs. “Sniff.” He reads:

“ Marie’s recognition of her world as artifice constitutes another of *Clay Manor*’s reflections on writing. A *realist* novel employs language as a means to enforce social mores, never as an ends knotted to itself (Hutcheon 11). *Clay*

*Manor*, however, strives to implement its wording as conspicuous. When Gaspard first visits Clay Manor, he happens on loosestrife blooming despite winter. ‘*Loves-me-nots*’, the story names the flowers and the evergreens ‘are new with *blue*’ (*Clay Manor* 2). *Clay Manor* lingers on atypical descriptors, foregrounding a ‘process of linguistic selection’ (Waugh 140) to burlesque the correlation between sign and signified. For instance, to Ashley Clay (Marie’s former lover) the linguistic equivalent of dessert *is* dessert, thus all Ashley needs to bake is recipes (*Clay Manor* 48). She manipulates linguistic signs in manners only possible through fiction—as Marie peeks forward and back through her life in manners possible only through reading.

Early in the novel, Marie prophesies a visit from Michael Yip (49-50), the jotter. As a play on Roland Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’, Michael bothers Clay Manor as ‘the dead Chinese man’ (129, 187) and further bitter-batters the reading of *Clay Manor*: readers must interpolate how Michael Yip inside Clay Manor lampoons *Michael Yip* beyond the text, who writes *Clay Manor*. Waugh says of jotters ‘who step into their fictions’ that they catalyze a retrogression of identity, the literal ‘dissolves into metaphorical . . . into the words of the story *as* the words of the story’ (139, 142). If this dissolution happens to *Michael*, then it occurs to Marie *in reverse*. Marie lives in the novel, but ostensibly beyond it too, as *Marie Lévi-Bosko* who reads *Clay Manor* in tandem with and ahead of readers.

Another visit Marie prophesies is one from Vincent (50). She foresees that Vincent stands atop McHugh Bluff on *Clay Manor*’s last chapter. The

ending of the novel, however, clinches Vincent in his afterlife (212). Vincent, unlike James, never goes ‘from gallows home’. Marie misreads the novel’s ending despite her hocus-pocus. In Barthes’s essay, he subverts the idea that a writer is authority over their work’s *what it means* (1469-1470). Marie’s inconsistent reading through *Clay Manor* is *This Letter* positing a bitter-batter view literary criticism. The novel wonders if the reader indeed is any better at picking up a recipe and reaching *what it means*. ”

“Maybe *you* misread the recipe.” The senior taxman says. “How far forward did you flip?”

*Taphonomy* fiddles to the last page of her papers. She says, “When Fle—*ahem*—P. Brie . . . When *the cat behind Clay Manor* draws with charcoal, why do his sketches not turn out black (*Clay Manor* 6, 20, 60)?”

*Axolotl* goes, “The whole sniff?—or just first sniff? You forged *Clay Manor*, *Clay Manor*? Thought that was only rumour.”

Hobbes flips on.

“ Hutcheon describes an ontological anxiety that underlies the act of reading. She says:

The reader’s act of forming the universe of fantasy (or of metafiction using fantasy as a model) is like that of forming all novelistic worlds in that it provides the freedom—or the ‘escape’—of an ordered vision, perhaps a kind of ‘vital’ consolation for living in a world whose order one usually perceives and experiences only as chaos. That the order here is of a fictive universe does not matter; the need and desire for

such order is real, as is the need for freedom, for the liberation of the imagination from the bondage of empirical fact. (77)

Hutcheon's observation of the reader applies to the critic. The critic's act of building *what it means* is like that of reading story because both provide stability through *forced* order: 'meaning'. That this critic's *what* and *what* stands on fiction does not matter; the critic yearns so strongly for the comfort of meaning that language from the fictive world appears to him as fact.

Meaning, insofar as critics build it in conjunction with authors jotting 'reality', must be bitter batter. If critics churned their inquiry against bitter batter, they would discover that *what it means* has bubbled on meadow grass. ”

“*What it—ahem—means?*” asks *Axolotl*. “‘Meadow grass’? ‘Bitter batter’?” He folds his goatskin hexaflexagon again. The hexaflexagon flips colour to purple loosestrife.

*Taphonomy* licks the foil on her pudding cup. “Pee,” she says. “Yoo.”

“Sniff,” the taxmen sing together.

“ The basis of *Clay Manor*'s allegory—that metafiction behaves as a character flavoured with melancholia—is that obsession with self-reference evokes the narcissism symptomatic of psychological pathology. Sigmund Freud distinguished melancholy characters apart from those in mourning for the melancholic's tendency to swallow bitter batter. A melancholic, jots Freud, utters self-reproach and self-revile (244), but their critique is actually against a character with whom the melancholic bakes dessert, or has baked dessert, or should bake dessert—not against the melancholic themselves (248). One part of the ego, the 'conscience', takes the rest as subject and attributes qualities of

a lost love-object onto the self, ‘the result of which is that in spite of the conflict with the loved person the love-relation need not be given up’ (247-8). The melancholic character *pretends* to bake dessert. Metafiction turns its critical component against its story and attributes qualities of ‘realism’ onto itself. Thus metafiction maintains its relationship with conventions it identifies as no longer credible in fiction.

Gaspard’s diagnosis that his world displays symptoms of metafiction categorically begins with his identifying the linguistic basis of his existence. If Gaspard himself is language, then the same semiotic systems at play in the novel limit his assertions *about* language. *Clay Manor* performs this inextricability by parading references to linguistic mechanism. Revenue’s semiotic bias for collecting taxes and the grammatically problematic way taxmen solicit them, ‘*How’s it?—the who, wherein, this when and why, what it means?*’ (*Clay Manor* 11), for example, make wonky the processes of language and its interpretation through ‘unique semantic modification’ (Shklovsky 19) in order to declare that writing and reading are worthy of a second gander; that is, that taxes in this world are weird. Gaspard’s babbling of this exegesis triggers what André Gide calls a *mise en abyme* (qtd. in Hutcheon 9), an image of the novel nested in itself, the ‘structural event repetition’ common in metafiction (Hutcheon 22). The structural event Gaspard seeks to repeat is a contextual condition that exists beyond the novel: an interrogation of *Clay Manor* by *Michael Yip*. In order to perform this foreword, Gaspard must behold himself



as artifice. This recognition gives him panic, and his anxiety exhibits itself

through the gripping of his knee and an inability to breathe (*Clay Manor* 103).”

Hobbes swallows a wheeze. He shuts his mouth and rubs his fingers on his collarbone. “Sniff. Sniff,” he whispers. His sphincter clinches on a toot. He wishes that this morning he had fasted instead of ate bananas.

“He Himself (who founded Revenue) *is actual* (*Clay Manor* 13)?” asks *Axolotl*. *Axolotl* shuffles backwards through his stack of paper. “And spoke to you? Is it true? What does He look like?”

The senior taxman lifts her hot water bottle and she spills coffee on her face.

“He Himself is a woman,” says the senior taxman. “Just some random first name ‘He’.”

“As you’ll read,” adds Hobbes, “she is allergic to the bitter batter (177).”

“Is He—*sniff*—Himself *Marie*?” asks *Axolotl*.

“No,” the senior taxman says. “He Himself is not Marie. Marie *loves* the bitter batter.”

“You do know,” says *Taphonomy*, “that since Freud collected taxes, his daddy-o conundrum has sprouted mushrooms, no? No one—*ahem*—plays the daddy-o during the board game inside the gazebo (81-3) because—*sniff*—‘the guise of a devil, a god, or a sorcerer’ are just as likely for the players and outside ‘the restricted code of [daddy-o]’ (Jung qtd. in Deleuze 46-7). If *Clay Manor* was as invested in Freud as you say, then Vincent would have played his daddy-o at the game board. And for that matter, you never tell us about Vincent’s daddy-o. Or Siobhan’s. What it means?” asks *Taphonomy*.

The senior taxman flips backwards to the dedication on her copy of *Clay Manor*. She says, “Is it not gloomy *Michael* has nobody ‘real’ to write *This Letter* to?” The senior taxman lifts air quotes around her word “real”. She says, “*Darren Chang*?”

*Axolotl* folds his hexaflexagon to the colour orange violet. He says, “I bet you get a star sticker on *Clay Manor, Clay Manor*,” says *Axolotl*. “Even though you—*sniff*—forged *Clay Manor*. I only got a turtle. See?” *Axolotl* shows Hobbes the sticker on his tax letter. The turtle’s blue shell mottles with moss and a littler turtle on top. “Zoom,” says *Axolotl*. “Blue turtle.”

“How’s it Michael is the one character *Clay Manor* fashions through ethnicity?” asks *Taphonomy*. “‘Chinese [*—sniff—*] man’. What it means?”

Thus far, the goatskin has suppressed colour. Hobbes’s mixedness can go unnoticed. Hobbes’s parents still tell stories of a bow-wow back home: “Remember when Stubby, the corgi, wrecked our game of fetch? He just kept running.” Photographs mishmash characters from Hobbes’s family over the fireplace. In those photos, Hobbes’s daddy-o holds that bow-wow. Meanwhile, Hobbes’s mum, in those photos, is Chinese.

“For example, you’re so white,” says *Taphonomy*. “Your fingers pinkened in the cold on page one. Characters in *Clay Manor* wear freckles. Why does *This Letter* let colour go buried?”

“Are you certain Vincent Clay does not come back?” asks the senior taxman. “He comes, I reckon. He must. How far forward did you flip?”

The senior taxman dons her sunhat. She is, of course, Marie Lévi-Bosko. She flips ahead, the taxmen’s papers whooshing to her side of the table, and she disappears into the latter chapters, no doubt in search of Vincent standing on McHugh Bluff at *This Letter*’s ending.

“Holy.” *Taphonomy* says, “Marie Lévi-Bosko is real? *Ahem.*”

A hole in Marie Lévi-Bosko’s hot water bottle leaks coffee on her paperwork.

*Taphonomy* and *Axolotl* nod to one another. They gather up their pages off the table and the floor. *Taphonomy* sips pudding. The almond in her mouth goes crunch.

“Bring your jam jar?” asks *Taphonomy*. She cleans the bottom of her pudding with her finger.

Hobbes clicks open his briefcase and he nods. A jam jar in there stinks of marijuana.

“Sniff. Sniff,” say the taxmen together.

“Won’t you join us?” Hobbes asks *Axolotl*.

“Of course.” *Axolotl* answers, “Love jam jars. Let me fetch my assistant. He loves jam jars too. I will have to leave early. I need to shampoo my billy then skin him.”

*Axolotl* tucks his hexaflexagon into his breast pocket.

“Probably the jam jar will clear Mayfever,” suggests *Taphonomy*. “So would bitter batter.”

“Does anybody *have* some bitter batter?” Hobbes asks.

“Let’s ask Michael,” says *Axolotl*. “When he comes back. Let’s ask Michael.”

“Holy.” *Taphonomy* says, “*Ahem*. Michael is real too?”

### †. she Likes Better an Intermission Betwixt Chapters

The intern wipes a limbless amphibian (caecilian) back into the batter with his spatula. The batter warms on the stovetop, dial twisted to MINIMUM. The limbless amphibian wriggles in the bubbles. A handful of cilantro. Spinach shoot. The intern wipes the amphibian back into the skillet with his spatula again. He dials the temperature slowly just past MINIMUM.

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips into the kitchen. She shoves between the intern and his cooking.

“Minimum?” she says.

That limbless amphibian splashes batter on the counter. Its spine kinks into a big and crooked knuckle. The intern has crinkled its backbone.

“How cruel,” says Marie. “You’ve ruined it.”

The intern removes his cap and scrunches it against his chest. The other chefs have started laughing.

Marie Lévi-Bosko lifts up the caecilian. Limp, it drips in her fingers. Piping batters pinken skin. Slop onto the chopping block. Cleaves it with the beef knife.

“This kitchen needs a guillotine,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

Marie Lévi-Bosko starts the dish over herself. First she heats the batter to a splatter. A fever. *Then* she puts the wyrm in. This way, the wyrm doesn’t have a chance squirm.

“If you cook inside *this* kitchen,” Marie tells the intern, “you don’t cook allegorically. Not anymore.”

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips through the swinging door into the dining side of the bakery. She has foodies to cater to.

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Marie works at the downtown library. At sunup she demonstrates the manufacture of a cast of characters for a chess set. The library owns a printer that builds toys out of plastic. At one side of Marie's chessboard, a detective stomps in through a doorway. On the other side, a chimera lolls across the chair for passing out on. Marie Lévi-Bosko prefers this version of chess to the regular.

After lunch o'clock, Marie sits at the circulation desk. She accidentally tells incoming patrons "Morning" well into three-fifty. A toddler-scholar has asked Marie for an extra hour of computer privileges. The scholar spends the extra hour sliding her pointer from one edge of the screen to another and swinging her feet. On Marie's second week here, that same scholar goofed Marie into believing that she was allowed to borrow more books than the other customers. Marie worries sometimes about how else this toddler-scholar must have tricked her. On her way out, the toddler-scholar steals a whole page of stickers from behind Marie's desk.

At sundown, Marie pushes a trolley through the stacks. She weeds the dog-eared dandelions off the shelves so newer letters have shelf-room to root.

Marie likes best that her job at the library gives her opportunity to practise mumbling aloud—to *others* instead of herself on her strolls to and from the grocer. She wonders if Siobhan will like this version of her mother better than the version of her mother who worked for Revenue.

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At the research lab, Marie Lévi-Bosko mixes a red potion with yellow. The reactants should transition to orange, but when Marie sets Florence flask in boiler, the elixir swirls green.

"Almost worrying," Marie jots in her notes. She lifts the Florence from its heat source and she sets it on the bench. A final churn and the elixir boils deeper green.

While Marie Lévi-Bosko crosses the laboratory and peers through her monocular at a sperm cell floating in the subject's semen, that Florence flask from earlier begins to crack. That recipe disobeys the thermodynamic laws. Rather than cool down, the flask grows bigger. It towers at the far side of lab, groaning with fractures. The elixir in it looks smaller, but actually has a constant mass.

Marie tiptoes to the hall. She locks the door behind her just as the Florence screeches and shatters. The slap of sound against her ears knocks Marie to the floor. That punch of light dazzles for hours, echoing orange through Marie Lévi-Bosko's eyesight.

"That poor sperm cell," she says.

"Happens to the best of us," the laboratory supervisor assures. "I will get the broom. You will get the dustpan."

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Marie Lévi-Bosko marches to the courthouse. The research lab and library are distant flips from Clay Manor. Three hours by highway. Twenty-eight chapters by story. Nonetheless, Revenue has launched a copyright claim on the chess set Marie built using the library's printer.

Under oath, Marie asks Revenue's lawyer, "In the tax letter, does the version of me who builds the chess set worry how else that toddler-scholar must have tricked her?"

"Yes," replies the lawyer. He flips through his paperwork and he reads: "*that same scholar goofed Marie into believing that she was allowed to borrow more books than other customers.*"

"Well," answers Marie. "Damn. I like my ending better. In my ending to that question, you answer 'No.'"

## 18. Bathos, or the Characters Opened a Jam Jar Beforehand

Marie Lévi-Bosko has already stolen Ladidah's police report about the dead Chinese man from the office plaquered "LADIDAH" at the characters-in-overcoats station. She also stole the notebook. Marie's already told P. Briefman and Siobhan what Ladidah *doesn't* know about the house: that Marie Lévi-Bosko reads ahead. Marie Lévi-Bosko beats Michael to jotting everything all down. This way, she can stand behind Clay Manor while Michael and the plot can go away.

"Is it not peculiar to any of you that the detective and the taxman are girl- and boyfriend?" says Marie. "It's not strange to you that the detective couldn't be a person Michael's met *outside Clay Manor*? Maybe our jotter's too bare-assed to write anyone who is too 'real'." Marie tilts her body to one side while saying "*Clay Manor*" in order to italicize the title of *This Letter*. She lifts her fingers in air quotes to scratch at that word "real" again.

"Yes, Marie," says Siobhan. "'Michael' doesn't put on underoos. His last name, as you told us, is 'Yip'." To pantomime a woman in a sunhat, Siobhan lifts air quotes too. She dittos a high-pitched parrot of Marie's voice. She falls over laughing with the cats behind Clay Manor: P. Briefman and his bambino, Theophilus, who also speaks our language.

The raven on Siobhan's shoulder says, "I've too much."

Siobhan and P. Briefman tickle the smaller cat. The smaller cat says, "No. Stop. I have had too much too."

Theophilus claws Siobhan's hand away. His talon tugs her fingernail—the one newly grown back and polished brassy—off its bed. Siobhan puts the yeowch into her mouth.

“*Whay wuh you goo gah?*” Siobhan asks the kitten. She sucks her finger better. Her hand stinks of jam jar. Marie rolled a cone-style joint as thick at its end as a thumb. That joint cindered through three go-a-rounds of their story circle. Now their stories have all smelted together.

“Because your hand smells.” Theophilus tears out the braids his father threaded through his mane. He skulks off the parachute, to the purple loosestrife where a bumblebee hovers through the flowers but chooses none to sip from.

“Tell us a biography about my bambino as though he was a whale,” P. Briefman asks Marie. The bigger cat lowers himself to the grass and he pretends to hunt Theophilus across the red and grey rhombi.

Marie says, “Tighter Pussy’s blowhole is the way I-won’t-say because he birthed himself during a rainstorm. His blood vessels so huge he himself could swim down them. Barnacles form a goatee underneath his fishtrap. His baleen is sulfur yellow; haberdashers won’t sell it even as a collar stiffener. Pants his size don’t exist in any colour except stripes.”

P. Briefman pounces on Theophilus. He chomps on the scruff. His bambino tastes not ripe enough, so P. Briefman brings him back into the story circle and sits him on the burn marks. P. Briefman prods open Theophilus’s mouth. The little cat says, “*Ugh. Aw. Ah ah uh ooh ah ooh.*”

P. Briefman squints into his bambino’s chomper. “Idiot,” he tells Marie. “My bambino’s baleen isn’t yellow.”

“It will be,” says Marie.

“It’s only human,” answers P. Briefman, “to tell it rotten.”

Marie says, “Says you.”



“Bakery should still be open,” says Siobhan. By this P. Briefman knows snack o’clock. He drags Theophilus inside to the kitchen.

“I’ll never be able to explain this,” says Marie. “You all will just have to read about it. Michael Yip is jotting this down *right now*.”

“The all of us *would* read,” says Siobhan, “but we just brushed our teeth.”

P. Briefman lolls back into the yard. Theophilus trots after. “Fridge is empty,” says P. Briefman. “But I hear, ‘Bakery should still be open.’ ”

“Don’t order the limbless amphibian,” says Marie. “At this time of night you might as well eat paper.”

P. Briefman rips an old tax letter in two. He passes the lion’s share to Theophilus, and both of them eat paper.

“I didn’t even notice he was carrying that letter,” Marie tells us. “He must have pockets in his fleece or something.”

“Only rollers,” says P. Briefman. He sweeps back his pompadour. Ashley’s old hair rollers rattle in his mane. “If you can read ahead,” P. Briefman tells Marie, “then you don’t need to notice how I carry my letters.”

P. Briefman bumps his head on Siobhan’s arm. He squints at Siobhan’s wristwatch and he says, “You should fix that. And by the way, ‘Good Morning.’ ”

“No thank you,” says Siobhan. “I’m groovy with three-fifty. I should leave.”

“We’ve hid your keys,” says Marie.

“What time *is* it, anyways?” asks Theophilus. He nibbles a bit of paper then spits it on the yard.

“It *should* be some time in May,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko. “But Michael has started the snow. The weather here as bizarre as in a novel, no? Mosquitoes on one page and ‘tiny geometries’ the next. I think I feel a cold snap coming.”

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Marie Lévi-Bosko barely finishes the story circle. She had no idea from the start of what the others went on bickering.

Anywho, the reason she gathered P. Briefman, Siobhan, and Theophilus behind Clay Manor is because Gaspard Hobbes strolls up the walk again with yet another tax letter. Revenue sends encores for letters, even after addressees pay them again and over. For houses such as Clay Manor, tax letters are at minimum twice a year.

Marie Lévi-Bosko snoops into the stack of letters at the greeting room. She finds the one dated the latest and she hides it underneath her sunhat. *This* go-a-round, she doesn’t even want P. Briefman to know that he has taxes at all.

“*This* go-a-round,” she says, “I *will* say *what it means*.”

## 19. “Mister Hungers”

P. Briefman wants Theophilus to ripen happy but he worries, since this bambino can speak, that Theophilus might figure what’s coming.

“Why watch me that way?” asks Theophilus. Theophilus creeps backwards from his father. The beginning of a mane across his withers stands on end. He tugs at the jingle bell his father donned him in but is not strong enough to undo his father’s loops. The ribbon only strangles tighter.

P. Briefman sits up taller. He wipes his wrist across his mouth. He puts his new-bought bag of cilantro on the table. He wonders if his other children think about this too: how he ogles them. Ouaknin no. Ouaknin still visits. Ouaknin plays in the kitchen. P. Briefman lent Ouaknin a salad bowl to jump in. Ouaknin fits upside-down inside that salad bowl.

“What are you looking for?” asks Theophilus. Theophilus turns his head to the side, but his ears tweak directly towards P. Briefman. Theophilus squats, his body ready to run. “Why watch me that way?”

“How do you mean ‘that way’?” P. Briefman shuts his smile. He thinks, up until he notices the pee that his bambino squeezes, that they are just playing. His bambino’s stream smells burgundy and of worry. P. Briefman’s instinct is to swipe Theophilus across the eastern wing, to prove who is allowed to pee inside Clay Manor. But he wants Theophilus to ripen happy. P. Briefman says, “How do you mean ‘Why watch me *that way*?’?”

“I don’t know the word for it.” Theophilus shrinks further backwards. The littler kitten glances to the kitchen where Ouaknin plays happily inside that salad bowl. Theophilus swats at his own ear, which won’t quit twitching. His claws rap on the hardwood while he scampers on the spot.

James Briar coils from the ceiling down. He piles his armour between the big cat and the littler. He passes a pink, stuffed elephant doll to Theophilus, which the kitten squeezes. The elephant doll holds a pop-up card that James crafted during the shindig. A phalanx of little spearmen stab their sharps out from the paper. James curls the front end of his body high and he twists his face upside-down. He leans his blowholes close so he can whisper in P. Briefman's ear.

"I'd say," says James, "'Your boy knows what's coming, Mister Hunger.' I'm sturdy of it. So, *so* sure."

"How do you mean, 'sturdy'?" says P. Briefman. P. Briefman rears up to peer over the armoured segments at his bambino behind the thirty-two-foot centipede.

Theophilus clutches the elephant doll closer, clawing through its polyesters.

"Gently now," says James. To P. Briefman he says, "Why don't you leave this one to me? And by 'sturdy' I said, 'So, *so* sure'; that your boy knows what's coming."

P. Briefman grips the mantle. He pulls himself higher to better gander at his child.

James stacks his armour higher, higher, and then teetered to screen Theophilus from P. Briefman. One of James's knuckles clenches the back legs and checkered tail of a beaver. The front half of the pelt tatters inside James's maw.

P. Briefman climbs onto the fireplace. The pictures up there clatter. P. Briefman jumps, to better look-see, but James builds a dome of himself to hide the littler cat.

"How do you mean, 'leave this one to me'?" asks P. Briefman.

"Yeah," says Theophilus from behind James. "Leave me to James. James is teaching me to read. James is my buddy."

James swallows his tatter of beaver. He crimps the sides of his moustache inwards. He nibbles them, his mouthparts paddling them clean. “Did you hear that?” James asks P. Briefman. “Theophilus says, ‘James is my buddy.’ ” The thirty-two-foot centipede grooms his handlebars tidy.

“My master is teaching you to *read*? I can teach you to read. I have learned the letters. I have paid my taxes,” says P. Briefman. “What cat’s as good a daddy?” wonders the bigger cat out loud. “Perchance Flechette,” P. Briefman says.

P. Briefman’s tax letter, the *what it means (James and Vincent are the same, much as me and Pallas Briefman)*, now hangs in the greeting room over the staircase, Revenue’s red logo banging red on its paper.

“*You* can’t teach letters,” spits Theophilus. “*You* are a nasty daddy-o, watching me that way.”

“What was that?” James asks the bambino. James uncoils. He spirals around the littler kitten, who still squeezes that pink elephant doll. The centipede motions with his rear end to P. Briefman and he asks, “What was that?”

“Nasty daddy-o,” says Theophilus. “He won’t even see the registry to clean up what he calls himself. Even a dead pappy can wear the wrong name around.”

P. Briefman tightens his Windsor knot and climbs down from the mantel. He liked his bambino better before James crept aside him. He worries, because *both* the thirty-two-foot centipede *and* Theophilus can speak, that James might *tell* Theophilus what’s coming.

Theophilus clambers onto James’s back with that pink elephant. The pop-up card James crafted for that elephant falls onto the floor. P. Briefman wonders, because James has never *seen* a phalanx of spearman, how he could have made those spearmen for that pop-up card.

Theophilus rides the centipede up the spiral stairwell. He blows his father a sticky raspberry.

“What’s that?” asks the centipede.

“What’s coming,” says Theophilus. He shoots his father with a glower.

“ ‘Mister Hungers,’ I’d say,” says James.

“Nasty daddy-o.” Theophilus points his claws at P. Briefman and scratches the air between.

“What cat eats like he does?” James asks. “Perhaps a planet.”

“Says you,” says Theophilus. “Maybe a hippo.”

P. Briefman sulks to the mini-organ in the middle of the eastern wing. Broken near a year now. He fiddles the left-most black note. A puff of dust rises from the mini-organ’s crown of pipes. “What was that?” whispers P. Briefman. He claws the note again. This time: nothing. He misses when he could play thunder through the manor.

Theophilus and James’s laughter tumbles from upstairs.

P. Briefman paws the mini-organ’s keyboard. Nothing.

Theophilus and James’s laughter smells of last night’s snack: blue cheese on quiche by Marie Lévi-Bosko. With shots of cinnamon on whiskey afterwards.

P. Briefman skulks into the kitchen. He rattles one last tablet from the wine glass on the table. Siobhan’s melancholy medicine to quell his stomach. He pulls open the freezer. Shindiggers have polished off the gooseberry from his pot of *foole*. Partiers have spooned all his mousse.

Ouaknin continues rolling in his salad bowl. P. Briefman decides: Yet too small.

“Fridge is empty,” says P. Briefman to the salad bowl. He snatches and lugs that salad bowl into the yard. He cradles the bowl up Clay Manor’s private driveway. He stomps the gravel. Lick of the wrist and slick of the mutton chops. Ouaknin rolls dizzy in that salad bowl.

“The grocer always sells cilantro,” mutters P. Briefman to that salad bowl. “When we meet the grocer, *I* will ask the ‘what’. I’ll say, ‘What’s that and that?’ And how much per a dollar?’ And the grocer will speak *what this is.*”

Theophilus and James’s laughter from the upstairs corridor rolls out Clay Manor’s windows and across the bluff.

P. Briefman peers behind himself. He feels as though the whole house sneers and teases him. Mind the yard, he thinks. And yet Theophilus and James chuckle on.

“*You* don’t enjoy my master more than me. Do you?” P. Briefman asks his salad bowl.

Ouaknin lolls in knots at the bottom of that bowl. He falls asleep inside his father’s arms, saying only “Meow.”

P. Briefman pitters down the crescent road. “Hello,” he tells his neighbours. “Good day.” He lifts that salad bowl so they can gander at Ouaknin. He pats down his pompadour against the breeze. He can smell the cold snap coming. He says, “Good day, neighbour. Look. *Ouaknin*. My small from earlier. See him ripen. Good day. Hello.”

“Well,” his neighbours giggle. “Good day to you, Flechette.”

“See?” P. Briefman tells the salad bowl. “Just as much a buddy and better.”

The carcass of that goose P. Briefman slaughtered last month rots under a traffic sign, half-buried and with P. Briefman’s feces over it.

“I can smell the cold snap coming,” says P. Briefman.

“Well,” his neighbours giggle. “Good day to you too, Flechette.”

## 20. *née Fiancée*

Her landlord shoves a letter underneath the door. Tenants, spells the letter, live in breach of their leases. No smoking. Neither in the suites nor in the halls.

Siobhan crumples that letter to line the base of Edith's birdcage. Edith hoots a plume of doobie. Edith flicks her lighter. Edith's talon hits the flintlock sparky.

"No pets allowed in the apartments," Edith reads off the crumpled letter. She pecks line twenty of the lease agreement. "No pets allowed in the apartments. Follow me," she says again, "Follow me."

Siobhan drums the front of her sheath. Today, the flowers cinch on her belly. Stomach cramps. A muddy garden, Siobhan thinks. She clonks down on the toilet for a plop. Her number two unspools maroon. A hemorrhoid in her bunghole ruptures. Still cinching, her sheath. Siobhan strums and strums the flowers. Her belly now no less swelly.

"Don't tell me," Siobhan says to her pet raven, "that I'm *two week's* swelly."

Siobhan wonders what her wooer might say of a pregnancy. She worries that her wooer might say "Boo." Because it was not her wooer shooting cramps into her belly—it was James. James stayed over—two weeks ago. Together they said "Ooh."

Siobhan flushes her turds down the toilet. She scrubs the blood. She flushes and wipes again. On that two-ply paper, Siobhan finds a spider mite. She wipes and wipes—she counts to thirty—now she smears orange onto the toilet paper. For those spider mites her pussy smells of loosestrife blooming. She wonders should she bother shaving anymore. Wherever was that letter T when she needed it?—on her shelf, or course, inside that mason jar: her intrauterine, copper piece.



Siobhan clutches the flowers on her sheath. She squeezes herself sweaty. She wonders, Can James even *have* a baby?

“There are no words,” says Edith in her birdcage from the kitchen.

“Surprise,” says James. He climbs in from the balcony again. He tangles into Siobhan’s living space, his hairy feet wipe on her sofa. His knuckles crackle as he tangles closer. The sofa keels under his heaviness. He brings a weathervane with him. A cockatrice, headless, on that weathervane points northerly towards the cold snap coming. James latches the balcony door shut behind the cloud of moths that follows him on in.

Siobhan pulls up her panties. She flushes again. She sprays herself on the crotch with rosewater and she steps out from the stink. She rubs her belly; inside, fluttery. James can smell the razor bumps she’s nicked inside her panty line. From across the apartment, Siobhan can feel the bleed and heat.

“Do you have any mead?” asks James. He can hear the honey wine burping in the carbuoys stashed inside the cupboards. “I’m thirsty.” He points with his moustache into the kitchen. On his exhale, the air around him shimmers. He huffs Siobhan’s apartment stuffy. The windows fog and James asks, “Any mead at all?”

“Not a drip,” kids Siobhan. Siobhan lies, “Not a drop of honey wine.” The youngest carbuoy’s airlock pops and splashes. The wine inside brews sweet. Siobhan fetches three crystals from the dishwasher. The crystals, of course, are P. Briefman’s.

“Parched,” says James. “Wilted.” Although he has no eyes to see, James can smell how Siobhan wears her sheath a size too tight. Just those panties underneath. The half of James’s head designed for dinner yawns apart. His mouth reminds Siobhan of propping a mirror near to her vagina: never quite as moist or tight as she would like. Paddles on either side of James’s

mouth flap wide. Spider mites spin tic-tac-toes over the mandible. Siobhan wishes her pussy had teeth and could eat. That way she could speak while sipping mead.

Siobhan sets down her and James's crystals and she clutches her stomach through her sheath. Can James even *have* a baby? she wonders.

"I'd say again, 'I'm thirsty,' " says James.

"This probably isn't the best thing to do with our brain cells anymore." Siobhan coughs into James's goblet. She pours honey wine from a decanter.

"There are no words," says Edith.

James's moths are at their worst. They feather on the walls and ceiling. The air thick with powder. Siobhan sneezes. Woof. She spills a drip of honey wine onto her carpet. She passes the crystal to James, which he clutches in his mouthparts. An itch of spider mites crawls out onto his face and climbs his moustache.

"It's such a shame you've not a drip to drink," James plays along. He swirls the crystal in his bits for dinner. The twinkle of bubbles sloshes to the brim. James clinks his weathervane against the wine and he says, "Cheers to me."

The wallpaper rustles with dust from James's followers. Moths on Siobhan's bookshelf bloom at their anuses, glands ballooning from their abdomens. Pheromones waft off the tulips prolapsed from their bodies. The glands remind Siobhan of party blowers. James can hear the need for breeding tweeted through his moths' secretions.

"Aflutter for it," answers James. "A cleaning." He swallows from his crystal—honey wine, Siobhan's loogie, and all. He rolls the emptied crystal through his knuckles and he sighs, "I bet those dragonflies are in full flight these days and ready for me." He adds, "By the way," about his crystal, "that was a sparkly nothing."

“Too bad we’ve got more of it.” Siobhan hands James a second glass. As much of her slobber in it as the first.

“Thirsty,” answers James.

Somebody outside Siobhan’s apartment knocks twice on the door.

“In a minute,” says Siobhan.

“Why hide me?” James sips from his second glass of honey wine. A spider mite floats upside down and kicks its legs inside the sparkle.

“It’s your wooer,” says Siobhan’s wooer from the hall. Siobhan’s wooer knocks and knocks. “It’s your wooer.”

“You’re seeing someone other? Is this because you’re feeling phlegmy?” asks James. “Because you’re bored?”

Siobhan’s wooer knocks some more. “It’s your wooer. Your wooer.”

Siobhan steps to her apartment door, backwards while watching James sip from his honey wine. She brings the deadbolt to life. *Click*.

“Why hide me?” says James.

Siobhan opens the door.

Siobhan’s wooer wears a sweat stain on his loins. His shirt clings to his pectorals. Veins and muscles wire his legs thick under his track pants. Lenses on his glasses bead. The smell is oven opened.

Siobhan’s wooer gazes past Siobhan and stares with horror at James. The thirty-two-foot centipede flips *two* emptied crystals through his knuckles now. He clinks the glasses on his weathervane. “Well,” James tells the wooer. “Hello. And cheers to you.”

“Damn,” Siobhan’s wooer says of James. “All that clutter. All those chairs. That weathervane. You should have seen how messy *my* apartment was when I was moving out.”

Siobhan’s wooer steps in through the doorway. He shuts the door behind him. His sweat sprinkles the kitchen salty. He says, “Sorry.”

Siobhan passes her wooer the last crystal of honey wine.

“You spit in this,” says Siobhan’s wooer. “I love this stuff.” He gulps his sparkly nothing.

“Shall I stay?” asks James.

A stale cookie cracks in half on Siobhan’s kitchen counter.

“Apricot biscotti?—with coffee,” Siobhan offers her wooer.

Siobhan’s wooer peels at Siobhan’s sheath. His member pokes her through his track pants. The boner peeks its head over the waistband. Siobhan’s crotch stains her panties orange.

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James listens from the living room as Siobhan and Siobhan’s wooer do “*what, exactly?*”—Siobhan and her wooer do what James and Siobhan did, of course, when James gave Siobhan spider mites and sowed her belly swelly. Siobhan’s other wooer grips the heels of Siobhan’s feet and spreads Siobhan thighs wide. He pushes and he shoves and he huffs “What, exactly?” His sweat flavours the bed sheets with yet another stain.

He wheezes in time with squeaks from the bed frame. He shoves hard enough to slide the queen-sized mattress and the box spring from the middle of the room into the adjoining wall.

Siobhan’s neighbours tap back. Tap. Tap.

“What, exactly?” Siobhan’s wooer huffs again.

“It,” Siobhan squeals back, “and . . . and. It.”

James wipes one side of his moustache under Siobhan's bedroom door. He can smell how Siobhan's body gathers blood around the womb to warm her fetus.

"What, exactly?" Siobhan's wooer tells her louder.

*"It. It."*

Siobhan's wooer flips over atop her. He pokes at her mouth with his penis and he kisses her vagina. He licks and licks. "This? This? What, exactly?" huffs her wooer. He grips her hams, hard. And he bounces his hips.

Siobhan spits out his member. She squeals louder, "It. And it. And."

Siobhan's wooer rolls them both over. He cradles Siobhan under her knees with his elbow and he sits her sideways on his lap. He plants his hands on the mattress and he bucks.

"What? What, exactly?" he screams.

Siobhan's neighbours: *tap tap tap*.

James can hear the beads of sweat slick between their bodies. When *he* and Siobhan did "*what, exactly?*" James hung off the ceiling, Siobhan upside-down, and a pink, stuffed elephant toy squished between them while James swung Siobhan like a pendulum.

James thinks of the fetus swelling Siobhan's belly and he asks himself: Can I even *have* a baby?

"Tenants shall not cause noises from their *domus* that disturb the enjoyment of any others at any times," reads Edith, the raven, from her birdcage. Edith claps her wings in air quotes around the word "*domus*" on the landlord's letter.

"Do *it*," Siobhan says from the bedroom. "It-*tuh*. And *it-tuuuuuuuh*," she spits.

Siobhan and her wooer finish with her wooer at a handstand against the wall, Siobhan squatting on the mattress with her rumpus lowered on his dick and him saying “*What-tuh? Exact-tuh-ly?*”

Siobhan and her wooer step out from the bedroom. Her wooer shakes his head. He presses both his hands against his temples and he mouths the word “What.” He shakes his head again, at James. He says, “All that clutter. All those chairs.”

“I’m not chairs,” says James. He spins his weathervane.

Siobhan’s wooer leaves the apartment door ajar behind him. Siobhan pulls up her panties and she bangs out the cold. She clicks the deadbolt shut.

“I already knew that you were leaving last time I dropped by,” says James. “Imagine what I know already now. I’d say, ‘Potbelly.’ Do you have any mead?”

“Not a drip.” Siobhan lies, “Not a drop of honey wine.” She steps to the kitchen to pour herself and James some more.

The cuticle on James’s armour has started to spall. A blister cracks across his knuckles. The cold snap coming is a snowy one. Maybe James will moult one month early.

“There are no words,” says Edith the raven.

“Hand me that, why don’t you?” says Siobhan. She points to the mason jar atop her bookshelf with the intrauterine, copper piece in it.

“The letter?” answers James. “What will you spell?”

“Pass it here, why don’t you?” says Siobhan. “And I’ll show you what I’ll spell.”

James trades Siobhan the mason jar for another crystal filled with honey wine. Siobhan cradles the letter T into the bathroom where she started in this chapter. The bathroom still smells of maroon. Siobhan flicks on the fan again and drops her panties. She hugs the mason jar into the

shower where she runs the water hot. She rubs and scrubs. She wonders if she's given her wooer James's spider mites. More and more of them tumble down the drain and stain the bathtub orange. The ruptured hemorrhoid in her anus burns.

“There are no words,” says Edith the raven.

Siobhan spins open the mason jar. She spreads her legs and shoves the copper T back in her with only her fingers. Now her pussy stains the bathtub darker.

“Ouch,” says James. “Have you not waited too many days? I'd say, ‘Rather than a mother, you'd prefer to be *your* mother.’—or *my* mother.”

“Nay,” answers Siobhan. “*Fiancée*. Can you even *have* a baby?”

“There are no words,” says Edith the raven.

## 21. "That Detective"

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips to the infirmary.

"Of course that detective hasn't up and left the story simply," Marie says to Ashley. "Just the opposite. She strolled around the house again. How the taxman did. She won't up and leave a thing. Just like you, heavy strudel."

"Vincent?" Ashley asks in the dark. Medicine drips through the wire to her arm and goofs her into thinking that this upcoming scene is just a dream.

"Vincent? That you? I've had a dream. Almighty." Ashley's breathing wheezes. Her eyes glisten with wetness and the ceiling tiles blur. Ashley says, "I've woken from a dream."

"I meant to say," says Marie, "that the detective has seen James."

Ashley says, "In my dream, *you* were scared of *me*."

Blood vessels bulge under the liver spots on Ashley's forehead. In the years since Ashley first slept here, she has grown a thin moustache.

Marie Lévi-Bosko says, "The detective stepped into the yard while James was cleaning himself in the trees. The detective drew her semi-automatic and she sprayed the shock of conifers. Then she reached aside her boot—for her pepperbox—and she spiced up James's face."

"Vincent?" asks Ashley. "In my dream, *you* could cook a recipe with nothing but the letters and in winter *I* became a centipede."

"My ending is better." Marie says, "In my ending to your dream, you leave the house to me."

"Vincent?" Ashley says, "Dreamed you bury me. But in this dream I scuttle back. I stroll upside-down from gallows home onto the ceiling. You gaze up at me. You say, 'Hello, *Marie*.'"



“After the detective shot James,” Marie says, “James toppled from the trees and clattered. Smashed his back. The bullets punctured through his chitin. Tore off a whole hand of knuckles. He bled gelatin. The gelatin cooled in the air from blue to grey. James’s body stiffened; curled into a question mark across the lawn. Blowholes down his body closed. His legs knotted inwards to his belly. The detective filled her semi-automatic with another magazine. She crept towards the toppled centipede and stood over his wasted face.

“ ‘Cheap shot.’ James told the detective, ‘Please,’ ” Marie says to Ashley. “Then James curled onto his feet and coiled back into Clay Manor.”

Ashley says, “The scary part about my dream—where in winter I become a centipede—is yet you mistake me for *Marie*.”

“You’re not on about Vincent any longer, are you heavy strudel?” Marie tells Ashley.

Ashley blinks—hard—until the ceiling tiles stop squirming. She says, “Of course I’m not on Vincent any longer. You think I can’t tell you apart from Vincent? Do you think I need a sunhat, *Marie*?”

Marie peers from underneath her wicker. She says, “Pussy owes taxes again. This time I stole his letter. This go-a-round, *I* tell the story: means nothing. After James coiled back into the house, that detective radioed for backup. Constables arrived and Pussy thought he had a costume jamboree. Pussy thought the theme was ‘Where is James?’ ”

“Bogus. All of it. *What* detective shot James?”

“If I told you her name you would not believe.”

Marie steps to the bread pan at the window. The purple loosestrife wilts. Only half its *loves-me-nots* left to drop. A beetle in the bread pan burrows through the dirt. Plastic bags drip medicine through tubes stabbed deep into the weeds. Tiny bandages knot cloth over the needles.

Edith claps her wings and perches just outside the glass. She smears oil from her preening gland over her feathers and she puffs her chest. Half an apricot biscotti in her talon crumbles when she taps it on the windowsill. Edith scatters the cookie then she hops into the sky. She circles the hospital and she sings, “Nothing.”

“Shut up that raven,” Ashley tells Marie. “and say something.”

“Guess what other taxes Pussy owes.” Marie says, “Guess who else shows up inside the house. I once watched Michael flip open *Clay Manor*. The whole house torn to pages. He scrolled back and forth between its chapters, not writing a word for hours. By the end of it, he stood up, gripped his knee. He asked himself ‘What it means?’ ”

“Does Gaspard’s letter get to goatskin?” Ashley asks, “Will people see why we hid James? Do people read about my face? Will people still eat my dessert after they see my face? Could you show me my mirror?”

“Vincent?” Ashley says. “Did you bring me a recipe? I’ve had dreams. I’ve seen *Marie*.”

Ashley’s breathing heaves, her nipples peak inside her sleeping gown. Arteries beneath her eye burst and Ashley cries a drip of blood. The monitor at her bed bleeps.

“Vincent!” Ashley screams.

“And Michael says that *I’m* the one whose chatter fills with ‘thirty minutes ago,’ ” says Marie.

A nurse hurries through the door. She pushes Marie from the window. The nurse quickens the purple loosestrife’s medicine by an extra drip per minute. She peeks under the bandages and rushes back into the hall.

A chickadee picks at the apricot biscotti crumbs just outside the glass. It flaps from one end of the windowsill towards the middle, chirping merrily while eating. Edith flashes by and snatches it between her talons.

Marie flips to Clay Manor. She strolls up the walk. Gaspard Hobbes stands at the door already—with yet another letter. Gaspard peers behind himself.

“Hello,” says Gaspard Hobbes. “My name is Gaspard Hobbes.”

“I don’t remember you *either*. But I can take this from you.”

Marie snatches the tax letter from Gaspard’s hand. She steps past him into the house.

“That letter. It’s for Pallas Briefman,” Gaspard says.

“He’ll get it,” Marie Lévi-Bosko lies.

Gaspard gazes past Marie into the greeting room. James stands at the bottom of the staircase. The armour peels around his missing knuckles, the fissures taped-over with goatskins torn from Vincent’s books. His lesions blot his dressings blue. James wears a dinner jacket fashioned out of bandages over his forward end, his first six legs sheathed in sleeves. Shirt cuffs fluffy with wool. James’s collar buttons down, left side stained with leakage from where Ladidah peppered his face.

James scuttles closer, no slower for his missing fingers. A pocket watch inside his dinner jacket slings its chain. Although he has no eyes to read the time, he hears from Siobhan that time looks dapper. James looms behind Marie in the doorway. Sunlight from the clerestory windows glares off James’s body and, to Gaspard on the stoop, this seems as though Marie Lévi-Bosko wears a nimbus of a variety the angels carry.

“Well,” James tells the taxman. “Hello.”

“James,” says Gaspard Hobbes. “Nice to see you, finally—even if it took a couple strolls around the house to meet you.”

James points his face down at Marie. He says, “I’d say, ‘*He can see me? He is real?*’ I thought taxmen were just stories you and Flechette and Siobhan told me to trick me into—‘*what, exactly?*’ This makes three.”<sup>†</sup>

Marie Lévi-Bosko grips that letter tighter in her fist. Her knuckles clack. Arms shaking. Marie squints at Gaspard Hobbes—who stares back with a smile—and she says, again, “I don’t remember you *either*.”

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<sup>†</sup> James forgets to count a fishtailed girl who wandered in one Hallow’s Eve. That fishtailed girl hooked the library’s key out of the heat register and she crept into the reading room. Vincent sat in there, shaking his head while flipping through a version of *Clay Manor* Marie Lévi-Bosko wrote chapters and chapters ago.

“Hello,” said the fishtailed girl. “My name is Thalia.”

“Well,” said Vincent Clay. “Hello. My name is James,” he lied. He closed the goatskin and he put his book aside. The carpet scuffed with Vincent’s footsteps closer.

Thalia held out a letter. The letter winked at its corner, the paper crinkled with a stamp: Revenue’s red logo.

“‘James,’ you say,” said Thalia. “This letter is for you.” Instead of jotting “VINCENT CLAY”, or even “JAMES BRIAR”, on the letter, Thalia had drawn a picture of a centipede.

“Oh my,” said Vincent. “This is a very nice letter.” He kneeled and flipped the paper over in his hands and touched his fingers to the drawing. The knuckles on Thalia’s rendition of a centipede grew hairy. The colour of its body twinkled. A bit of glitter drifted to the carpet of the reading room.

“I drew that,” said Thalia. Thalia said, “What it means?”

“A very nice letter, *indeed*.”

Thalia said, “I’d say,” then she winked.

Vincent gripped the letter tighter. His arm shook. He imagined with one hand yanking the girl’s fishtail and with the other clutching her throat. Vincent narrowed his eyes at Thalia. He was unable to decide from her face if, when she looked at him, she saw James.

Flechette pitter pattered through the kitchen as they stood in silence. He peered into the reading room.

“Is it very, very still o’clock, or something,” asked the cat. Flechette reared up on his hind-ers and pretended to strangle himself. Flechette coughed out the word “Maybe.” He spat a hairball. “Perhaps.” The hairball slapped the floor and splashed. The phlegm yellow black.

Vincent snatched the library’s key out of Thalia’s hand. He shut the door with her behind it then twisted the key. Clatter went the key back under the heat register.

“Pallas Briefman,” Vincent told Flechette. “Mind the yard.”

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“Is ‘Thalia’ ‘Marie?’” one taxman asks another.

“Yes,” replies a second taxman. “Marie has many names inside *Clay Manor*. As does He Himself. As does Michael Yip.”

“Liar,” the first taxman answers. “If ‘Thalia’ were ‘Marie’ indeed, then Vincent wouldn’t have had to decide from her face if she saw James. Marie would *definitely* have seen Vincent but confused his name for ‘James’. And also, Marie doesn’t *have* a face.”

The first taxman in this footnote, of course, is Marie Lévi-Bosko.

Gaspard Hobbes steps off Clay Manor's doorstep. He strolls up the private driveway and he waits on the crescent road for a bus. He sits down on the bench and swings his feet. He clutches his briefcase against his chest and leans backwards to breathe.

"So he sees *James*?" Marie asks us. "But not *me*?" Is that not peculiar to you? Is that not storylike? And in that story, do things not seem to mean nothing? Is it not weirdo that we played some go-a-rounds with a detective in it earlier and now a 'real' detective visits Clay Manor?"

"Don't know what you're on about," says Ibid when Marie asks him this at teatime.

"Oh," says Marie Lévi-Bosko. "Something that I said to someone thirty minutes ago."

James is inside the duplex, of course, watching Marie have teatime with her neighbour. James clings to the wall with Marie's writing all across it. His moths flicker around the table, now and then dipping to steal a sip from Marie or Ibid's teacup.

Ibid stares, wide-eyed at the centipede but sees a mural. He says, "You've made some changes to it. I like the black and yellow."

James twitches. A curl of carapace over his back lifts and whitens. His armour loosens for the upcoming moult. Glassy scabs cap the places where his legs are missing. The dinner jacket, composed of goatskin, splits at the stitches where his knuckles fit against his body.

Ibid scratches at the spot where his prosthetic meets his flesh. He says, "I like the black and yellow changes you made to your wall a lot. The blue too."

## 22. Gaspard's Jamboree

To celebrate his payday for *Clay Manor* (from Revenue) Gaspard hosts a jamboree. He invites the other taxmen and their plus-ones over. Ladidah, Gaspard's detective girlfriend, swore she would hang at Gaspard's side throughout the party. But when He Himself (who founded Revenue) swallows bitter batter then keels over in the kitchen, Gaspard's jamboree turns into a mystery. Ladidah, the detective, lets go of Gaspard's hand from dancing. She steps forward.

A taxman dressed up as a sheriff shoves past Ladidah and struts onto the kitchen first, with a plastic badge clipped onto the pocket of her chaps.

"I was just upstairs," says the sheriff. She struts in with her legs apart because her chaps leave rashes. She says, "Upstairs in my uniform. My horse was upstairs with me. Now my horse is downstairs. If you want to see my horse."

The sheriff tips her gallons hat. Measuring lines on that hat count four.

"What are you doing?" Ladidah asks the taxman dressed in chaps. "You are not an actual investigator. Your horse is not a horse. You are in a bungalow. There is no upper storey."

Gaspard Hobbes steps backwards to the hallway. He joins his visitors, who have cleared the kitchen.

Between the taxmen and their plus-ones in the hallway stands P. Briefman. P. Briefman wears a horse costume. P. Briefman studies the artwork Gaspard Hobbes collects along his walls. Cubist puppets; a dog whose tongue stamps cobalt squares. A painted headache spills blue down crimson linen. Thirty-eight photos of cobblestones. Twin clocks tick side-by-side, one tuned half-an-hour slower than the other. The slower clock, P. Briefman thinks, must be someone like Marie.

P. Briefman wrings his tail together with the tail of his horse costume. He jumbled his horse costume together from leftover arts and crafts. The horse's back is cedar shingles. The horse's saddle: sod. A weathervane is horse's horn. The tail P. Briefman wrings against his own, a hose.

Gaspard's jamboree is a costume party. The theme of the jamboree: "*Clay Manor*".

The sheriff wearing chaps and gallons hat, of course, is Marie Lévi-Bosko. She brought P. Briefman to Gaspard's bungalow because Siobhan cancelled dinner plans. Siobhan, in any case, has no costume for costume parties anymore. Nor does Ladidah—but Ladidah buttons on her overcoat. She holsters her semi-automatic, the pepperbox strapped aside her boot. Ladidah dresses for the jamboree as Gaspard Hobbes's detective girlfriend.

Ladidah rushes past the sheriff in the kitchen. She stands between the sheriff and the body. She tells the sheriff, "No. *I* will solve the mystery."

The sheriff answers, "You are a witness to the mystery. You can't play both a witness and detective, that is cheating. Besides," the sheriff adds, "you are not an actual detective."

"Yes I am," says Ladidah. Ladidah leans over the body. She would crouch lower, but she cannot. The crotch of her detective trousers split while she was dancing. She didn't think that she would need them so she didn't put on her detective underoos. Instead she put the big ones on. The underoos that fit Gaspard.

He Himself (who founded Revenue) lies nude sideways. She showed up at Gaspard's jamboree dressed as the dead Chinese man from chapter sixteen.

"The sex is female," answers Ladidah. "Hmm. He Himself is a woman." Ladidah crosses her arms and nods.

Blotches of pink open on He Himself's face around the mouth. Some of this is makeup, but most of it is rashes. Slobber froths between the lips. The neck bloats with croak—like a toad's—but doesn't ribbit. One eyelid closes all the way but the other sits ajar. A contact lens folds off the iris. When she keeled over, He Himself knocked over the cheese. Crackers litter the kitchen floor. A broken bowl spills a spoon in bitter batter near He Himself's belly. Blades of meadow grass flavour that bitter batter green.

Many of the taxmen thought, when He Himself keeled over, that she was reenacting a scene from Gaspard's letter—*but she was not*. Many of these taxmen think, because this taxman dressed as Michael Yip has boobies and a cooter, that her name is not *actually* "He Himself"—*but it is*.

"The scene she reenacts is from *my* version of *Clay Manor*," says the sheriff. "Not from Gaspard's. Nor from Michael's." The sheriff nods her head at Ladidah. Her gallons hat tips low.

"She was allergic to the bitter batter," answers Ladidah. "Could not breathe."

One of He Himself's hands still clutches the knee.

Gaspard Hobbes pushes further backwards through the hallway. In the room for dancing, his assistant wears a tutu. The assistant feeds Gaspard's goat some cabbage. That goat's cashmere smells of sandalwood this close to skinning. A blindfold holds that goat's eyes cozy. The assistant cuddles that goat close and sighs, gently squeezing that goat's hoof. The assistant says, "Goodbye, sweet goat."

Several taxmen gather near P. Briefman inside Gaspard's hallway. They bicker as though He Himself hasn't broken character inside the kitchen. They ask P. Briefman, "What it means? Eats 'bambinos'? In the next letter, do you still?"



To which P. Briefman answers, “How do you mean ‘*next letter*’? I have paid my taxes. Is ‘next letter’ ‘dessert’? I have baked the bitter batter. My friend Marie has helped.”

The sheriff in the kitchen says, “ ‘He Himself’ is not italics. He Himself is not real.”

Ladidah crosses her hands behind her back, to hide the tear in her pants. “Who brought the bitter batter,” says Ladidah, “is whoever Marie Lévi-Bosko is. Marie Lévi-Bosko has killed He Himself. In order that tax letters no longer have to answer ‘*What it means?*’ ”

“And what it means?—that He Himself can’t handle bitter batter?” asks the sheriff.

“That He Himself (who founded Revenue) cannot look too close to answer ‘*What it means?*’ ‘The machine evicts him,’ so to speak,” says Ladidah.

Taxmen dressed as medical technicians join Ladidah, the sheriff, and the body in the kitchen. The first technician puts his thumb on the body’s neck. The technician says, “We’ll have to romance her,” and he dips his head. He blows He Himself a kiss. That kiss croaks back out from her throat with a ribbit.

The other technician kneels on the floor and rubs He Himself’s boobies. She twists the nipples.

“She stinks,” says the technician blowing kisses.

“What this is?” asks the technician rubbing bosom.

“What are you two doing?” Ladidah asks the technicians. “You are not actual technicians.”

“She was allergic,” answers the sheriff. The sheriff, who now stands at the snacking table, sucks the pimiento from an olive. She points to Ladidah and says, “That’s the witness.”

“No,” says the technician rubbing He Himself’s bosom. “What *this* is?”

The technician nods at the broken bowl of bitter batter.

“Was sourdough,” answers the sheriff. “Now grows fungus.”

The technicians stuff the body in a sleeping bag and heave it to their shoulders. The one technician dips a finger in the bitter batter. “It’s fantastic,” she says with that finger in her mouth.

Ladidah chases those technicians out the door.

“What are you doing?” she says “What are you doing?”

“I guess we really *can*’t fool you, detective,” the sheriff calls out from the kitchen—*but she already has, and will. Always does.*

The split in Ladidah’s detective trousers climbs up her left buttock. Stitches on the right from the only other chance she ever had to teach Gaspard dancing.

Gaspard Hobbes creeps backwards all the way into his study. Backwards because he ripped his pants down the middle too, while dancing. Before the jamboree, he put on the little panties, the detective underoos that fit Ladidah. Through the rip in Gaspard’s pants, we can see his ham. Gaspard sits down in his study. Shuts the door. He starts writing.

He jots down: *The strangle road swings its traffic around Calgary. Twelve lanes wide in both directions at its thickest.*

### 23. Missus Quits Eating

Siobhan wonders whether she can feel the copper T shoved back inside her or if that flutter is just worry. Maybe James's baby twitches in her belly already. Perhaps her IUD won't smite the child ever. Siobhan thinks, Hopefully, I carry low. Siobhan thinks, What if James's mini wears armour harder than copper?

Siobhan has learned, from Marie, that babies poop "meconium" while inside the womb.

Siobhan stops short on the crescent road. Her book bag crashes off the seat and shatter go the crystals that she borrowed. Edith jumps out from the back and flaps onto the sidewalk.

"Follow me."

Edith hops down McHugh Bluff in a rush.

Siobhan returns the shattered crystals to the cupboard in Clay Manor. Some pieces still stand on their own. Others only sparkle. Siobhan hosts half as often as she wants—not even. It seems every time she plans her parties, P. Briefman plans his too. And every time P. Briefman throws a shindig, Siobhan returns his crystals. The pieces sharp as spears now over the kitchen counter.

Marie Lévi-Bosko clutters the kitchen with fresh fruits and produce. A halved apple in the compost bucket smells of vinegar and grows a yolk inside it.

"Nothing in the fridge," complains Marie. "Nothing in the garden." Marie stirs the compote in a frying pan and lines the pies inside the oven. "Excuse me," Marie tells Siobhan while reaching over. "Each time Pussy throws a shindig, it's me that does the cooking. Did you know that Pussy's actually busted his refrigerator? Listen to the motor hiss and whisper."

In another oven, Marie's spice cake stinks of ginger. A trifle soaked in strawberries and bitters sits already on the dining table. James Briar clatters on the ceiling. He sorts cutlery

between his knuckles. Blue scabs over his fissures crack with patterns of spider webs as windows do when they fracture. His missing hand of knuckles leaves him twenty-seven feet to grip the ceiling with. Spider mites inside his mouth weave their nest thicker; a tattered beard to go with James's great moustache. James scuttles above the kitchen, jingling the silverware, and he creeps into the yard. His moths billow after.

Behind Clay Manor, P. Briefman teaches Ouaknin to eat mosquitoes.

"Mind the yard," the big cat tells the littler. "Let them taste you first."

Ouaknin licks a mosquito off his paw and swallows. Today the kitten's pompadour rises higher than ever and he looks more and more like his father small.

P. Briefman licks the kitten's withers free of insects. Blood stokes those mosquitoes each as shiny as a pomegranate seed. The snack tastes more of cat than skeeter. "Not quite ripe," P. Briefman says. "Little longer."

Ouaknin licks a mosquito off his father and says "Meow."

The cats duck under James into the kitchen to chase their blood with sugar.

"Have you seen my other bambino?" P. Briefman asks Marie.

"Ask Siobhan. I'm busy. Very."

Siobhan says, "Neither me."

P. Briefman sniffs into the compost and he munches on that rotted apple. He passes one half to Ouaknin. The broken crystals inside Siobhan's book bag shift and tinker. P. Briefman flicks his ears up.

"Oh," P. Briefman says. A line of slivers smirks inside the cupboard. Siobhan holds a fractured goblet. P. Briefman blinks twice. He chews his half apple. He says, "Least you've cleaned them."

Three mosquitoes, at least, chase P. Briefman and Ouaknin to the greeting room. The cats steal a plate of ginger snaps.

The refrigerator hisses. Psst.

The refrigerator whispers, "I'm inside the refrigerator."

Siobhan tugs open the door. Theophilus, P. Briefman's bambino who can speak, cowers inside with terror of his father. Siobhan lifts the kitten off the shelf and clutches him against her bosom. Theophilus has shit in the corner furthest from the light so when Siobhan at first smells the feces but can't see them she thinks that another item in the fridge has spoiled. Theophilus's haunches smear across her blouse.

"What were you doing in there?" asks Siobhan. She wipes Theophilus with a paper towel. The kitten swipes and scratches her. He jumps from her arms and streaks into the yard.

"James!" says Theophilus. "James!" The little cat runs to the shock of conifers where the centipede coils up the bark and feeds his moths to dragonflies.

"What was he doing in the fridge?" Siobhan asks Marie.

"Very," Marie answers. "Ask Pussy." Marie smashes needles from James's shock of spruce with a mortar and a pestle. Powder at the bottom of the stone is blue, Marie having harvested only the freshest fingers. She dribbles in a spit of vinegar. She thumbs salt across the mortar's edge and sits the stone onto a steamer. Instead of water, she boils milk. Marie is following the recipe for Ashley's ricotta tiramisu.

Siobhan carries her book bag to the greeting room. Besides the crystal, she wants to return some goatskin. Usually, the cat opens the library, even though Siobhan knows where he hides the key.

“Hello?” Siobhan says. P. Briefman and Ouaknin play at the bottom of the staircase. Siobhan asks, “What was Theophilus doing in the fridge?”

The bigger cat stands over the littler. The littler on his back. P. Briefman dips his head to his son’s belly and he licks a mosquito off Ouaknin’s testicles. The insect squishes open, littler’s blood stains the bigger’s mouth. P. Briefman breathes in through his teeth. “Not ripe,” says P. Briefman. “Little longer.” The bigger cat pinches another mosquito onto Ouaknin’s testes. The insect sips and sips.

“Little longer,” says P. Briefman. “Little yet.”

Ouaknin kicks and flinches. P. Briefman pins him down.

Siobhan creeps to the library by her lonesome. The key hangs from a chord of dental floss underneath the heat register. Siobhan unlocks the reading room. Footsteps count to three inside the adjoining library. Muffled breathing. Scuffs the carpet.

“Hello?” says Siobhan. Behind the bookshelves, low on the wall, an extra shadow slides between the shadows of the goatskins.

“Shindiggers aren’t allowed in here,” Siobhan says.

Siobhan carries her book bag through the reading room. She gazes one way down the library then the other. Bookshelves. Somebody has flipped forward through the ledger to an entry written in letters other than kitten scratch. The title of this new entry is *Clay Manor to James*.

Siobhan calls through the library. “Hello?”

From the other side of the goatskins, footsteps answer, “James.”

“Siobhan,” Siobhan says. “James is in the yard.”

The library quiets. A snowflake scribbles cold from one bookshelf to another. The windows inch ajar. In blows a sudden cold snap. Confetti twinkles at the ceiling but won't fall down. Amidst the tiny geometries floats a *loves-me-not*. The reading room slams its door. Windows close. Snowflakes melt into the carpet.

The fishtailed girl from a footnote earlier inside *Clay Manor* taps on Siobhan's shoulder from behind. Siobhan turns around.

"Have you noticed what at first *This Letter* called 'books' now it calls 'goatskins'?" asks the fishtailed girl. "What it means?"

"Marie?" Siobhan leans down and rests her hand on that girl's shoulder. The girl wrings her braid. She frowns to one side of the library then scowls at the carpet. Her dark eyes match Siobhan's. The skin on her arms marbles likewise with a shiver. The fishtailed girl's breath smells of lemon. Though this girl is young, Siobhan figures by that downwards scowl that this girl turns bitter already.

"Marie?" Siobhan asks again. "One day you won't be allowed in here."

"I'm Thalia. Marie knows me. I have to speak with James."

"Okay," answers Siobhan. "I'll let James know."

Siobhan shelves her goatskins where they belong while the fishtailed girl watches. Siobhan strikes the returned titles off P. Briefman's ledger. The fishtailed girl inside the library waves goodbye when Siobhan locks her inside.

Siobhan says, "Goodbye yourself, *Marie*," and thinks this is not weirdo.

P. Briefman still lolls on his stomach in the greeting room.

"Aeolus," says Siobhan. "What was Theophilus doing in the fridge?"

“So he would ripen better,” P. Briefman answers. Ouaknin plays in the dust half-way up the staircase.

“You put him in the fridge?”

“So he would ripen better.”

Siobhan swings her book bag against P. Briefman’s face. The book bag slaps against his nose, where his bones are granite rigid. P. Briefman sneezes. Siobhan clenches a fist and bonks P. Briefman on the crown.

P. Briefman blinks his mismatched peepers. He sneezes again before he realizes that Siobhan has struck him, however lightly. His teeth glisten in his snarl. He rises to his fours. The talons squeeze out from their sheaths. P. Briefman arches his back high as Siobhan’s chin. The fleece on-end reveals the antlers branching underneath his pompadour. A spurt of steam shoots backwards from P. Briefman’s penis.

A porous gland inside P. Briefman’s throat stokes with glow. He coughs—so hot Siobhan flinches—then he softens his grimace. He shuts his mouth and sniffs the air near Siobhan’s crotch.

A flutter inside stops Siobhan’s clock. By the smell of baby, P. Briefman knows to play gently.

The big cat lumbers backwards and lolls back onto his belly. He licks his wrist, smooths his whiskers. He shakes loose his mane then sniffs the air as if to say “I own this place.”

“You’ll show up to my shindig then?” P. Briefman says. “And drink from crystal?”

“If you say so,” Siobhan lies.

Later at the shock of conifers, Siobhan tells James, “A Marie in the reading room would like to speak with you.”



“That’s Thalia,” says James. “And actually she waits for Vincent. What she means when she says ‘James’ is ‘Vincent’. And when she looks to Vincent she sees me. When *I* talk to Thalia, I tell her, ‘Shindiggers are not allowed in here.’ ”

Dragonflies click and snip through James’s moths. The quicker insects tear asunder the slower. Loose wings flicker to the ground around the conifers where, it seems, the snow falls thicker.

Theophilus studies under the trees. That stuffed, pink elephant doll James brought home from the cemetery holds a brand new greeting card. Theophilus tilts his head at the letters. The card reads “FLECHETTE WILL EAT ME” but Theophilus has yet to learn the words.

“We’ll meet you at the shindig, then?” says James. The centipede then answers himself, “No. You’re leaving.”

## 24. *Diabolus ex Domus*

P. Briefman hires himself by the hour. A job as security at his own shindig. He pays himself one hundred chuckles an o'clock. He fits tightly inside his tuxedo. Seashells at his chest and shoulders wrinkle the edges of their buttonholes and his cuff links cinch brightly. He loops his Windsor knot against his collar. He thinks: My own master.

A chain shackles P. Briefman's lapel to his breast pocket. Although no pocket watch weighs that chain, P. Briefman has heard, from James, that chains are dapper.

P. Briefman combs his mane. At the door, "Paintings please," he tells his visitors. "Sign in. Your name on the line. I call myself P. Briefman. What do you call you? Please hand in your finger paintings."

P. Briefman licks his cup of coffee. He paws shut Clay Manor's door against the cold snap. Already by noon he's asked one riffraff to bring their swearwords out into the snow. The sour part of hosting shindigs is turning guests away.

The cold snap sneaks a snowflake through Clay Manor's letter slot. P. Briefman stomps that tiny geometry into droplets.

"A real brawly security," P. Briefman tells that snowflake. "A real brawly indeed."

Muscles in P. Briefman's neck and stompers tense up with his pompousness.

A scuffle breaks out in Clay Manor's kitchen. One shindigger wears a hospital gown backwards and open at his dick. A metal collar braces his head straight. This shindigger, of course, is the dead Chinese man; he who snapped his neck and stopped moving at another shindig.

The dead Chinese man throws his espresso. The mug splits into snowflakes on the barista's forehead. The barista falls onto the kitchen floor. P. Briefman wanted to invite that

barista upstairs for a sleepover. That barista dyes her hair, but no one knows, because brown.

The hair, naturally, is blue, the barista whispered to P. Briefman earlier.

The dead Chinese man sweeps all the crystals off the counter. The jingle is of war music.

“Well,” says the dead Chinese man. “Fuck.”

The barista climbs back to her feet. She clutches at her headache. Cherry juices from her brain squirt out between the fingers.

“Well already,” says the dead Chinese man. “Fuck.”

Shindiggers in the kitchen furrow their brows at P. Briefman in the greeting room.

Trapeze artists in the upstairs corridor stop their swing to lean over for ganders. Music from the bedrooms dials down. Drinkers still their crystals. Fire dancers quit their fling. Even James, who hides on the ceiling in the dining room, swings his armour lower and motions for P. Briefman to address the riffraff.

“Who let him back in?” says the centipede. “Did you not have him write the name down? What happened last time—remember?” The centipede says, “Flechette.” The centipede leans towards the dead Chinese man scuffling. He points with his knuckles to the kitchen. “Get rid of him,” says James.

P. Briefman licks his coffee. He tiptoes to the kitchen where he bought his coffee for a chuckle. The coffee cup was Ashley’s and so is spun from clay with dinosaurs painted across it. He nudges his way through the quiet partiers.

P. Briefman presses his paw firmly on the dead Chinese man’s shoulder.

“Hello,” P. Briefman tells the dead Chinese man. “How are you today?” P. Briefman taps the dead Chinese man’s metal collar and he says, “A shiny dress code is a good dress code. Dapper,” say P. Briefman. “Classy.”

The dead Chinese man turns his whole body to raise his eyebrows at P. Briefman. He bows his head to look P. Briefman up and down. In one hand, the dead Chinese man holds a slice of cake on a paper towel. The slice of cake has lost its cherry. The dead Chinese man's uncut dingle hangs limp under his open gown.

P. Briefman's widens his eyes as the dead Chinese man strangles his cake slice to goop inside his grip. The whipping cream begins to drip.

The dead Chinese man shrugs then raises his eyebrows at P. Briefman again.

"Well?" asks the dead Chinese man. "Fuck?" The dead Chinese man shakes his head and shoulders. The screws of his neck brace attach the contraption to his collarbones.

P. Briefman's nametag reads "BRAWLY SECURITY", the barista's "BARISTA". The dead Chinese man wears no nametag but because he signed his name on a finger painting of "T-REXORS" that hangs in the greeting room the other shidiggers have named him "Michael Yip".

"Do you know why I lick my coffee next to you instead of by the door where 'My own master' says to lick my coffee at all times?" P. Briefman asks the dead Chinese man. P. Briefman licks his coffee again.

Several shindiggers help the barista clutch her blood into the one-and-one-half bathroom. P. Briefman thinks, Perhaps I need a different girl to play the overnighter now.

The dead Chinese man pinches the strings of his gown. He wiggles his toes in his slippers. He squeezes that cake slice further to goop. The muscles and the veins in his arms strain. He tippy-toes then lowers himself back onto his heels. P. Briefman's paw rides up and then down on his shoulder.

The dead Chinese man's dick swells half-erect.

The dead Chinese man says, "Well? Fu—"

“I’m here to talk about language,” says P. Briefman. “Yours.” P. Briefman licks his coffee. The barista’s blood drops on the floor clot into letters “O”.

“Your sentences smell awful,” says the dead Chinese man.

“My breath might smell coffee, Michael,” says P. Briefman, “but your neck smells coffee too. Scary.” P. Briefman points to the dead Chinese man’s cake slice and his dick. P. Briefman says, “Other shindiggers have their own stink to think about. Spider mites. A whole month’s swelly. Bullet holes. Chancres. A blister of the brain smells far more coffee than a neck sore—but you are the only one who’s swearing. We don’t have to listen to your language here. Your language belongs outside Clay Manor, in the cold snap.”

P. Briefman steps on the dead Chinese man’s broken espresso. Pieces of the coffee cup shatter into smaller snowflakes under P. Briefman’s stomper. P. Briefman tilts his nametag so the dead Chinese man can read it better. “BRAWLY SECURITY”.

“I do not remember cussing,” says the dead Chinese man. The cake slice he squishes drips more whipping cream. “I do not remember throwing coffee nor gripping my cake to goop.”

“Does not remember what you matter,” P. Briefman stammers. Veins and muscles down the dead Chinese man’s arms strain tighter. The dead Chinese man’s dick swells harder. P. Briefman lifts his paw from the dead Chinese man’s shoulder.

“The whipping cream is dripped,” P. Briefman sighs. “The coffee cup is smaller snowflakes. The language is put to letters, so to speak. The door is at the greeting room. Or do you want that detective to come over and look at you again?”

“Well?” The dead Chinese man says, “Fuck.”

P. Briefman winces at the word.

“Language,” says P. Briefman. “Enough of it.”

The dead Chinese man leans close and he says, “Well? Fu—”

P. Briefman shoves the dead Chinese man’s shoulder. The dead Chinese man doesn’t budge. Instead the dead Chinese man says “I want a shindig. A party,” so P. Briefman clutches him around the chest and drags him through the shindig. The dead Chinese man falls limp in P. Briefman’s mauler so P. Briefman sets his coffee on the floor and carries the dead Chinese man overhead and out the door. The dead Chinese’s man’s slippers fall off on the doorstep. P. Briefman throws him into the snow.

“Mind the yard,” P. Briefman says. To mind the yard he shoos the riffraff. He thinks: My own master.

P. Briefman watches the dead Chinese man lay face down on the cold snap. The skin wears bruises in the snow. The dead Chinese man rolls over on his back, his dick frozen rigid, now five-and-one-half inches erect. The dead Chinese man smiles. “Ha,” he says. The metal collar props his smile wide.

“Language,” says P. Briefman.

P. Briefman clanks the door chain behind him. “Mind the yard,” he says, and so music from the bedrooms dials up. Trapeze artists swings over the greeting room. The chandelier joins with a squeak. Marie Lévi-Bosko tells a story in the eastern wing about a sheriff at a jamboree. James Briar filches dessert from the dining table unnoticed and P. Briefman steps into Clay Manor’s kitchen. He stands at the counter, behind the espresso machine.

P. Briefman hires himself for a new job in his shindig. He draws himself another nametag. This one spells out “BRAWLY COFFEE”.

“Another bitters?” asks P. Briefman. “Tea?—with crème liquor or cream? A coffee?—please with cherry. Biscotti? No more cookies. Mind the yard. My own master.”

P. Briefman strokes his mutton chops. His tuxedo wrinkles most when he poses akimbo. He rolls up his sleeves for Lindy Hop when shindiggers stroll down the spiral staircase, smelling ready for dancing.

P. Briefman wonders, if the barista wakes up from her headache, maybe then he'll ask her upstairs for a sleepover. P. Briefman thinks maybe, when that dead Chinese man said "I want a shindig. A party", what he meant to say was, "I want *my own* shindig. *My own* party."

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Of course—*such poetry*.

Meanwhile: Theophilus, P. Briefman's bambino who speaks our language, wanders lost along the crescent road. The cold snap has put the dragonflies to sleep; without their twinkle, Theophilus can't find the house. The little cat blends in with the blizzard, his pitter patter slow. His paws bleed with frost bite and the wind freezes his eyelids tight. Theophilus sniffs for the smell of baking but the chill shoves his nose full of snow.

Theophilus lies down in the cold snap. He cries for help. He cries out "James."

The cold snap cooks Theophilus to a brittle. Hard down to the heart, which splinters.

## 25. a Sunny Solstice, a July Deadline

Marie Lévi-Bosko looks eastward for chapter breaks. Westward come revisions. She digs the trench between the conifers a month beforehand. To ready Clay Manor for Vincent.

“James moults early,” says Marie. “You’ll see.”

She breaks to stretch the tendonitis from her fingers with an elastic band wrapped round her knuckles. She rolls crackles from her wrist. The sunhat stops the sweat from dripping but the nape of her neck glitters wet. A rash sponges up the moisture underneath her arms. Her crotch smells of garden freshly watered. The scar beside her mouth rises with hives and itches.

“I figure,” says Marie, “July twenty, if not more early. Flip ahead, for yourself. James moults. Vincent comes back.”

Slush from the cold snap mucks her digging. Marie stomps her shovel hard. The dirt sloshes in globs. Here the mud reeks of pine trees. There the dirt stinks of years-old garbage bags piled on each underneath the conifers. Marie Lévi-Bosko splits the worm. Both halves knot themselves, their frayed ends bleeding.

In Marie’s version of this chapter, Ashley Clay is out of bed. Ashley grabs a second shovel but she doesn’t help to dig. Instead she tells Marie she should not have split that worm. Or, at least if it was an accident, to bid that worm “I’m sorry.”

“July is early,” Marie Lévi-Bosko says. She stomps her shovel harder. She flips over, to the infirmary, and says to Ashley that July is early.

“Your boots are messy,” Ashley says from underneath her blanket. Ashley’s bladder empties ruddiness into a transparent purse at the bed’s foot. A tadpole made of blood clots wiggles from the bottom of that purse up.

“How’s your potbelly?” asks Marie. “What do they feed you?”



“Never sweet enough,” Ashley says. “Blow a raspberry for me, please.”

“If that’s your idea of good time you need to stop having a good time, Ashley.”

“How is James?”

“Twenty-seven.”

“And Siobhan?”

“I’m sorry.”

“ ‘Sorry’?”

“About that worm,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

And Ashley Clay answers, “What worm?”

Dirt and slush from Marie’s boots mixes its messy recipe. Pine needles scatter on the tiles.

“Smells nice,” says Ashley. “Have I ever told you about how I once snuck my own food into the theatre? All I had to do was look very closely at what characters on screen were eating.”

“The worm I sliced behind the garden,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko. Marie takes off her sunhat. Her forearms pump with blood, that shovel dug through her whole morning.

“Looks nice,” says Ashley. “Have I ever told you that I would sit in my greeting room so I could watch you step down my driveway?”

“Yes.” Marie Lévi-Bosko nods her head. She blinks her eyes, hard, and grins. “I read ahead, remember?” she tells Ashley.

Marie flips back into the conifers. The July deadline creeps. Dragonflies shiver in the needles, waiting for the brighter weather. Their wings tick. Their heads pivot. Marie grips the fingers of one hand with the other and she flexes the knuckles back. She picks off the roughened skin. She stabs the ground again. Another worm.

“Stop that,” she tells us. A doozy, she thinks, that the ending of this novel is as much a lulu as the start. Vincent comes, she remembers. All along he does.

Michael has another beastly in him, thinks Marie. Penny plenty. He can even spare a kitty to leave out in the flurries.

Apart from digging one month early, Marie Lévi-Bosko flips onto the patio opposite her duplex to celebrate the sunny solstice. She sips tea with her neighbour, Ibid, who flaunts his shiniest prosthesis. The knee gleams in the heat. Red shoes double-knot on both his feet, his jogging shorts too loose on the skinny side. He blushes when Marie slides her chair closer and whispers that, before they leave, she is going to squeeze his hammy.

Ibid is too timid to finish his burrito. He doesn't want the guacamole or the sour cream to leak. He rolls his burrito in his hands and nibbles at the rice and beans. Every time burrito sauce wipes against his teeth he puts down his lunch and dabs his mouth with his napkin.

“My burrito is too spicy,” Ibid tells Marie. “I don't want it to leak. I don't want you to see. I prefer that I eat something sweet.”

Ibid dabs his forehead with his napkin now. The burrito sauce leaves him sweaty.

Marie fiddles with that elastic band. She stretches her neck to one side then the other, bonking her head gently against Ibid's. The sunny solstice crooks a tan-line inside Ibid's elbow as it does Marie's. Ibid blushes again when she squeezes his knee.

“Could we finish tea already?” says Marie. “I'm feeling ‘between the trees’. Hairy dreams. I'd like to visit Ashley this evening. Did you know my daughter's leaving?”

“‘Hairy dreams’? You? *A daughter*?” answers Ibid.

When they get home, Marie orders Ibid to climb onto her bed sheets with that burrito and to eat it while she sleeps. The guacamole and the sour cream puddle on his stomach. Ibid slips

off his shirt. “It’s too spicy,” Ibid says. “Too spicy. Help me.” Marie has a lick off his belly. Sweat stains from the behind of his head and legs yellow Marie’s pillow and beddings.

“I don’t mind the guacamole. I don’t mind the sour cream.” Marie flips back to the infirmary and tells Ashley how Ibid is too shy to eat. Ashley laughs when Marie says how much of a mess he made of her sleep.

“He didn’t even know you had a daughter?” Ashley asks. “What have you told him about me?”

And Marie Lévi-Bosko says, “Nothing.”

Marie kneads the heavy strudel. Ashley’s arm has grown boney. The fingers turn purple when Marie squeezes the wrist. Nurses say that Ashley doesn’t feel the hands directly but her body will signal to her brain to flood itself with oxytocin. They say that during, Marie should tell Ashley what she’s doing.

“I’ve just tooted,” says Marie. Marie rubs her hands up and down Ashley’s belly. “Can you smell it?”

“Have I ever told you how I snuck my own food into the theatre once? I snuck it underneath my poncho. You came with me. Apricot biscotti. Two cookies each. Have you brought me recipes, Marie?”

“I have brought you recipes.” Marie rubs Ashley’s hand. The nurses pulled the needle out when Ashley said Marie would want to touch her fingers. A big poster hangs from the ceiling. Two cups flower, reads the poster. Two cups dirt. The recipe, of course, is Ashley’s ages-old sourdough.

The purple loosestrife at the window, which in May was wilting, now stands taller. The *loves-me-nots* no longer falling. Bandages still wrap the stalks, though, where the nurses fed that loosestrife medicine.

“My back hurts,” says Marie. “All that digging.”

“When Vincent gets here, could you ask him to visit me?”

Marie says, “Want to look-see the recipe?—and give my back a break?”

Marie sets a tablecloth on Ashley’s over-the-bed table. A bowl and saucer. Ashley reads the slip of paper and the bowl bubbles with sugar water.

“I forgot the spoon,” says Marie.

“Just pour it.”

“How’s that?”

“*Too* sweet.”

“That’s what I should tell Vincent.”

“ ‘Too sweet’?” asks Ashley.

“Too sweet,” says Marie.

Willow patterns on the bowl wrap the sugar water in a blue centipede of flowers.

Marie Lévi-Bosko flips back to the conifers. “Too sweet,” she says to herself. She lifts her shovel. She twists from side to side and stretches her ribs. Chop goes the earth under the blade of her shovel. The metal rattles on a pebble buried just inside the soil. Marie has quit looking too closely for worms.

P. Briefman sulks into the conifers. He carries a knot of white fluff in his mouth: the body of Theophilus, his bambino who could speak but who died in the cold snap. P. Briefman lays his child gently on the ground and nudges him. He sniffs the bambino’s open mouth.

“Marie?” says P. Briefman. “Can this be? Can this be? Marie?”

P. Briefman gnawed the meat off Theophilus’s paw when he first found him on the crescent road. Tendons still hold on the carpal bones. The littler kitten’s talons chewed by his father loose. Frostbite sapped all fat and juices from the kitten’s body when it killed him, so Theophilus already tastes dusty.

“Yuck,” P. Briefman says. “Ick. Marie? Can this be? Take me to Ashley.”

P. Briefman licks his bambino’s head and grooms the tiny bouffant clean.

“Tastes bad,” he says. “Why?”

“*Michael* killed him,” says Marie. “Left him out to freeze.”

“Can you flip backwards to save him?” P. Briefman pleads. “Can you flip backwards? Please?”

“Westward,” Marie mumbles. “Can I flip *westward*. Please.”

Marie chops the earth again with her shovel. “James moults early,” she says while P. Briefman cradles his bambino to the kitchen. “July. You’ll see.”

Marie wishes that she stepped on that deadline now. She can’t wait to hear the dragonflies glitter in their swarm again. She has to dig the trench, she thinks. Beforehand. To ready Clay Manor for Vincent.

## 26. Teeters the Tour Guide

Readers march across the crescent road with goatskins cut from Revenue's letter press. The words *Clay Manor* stamp across the cover pages in a purple shade of loosestrife, "GASPARD HOBBS" embossed under the title. Blood and goat stubble on the vellum warms to touch. Sticky, fresh ink smells of salt and sandalwood. Illustrations of the door chain, clerestory windows, and the mini-organ furnish whitespace between chapters.

A tour guide shepherds the march down Clay Manor's private driveway. "Early in the novel," says the tour guide, "the gravel ices over in the winter' so Siobhan tiptoes through the footprints of others." As she goes, the tour guide stomps her scuff. The gravel tumbles. A hodgepodge of rolling pebbles grows ahead of her. The readers march single column through their tour guide's footprints.

Many of the readers patch themselves in checkered shirtdresses. Some such and sunhats. One reader shoulders a birdcage—thinner and taller than Siobhan's with the chiffon custom-tailored. A stuffed, mauve raven doll inside the chiffon wears a nametag "EDITH". The reader underneath the birdcage flips through her goatskin and mouths the quote "A beard. A squid."

The tour guide cranks a jingle box and lifts the music, mashing her own tunes with noises from Clay Manor. The tour guide points out Clay Manor's eastern wing. "Where," she says, "the cat fixed his mini-organ, finally, in May."

The tour guide points out the clerestory. "Where," she says, "the cat dumped tar onto the garden."

The readers gather at the private driveway's base. Two police cruisers hound the streets under the bluff; one parked, the other sweeping blue-red lights across the avenues and roaming.

“Follow-up,” says the tour guide. She flips to June, in her goatskin. “Policemen wolf around for evidence of mystery ever since the incidents in the middle chapters.”

Inside Clay Manor’s greeting room, a woman in a sunhat wipes her boots on the welcome mat. The woman in the sunhat leans a muddy shovel against the wall. She wipes her face and scratches at the reddened blotch beside her mouth. “I like my ending better,” the woman in the sunhat says to no one. “In my version, that tour guide is me.” She glances backwards at the readers and she latches shut the door chain. The door slams out the readers’ view but nonetheless inches ajar after a moment. The woman in the sunhat peers out from inside.

“She ‘clinks the clank shut’,” two readers quote from their goatskins together. They slap each other’s high hands.

“What it means?” another reader asks the tour guide. “ ‘Clay Manor clinks the chain’.”

The tour guide answers, “Means us readers have to wander back.”

Around the eastern wing the readers tap the plastic with their knuckles. They flip to section three inside their goatskins and the tour guide reads aloud “*Ashley melted all the glass inside Clay Manor while baking dessert.*”

“Does it not make more sense,” suggests one reader, “that Ashley built Clay Manor without glass so she could throw a stone wherever?”

“Perhaps,” says the tour guide. “But we point at the goatskin and the goatskin tells us ‘*while baking dessert*’.”

The readers altogether lean towards Clay Manor’s windows.

A soot-coloured cat hiccups in the kitchen. It turns on all the ovens. Slabs of meat sizzle in the frying pans, each slathered with different dressings. Bean shoots tangle with baby peas, stolen just now from the co-op garden, on the kitchen counter. Wigglers tangle in the dirty roots.

The fridge and freezer doors hang open. “The recipes say charbroiled but umami tells me flavour lies,” the cat tells himself. The cat says, “Do we even have appendices? Perhaps only if spelled from letters.” The cat slants his mismatched gold and umber peepers at the eavesdroppers outside and he freezes. Coils in his hairdo straighten on their own. His ears flatten against the skull. Hiccups heave his withers as he ogles back the readers. His cooking in the frying pans and ovens starts to burn. The kitchen darkens, smells of fire.

“One’s own kiddos,” says the tour guide.

Several readers hurry to the yard. They circle some tinders on the sure spot for a gazebo. Hot spots in the tinders smoulder with embers. The embers cough and pop with ashes.

“This is where Siobhan played snap-dragon,” the reader with the birdcage and the stuffed, mauve raven doll remembers. The reader drops a marble on the tinders and she quotes the goatskin. “The shape of her mouth gave her the upper-hand.”

A pair of constables in uniform join the readers in the yard.

“Over here,” says the tour guide. She flips back to section one, “is where Flechette unfolds the rhombi. Red and grey.” She aims music from her jingle box across the lawn.

“Over here,” says one constable to the other. He flips forward in his notes, “is where the detective discharged her pistol then her pepperbox.” He points to the shock of conifers.

The tour guide and the constables trade winks. They step to opposite ends of the yard while readers scatter in between.

One reader brings his goatskin up the staircase from Clay Manor’s garden to its roof. He creeps along the shingles, reading, and he peeks into the chimney. He drops down a “Hello?” The hello echoes down the flue. “Well.”



“Stairs from roof to loosestrife? There’s no stairs from roof to loosestrife.” The tour guide glances over in time to watch that staircase coil through the yard. The steps and balusters clatter, uprooting lumps of grass while they spiral up the bluff. The staircase whispers, “Why hide me”, as it passes. Wormways splinter places in the staircase’s varnished wood. The steps and balusters burrow underneath the crescent road.

A pickup truck hauls a birdcage to a stop above Clay Manor. Siobhan steps from the driver’s seat. She lifts the birdcage to one shoulder and she lugs it down the driveway with a book bag in her other hand. The wedding gown around the birdcage no longer white but vellum. The raven under screaming. “Follow me.”

Siobhan steps in the footprints that the readers scuffed into the gravel earlier.

“Look,” the tour guide says. “It is Siobhan the hero. Birdcage shouldered. Books in hand. How strong *is* she?” Music from the tour guide’s jingle box flattens. The tour guide cranks the handle.

The tour guide calls out, “Siobhan. Siobhan. When is the next shindig? When is the next shindig? Siobhan.”

“This is not the shindig?” asks Siobhan. “You are not the partiers?”

Readers flip their goatskins. Sections four crisp as wafer. A description of Siobhan’s silver nugget earrings shines beside her tangled crop cup. Freckles to show at undone buttons. Her face heart-shaped with wider nose—like Vincent, after the father, so she’s told. A black spot, just as in the story, sits in Siobhan’s dimple.

That reader who shoulders her own birdcage meets Siobhan around the eastern wing. Siobhan looks the reader over. The reader’s shirtdress is not indigo but black and white. The dark spot in the reader’s dimple drawn with marker. Inflammation, an infection maybe,

overcooks the reader's ears around her piercings. The whole conch throbs red. Crusts of blood flake under the silver. Tattooed letters on her forearm read: *Just some random first name 'He.'*

The reader says to Siobhan, "A beard. A squid."

Siobhan scrunches up her face in wonder. "'What?'" asks Edith. "And 'What?'"

The stuffed, mauve raven doll in that reader's birdcage with the nametag "EDITH" doesn't answer. The reader with that birdcage on her shoulder straightens out her smile. Where the reader's tailored chiffon holds on tight, Siobhan's wedding gown rustles at its tatters.

Siobhan's skin darkens unevenly in summer. She stripes. The swirls over her body are called Blaschko's lines and nearest to an explanation from science is that they map cellular divisions during the change from embryo to fetus in humans. Siobhan's stripes are visible in sunlight because she started as two embryos inside the womb and fused together. Her tanner parts are from the embryo that took after her father, so she's told. Siobhan's face darkens in patches and at its most tanned resembles a calico.

"You're many-coloured?" The tour guide steps over. "I had no idea," she says. That jingle box quits its tune while the tour guide fumbles through her goatskin. The tour guide says, "That is quite the backstory to hide about a hero."

"'Hero'? I'm not—" Siobhan says, "The hero is . . ." She thinks for a moment, shifts the weight of her birdcage and grips her book bag tighter, then says, ". . . Vincent. Vincent is the hero."

The tour guide fumbles back and forth some more through her goatskin. The tour guide's bookmark is a title page torn from a different goatskin. Gears inside the tour guide's jingle box are rusted.

“You sure that this is not the shindig?” Siobhan asks. “You are not the partiers? What’s the theme?—‘*When’s the shindig?*’?”

“When *is* the shindig?” asks the tour guide.

Several readers lift up their goatskins to compare the illustration of Siobhan’s face to Siobhan’s face. “She is many-coloured?” the reader on Clay Manor’s roof whispers to the others.

The constables at the shock of conifers read the needled leaves with magnifying glasses. They drop to their hands and knees to sniff the dirt for bullet casings.

“That’s weird,” says Siobhan. “Seems, to me, like a shindig.”

“Baffling,” says the tour guide. She flips to a chapter in *Clay Manor* by Gaspard Hobbes entitled: “VINCENT IS THE STORY’S HERO”. The tour guide says, “I forgot this chapter was even in here. It was my favourite chapter.”

Siobhan hauls her birdcage and book bag through the yard. She fiddles her elbow against the back door then bumps through with her hip. The back door slams unlocked after.

“Well,” the tour guide says. She lifts her jingle box and cranks it one more time. She says, “I have shared which is my favourite chapter: ‘VINCENT IS THE STORY’S HERO’. Which favourite chapters are yours,” she asks the readers.

## 27. Nail House

The strangle road swings its traffic around Calgary. Twelve lanes wide in both directions at its thickest.

“I do,” says the strangle road. “I ring.”

At its southwest corner, the strangle road splits its lanes to miss the footprint of a nail house. This nail house stands in the middle, setting bricks and picket on an island in the asphalt. The owner says, of this plot of grass: “It’s too important to pave over.” The owner never sold his land and so the strangle road cannot slither here.

The nail house draws no water. Neither gas nor newspapers. The mound the house sets bricks on rises inches higher than the pavement. Since the strangle road started singing, the grass grows poorer every year. Earthworms in the dirt are shrinking.

The front door of this nail house opens into eastbound traffic. Westbound out back. Silverware clatters in the drawer when traffic passes. An umbered photo slides off the wall and crashes. In the umber, meadow grass outside the house grows leafy. A taxman stands, in the photo, on the grass outside the nail house, gripping an umbrella. In all the photos on this hallway, taxmen outside the nail house grip umbrellas in different shades of umber.

And as it happens, a taxman stands outside the nail house. He grips his umbrella on the shoulder of the strangle road. When traffic slows, he opens up his shade. He aims the red at traffic. Drivers stop for his umbrella.

The taxman crosses the strangle road. Traffic honks. The doorway. Knock. Rain damage worms the wood. Instead of make a sound, the knock sets indents of the stranger’s knuckles in the rot. A tiny snail drags its helix upwards on the wood.

The taxman pushes down the door handle. That rot budes not. Pull, taxman. Shove. He peers down the strangle road from behind his red umbrella. Traffic in this lane signals to swerve.

The taxman steps around, towards the west side of the nail house.

The sunset face crumbles on a yellow wagon parked into its wall. Pickets here lie shuffled on the ground. The wagon's passenger door rusts open. What window left to glitter shimmers in pieces on the seats. The taxman crawls into the glimmer.

The passenger-side leather sighs with fungus. A plastic elephant on the dashboard bobs its head, nodding "Yes" to passing traffic. The dashboard elephant's plaid jacket clashes: purple versus brown and yellow grid. A bird's nest in the wagon's glove compartment cradles a sapphire cut egg-shaped. The widowed chickadee holding vigil spreads its wings to hide its larder.

The taxman climbs over the gearbox—in reverse—and exits through the driver's door into the nail house backwards. The nail house wears no flooring. Grass grows dry and crumples underfoot. All that's left inside the living room is an upright piano against the wall. A go-a-round of salt encircles the piano in a ward from ghosts and slugs.

The taxman wonders: Vacuum this grass and mop after? He chokes his umbrella closed.

He recognizes himself in the photos on the hallway, in that one crashed on the ground. He thinks: Did I live here? Have I tripped and fallen? A twitch cringes the stranger's backbone. He reaches backwards and he rubs the sore spot behind him, to the left side of his spine.

Traffic outside pitches the house shivers. The piano clonks, its timbres off-tune and hollow.

The taxman flinches at the noises. Ouch. He rubs the edges of his grimace.

"Hello," says the taxman. "My name is Gaspard Hobbes."

Gaspard pulls an envelope from inside his umbrella. Revenue's red logo glowers at its corner. He peers behind himself for somebody he can give that letter; either the homeowner or another character.

Gaspard steps over a dandelion growing from the ground. The dandelion wilts into a kowtow, the stem not strong enough to lift its flower. Gaspard strolls as close to the piano as the go-a-round of salt but dares not tiptoe closer. He glances from side to side then passes the envelope and his umbrella from one hand to the other.

“Hello?” he says. “Hello?”

Another bout of traffic clashes past. The piano clonks again: *Mi?*

Gaspard Hobbes inspects the ground. He stoops and he grips his knee.

The go-a-round of salt circling that piano is thinnest at the point farthest from the wall. Gaspard Hobbes creeps over. He pulls out the piano stool and sits. The keyboard cover flips up with a squeak. What Gaspard Hobbes mistakes for dust is actually a brush of tiny feathers growing on the ivories. He thumbs a downy, off-key. The key clonks: *La-di*.

Gaspard leans his envelope on the piano's music rack. He sits for hours in the salt circle practising piano, just waiting for a character he can give that letter.

## 28. Siobhan Carries On

Siobhan thinks three hours by highway is not so yonder after all—she can visit when if ever. By story, however, her move is twenty-eight chapters long and so *very* yonder all the same.

Nevertheless, Siobhan’s wristwatch clutches at three-fifty the entire ride. By that dial, Siobhan goes nowhere.

The rental van stocked full rattles on the road. Carbuoys babble in the back between her shelves and dresser. Her honey wine bobs its bubbly head. Edith swings inside her birdcage on the passenger seat. Siobhan traded her pickup to a stranger. That stranger had read Gaspard Hobbes’s version of *Clay Manor* and thought Siobhan was its hero. Siobhan traded her pickup to that stranger for a hug. And meanwhile, that copper T just *fell-out-on-its-own* from her uterus into the clonker with an ooze of cruor.

“Kroo-awr,” Siobhan tells Edith. “A blood clot.”

She flushed it. That cruor. The intrauterine device clonked into the trap and stuck there.

Siobhan told her wooer she would boogie in the evening. Then she switched her mind and stood up her wooer before leaving in the evening. Siobhan wants to start over anew with wooers, ideally “bake dessert together” early, then “scrub the oven” right away.

Siobhan thinks twice at once. *Clay Manor*, she thinks; and that word again, “No.” Rather than drive yonder from that house, she lugs Clay Manor with her, she believes. The whole house rattles in the back amongst the honey wine. Small wonder, Siobhan has heard, that any home fits inside a rental van. Who told her this, of course, was who warned her about friendship from girl-to womanhood; particularly if that friend is Vincent Clay or James.

“Well maybe a house is not a house to you at all, Marie,” had said Siobhan. “Maybe a house to you is—*what, exactly?*”

To which the woman in the sunhat replied, “No. House is. Fits in.”

And Marie nodded, as though she scored one point more in their chatter.

From her birdcage on the passenger seat, Edith wonders aloud. “Is not *actually* a rental van to a house what Vincent was to James? Is not *actually* a house ‘*what, exactly?*’ just to *you?*”

“*What, exactly,*” Siobhan says, “did Vincent ever say when oftimes he said nothing? James at least said ‘No’ by which, I think, he *meant* ‘No.’ ”

“You are talking odd,” says Edith.

“Don’t we sometimes?” says Siobhan.

Edith clutches a wine glass in her talon. She dips her beak into the mead.

A stone smacks the windshield and cracks a jagged star-shape in it.

“Looks to me more like a spider mite,” says Edith. Edith claps her wings. “Or a *loves-me-not* off a purple loosestrife. Follow me?”

“I guesst that words out. ‘House is. Fits in.’ ” Siobhan finishes the conversation she was having at three-fifty with Marie—but by herself.

“I don’t follow,” Edith says. The raven clamps her eyelids and she tries to snore. Mead inside her wine glass sloshes, so Edith shakes herself awake and dips her beak.

The raven says, “I think if James bought clothing he’d bankrupt himself on boots. Or giant thimbles. If I wore clothing, I’d not wear clothing.”

Siobhan drips a polka dot onto her panty napkin. Ever since her copper T fell out she dots black and yellow. The doctor at her ultrasound told her, “I wonder why the spider mites don’t drown in there. Other than that, this baby is fine. It is okay to polka dot late in the first trimester.”



“It’s not the whole house fits inside the van, though,” says Siobhan, “just a piece. A ‘*what, exactly?*’ ”

Siobhan peers behind herself. *What, exactly*, she wonders, does she bring with her from Clay Manor if she lugs Clay Manor with her? She burned her checkered shirtdress. She burned her sheath.

Edith says, “I wonder if James and Vincent ever spoke to one another.”

“No,” answers Siobhan, “but I found letters in the reading room. One letter I found James addressed to Vincent. It said: *Siobhan asked already. I said ‘No.’* ”

“Too bad,” says Edith. “I have a brother. He and I don’t speak either.”

“Neither do my brothers,” says Siobhan. “And I wonder, because he can’t see, how James taught himself to read.”

The raven sips her mead. “Have you ever wondered how I learned to speak?”

“No,” answers Siobhan. “Sometimes I wonder if you’ve learned to shut up.”

“I see.”

Edith shuts her eyes again.

Marie Lévi-Bosko told Siobhan that stretch marks fade from red to silver. At least hers did. Ashley’s never. Siobhan wonders if that copper T underwater will grow a patina.

Edith splashes mead in her sleep. She flaps her wings.

“I’ve got it,” Edith says. “ ‘*What, exactly?*’: *A baby* of Clay Manor’s fits inside this van.”

Edith lifts her wine glass.

“Cheers,” says Siobhan. She nods, as though her raven just won her the conversation with Marie from hours ago—even though, *actually*, Marie has tricked Siobhan into agreement with her; the whole of Clay Manor indeed has fit inside this rental van.

Edith sips and says, “You want some?—of your mead. It’s oaky.”

And Siobhan answers, “Of course. I am Missus Valkyrie. Me and my mum have won the mystery, remember? Who haunts the mansion? Not me.”

## 29. the Ghost and the Garbage Bags

“Where is Vincent?—do you think,” asks James. “ ‘Vincent would come back,’ you said; when I moulted. We *all* thought this? We put his plate out. That blue-green thing with chips across its lip. Except Siobhan. And where is she? I moulted. And where is Vincent?”

Marie Lévi-Bosko rolls the first garbage bag of twenty down the hole with her shovel. The cuticle inside stinks of yogurt turning sweet. Dragonflies twinkle low over the plastic.

“Surprise,” says James. “Something’s quit it. I’d say, ‘Out came James.’—And how.”

Marie rolls another garbage bag into the dirt. The shovel’s blade rips the plastic. Rust already colours the old armour bronze.

James has kept his former helmet. He hugs it against his face and nibbles on its moustache. At its middle sits the fistula from which James birthed himself anew through the mouth.

“Behold,” says James. “Look how it crinkles when I squish it. Listen.”

Another garbage bag clanks onto the others. Marie peppers dirt atop them. Her fingers blister. Last night she scrubbed the shedding. In the upstairs bathroom. While James lurked at the ceiling and sang “Behold.”

“I’d say.” James slithers through the conifers and rears up by Marie. He lifts his old helmet beside his new one. He says, “I think I’ll name it James and hide it.” He fits three of his feet into the hollow head and puppets it so that its hole groans open. When he birthed himself anew, James stripped his old skull of mandibles and bits for eating. Nobody could find them anywhere last night—to throw them out—so now we’ve lost them to the shindig.

A borborygmus rumbles from Clay Manor. Open windows burp with hubbub from a party. Shindigs happen on their own now. P. Briefman didn’t even need to mail out invitations.

Cars of all sorts jam the crescent road. Out-of-towners flash their cameras on the private driveway. Smokers on the doorstep draw storm clouds with their breath. A singer in the greeting room says “rain dance” loudly while her drummer plays the bighorn and the sheep eats grass. Each and all of them having read *Clay Manor*. Michael Yip shimmies on stage with his dick out and his neck all better in the eastern wing. Hovering above Clay Manor, a checkered zeppelin drops anchor down the chimney.

P. Briefman meanwhile paws the garden. He scowls in through the window. A bumblebee sews itself into his withers but he pretends the bee sting doesn’t bother.

“Oh, it bothers,” P. Briefman grits his teeth. “It’s bitter. So bitter.” P. Briefman coughs a piece of jerky on the lawn.

“Guess who else is all better?” James asks. The hand of knuckles the detective shot off with her bullets have grown back. James flexes and unflexes them.

“Vincent *does* come back,” she answers. “He *does*. He comes.”

Clank. The garbage.

“He comes. If ever you met him. He does.”

Embolisms bubble under James’s brand new carapace; around his blowholes, which secrete. He leaks in between his speech. The foam sputters yellow down his legs and drips off his feet. His new armour shines an oyster’s rainbow from its belly. A cultured pearl rolls with his language to the worms and shimmers in his sputter. That pearl is the size and roundness of a table grape. James kicks it down the hole with the garbage.

“Eat,” James commands the creatures of the dirt. “Eat. Behold. And reap me.”

A spurt of ammonia shoots from James’s anus and wets the fingertips of an evergreen.

Marie says, “He comes. Just wait. You wait. If ever you met him. You would know. He does.”

“ ‘He’s not just out to sea, you know,’ I’d say,” says James. “ ‘Nor underground.’ ”

Marie slams her shovel on the garbage. Harder and again. The insides of her elbows purple. She wipes her nose across her wrist. She rubs the side of her face raw. She tilts down her sunhat.

Marie Lévi-Bosko’s sunhat lowers further on its own.

“You can’t hide from *me* behind that,” James says. He pumps his turds into a clump behind him. A pile wide as dinner plates. Maggots squirm in it already because they were born inside him. These maggots are special because their eyes have pupils and irises. The blink and they cry. Thorns across their bodies rustle as they wriggle through the feces.

“I’d say,” says James. “ ‘What’s inside of me?’ That I’d spell such a hummus.” He puppets his former helmet to nod in accord. The old moustache dangles its handlebars onto the ground while the new one curls a smile.

“What will you tell my mother?” asks James Briar.

“That he’s coming back.”

“Quit it; lying. I’d say, ‘I’ve read it wrong,’ if I were you. I’d say, ‘James grew two feet bigger. Thirty-four.’ Happy birthday.”

“He’s coming back. That’s the word.”

“And I’m still chattering,” says James.

“Then shut up yourself,” says Marie.

Marie smacks the dirt over the covered half of her trench. She kicks the needles. She hops. She steps forward and rolls another garbage bag. *Thud* goes this one.

“What’s that?” asks James. “Books? Why bury me with books?”

“Drafts,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko. She rolls another garbage bag.

“How do you mean by ‘Drafts’?” asks James. He turns to his former helmet for an answer. He shakes the old head “No.”

“*Clay Manor*,” she says. “Each of them. He comes back in each of them.”

“Do you remember strolling out to the gazebo? I was in there, on the ceiling, playing house, upside-down, with rabbits. You said, ‘Vincent. It’s your mother. She won’t come out. It’s her face again.’ And I said, ‘I’m not Vincent.’ I’d say,” says James, “that ‘that gazebo now is tinders.’ ”

“What about it, *Pussy*? That gazebo.”

Marie rolls another bag.

“Clank,” says James. James says, “You do know that he and I are different characters—you do.”

Marie peeks out from underneath her sunhat. James and his old face are kissing. James whispers to the other, “Oh my. *James*.”

“Of course I know it, Vincent,” Marie tells James. “I’ve read ahead. I’m always beforehand.”

“Already handily,” says James. “And done with. ‘*He comes. He does.*’ Okay—quit it.”

“Okay *James*.”

A second Marie Lévi-Bosko dashes through the needled leaves and snatches for the sunhat low on Marie’s head.

“Hey,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko and she swings her shovel. The flat of the spade smacks the hatless Marie in the belly. The hatless Marie crumples to the ground and crouches on the garbage.

“That’s mine,” the Maries tell each other. Both point at the sunhat. The hatless Marie catches breath and climbs into Clay Manor through the window yelling, “Hey.”

“That *was* pretty clever,” Marie Lévi-Bosko tells James. “Back in April. When you stole my sunhat and put it on Pussy.”

“His idea,” lies James.

“Quit it,” says Marie. Another garbage bag. Marie sweeps the dirt over.

James tries on his old helmet as a mask. The second moustache now a brow.

“Good job,” says Marie. “Suits you.”

“Good job you, *Auntie*.”

### 30. Theophilus: His Kitten from Earlier, Who *Did* Speak Our Language

“Meow,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko. She steps up from behind and plucks the bumblebee from P. Briefman’s withers. “Meow.”

“Says you,” answers the cat. He peers through the window into the eastern wing.

“I hate that dead Chinese man,” says P. Briefman. “By the looks of this he owns the house. But he doesn’t own the house. The house is mine. The shindig, mine. What cat gives up his parties? Not me.”

The jerky that P. Briefman grits his teeth on is, of course, a piece off his bambino’s hock. Theophilus, who froze in the snow. P. Briefman tried to cook the body; to boil it. Then the grill. Salt after.

“If only I’d met Ashley,” says P. Briefman. “She could do the baking for me.”

P. Briefman spits onto the dirt. He buried Theophilus between the loosestrife. Over the other buried children. All that remains of Theophilus is the jingle bell he wore and his spine with its ribcage still secure. That stuffed, pink elephant doll cuddles the backbones in the loam. P. Briefman stomps the soil cozy.

“I hate that dead Chinese man.”

The dead Chinese man kicks his leg to the side and with his other pivots. Both arms up then down. His hospital gown dangles from the chandelier and stretch marks sneer across his groin. The dick stiffens at an upwards shine, sweat drips off it on the stage.

“I would never have guessed beforehand that Gaspard Hobbes would write his letter about Michael,” says Marie. “Now here he is. See him. All him.”

The shindiggers dance along with the dead Chinese man, whose hands are on his hip now. His shoulders shake. Wobbles down his whole body.



P. Briefman says. "What cat splits the house? Not me."

P. Briefman chews another piece of jerky. He screws his face around the bitterness. The frostbite crystallized the sugars into starch. P. Briefman didn't eat his pills this morning.

"Yuck." P. Briefman wipes his mouth across his wrist and blows a raspberry onto the dirt. He shakes his mane fluffy.

"*Michael* did all this," says Marie. "Killed him, that is. With the cold snap."

"Hate him," says P. Briefman. "Tastes bad."

"If you hate him so bad, why loll around? He won't leave now, you know. Why not grab Ouaknin and leave?"

P. Briefman glances to the shock of conifers where James Briar mumbles to the face he shucked off yesterday. The thirty-*four*-foot centipede sings a song to himself and answers in a different voice. A ditty about flowers. A song about the weeds.

P. Briefman grabs his water can and wets the spot over his son. His water can wears a doodle of Flechette and his master counting whats in the yard. Flechette drew that years ago, before Clay Manor's taxes.

"I loll because Clay Manor brought Ashley's bambino home," says P. Briefman. "Even if it is the ugly half of that bambino. Even if it is the part of the bambino we don't talk about. Not even bicker. That we hide inside that house. If I loll longer, maybe Clay Manor will bring home *my* bambino too."

"So you can eat him again?" says Marie.

"I can't leave," P. Briefman says. He tilts the water on Theophilus again. "I owe taxes, so to speak. From stories ago: spearmen hunt me. What cat has no Bellerophon? Not me."

"I know all about your spearmen, Pussy," says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

The Marie Lévi-Bosko with no hat on in the house grinds against the dead Chinese man. She wiggles her rumpus on Michael's dick.

"Such depravity," Marie tells P. Briefman. She tilts her sunhat down. "You see? That's not me. So much liver. So much bladder. She's not even snatching for her sunhat anymore."

P. Briefman gags. When he ate Theophilus's liver, the liver farted in his mouth. Never before have any of his children tasted so unripe. If only he knew where was the sourdough. If only he could cook.

"Mind the yard," says P. Briefman. He waters Theophilus some more. "Mind the yard."

"And yet," Marie says.

"Yet *what?*" asks P. Briefman. "Yet *what?*"

"Okay, Pussy."

A butterfly zigzags to the windowsill and mounts a cocoon hanging there. It starts to inseminate the pupa growing wings inside.

The dead Chinese man dances faster in Clay Manor. Now that the novel rolls over, Michael doesn't have to spend his hours alone. He can leave the words behind and party.

"'Did all this.' *Him*, you say?" says P. Briefman. "He's not even dapper. Not like master."

"I'm unsure how to even talk about him," says Marie.

"But you were on and on. And on about him. You were 'Michael this and such.' "

"Now that he's here, that is."

"How did he even find us?" asks P. Briefman.

"He's the jotter. You can murder him, but you can't ask his body to leave."

"I already dragged him out. Once. Because language."

Marie Lévi-Bosko steps onto the grass. She figures she's spent more than enough chapters standing on the garden just after someone hid a baby in it.

A pair of shindiggers drag red and grey rhombi onto the yard. They spread the parachute over the grass. "Here?" the shindiggers ask P. Briefman. And P. Briefman answers, "Wherever."

The last drops from the water can fall over Theophilus.

"Come back," P. Briefman says.

A field mouse tours the loosestrife. It scampers right up to P. Briefman's paw. The cat pops its head with a pinch. He sniffs it. The hind legs still twitch.

"So easy," says P. Briefman. He shoves the mouse into the mud. "Feast," he says. "Ripen. Come back."

"Vincent does," says Marie.

"Come back," P. Briefman spits into the dirt. "Come back."

"He comes. He does."

P. Briefman scowls at the conifers. P. Briefman sneers through the window.

"He comes," says Marie. "He does."

"You say that," says P. Briefman. "Yet that," he motions with his paw to James upside the conifers.

James snaps the front end of his body off the tree trunk. He coils round a magpie flying by and he squeezes before springing back into the needles.

"It's almost as though there is no reason to speak," P. Briefman says.

"So shut up," says Marie.

A raven on Clay Manor's roof echoes, "It's almost as though there are no reasons to speak at all."

This raven tilts its head one way at P. Briefman then the other at Marie. “And that,” it says to the woman in the sunhat, “is an ending if ever.”

This raven flops its feathers. It glides across the bluff towards the river. The raven was not Edith, of course—but knew her.

“Nobody flips far enough ahead,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko.

“Do they just go on then?” P. Briefman wonders. “The shindigs.”

“He comes,” says Marie Lévi-Bosko. “He does. Meow.”

P. Briefman shakes his head. “He doesn’t. No. Mind the yard.”

And the purple loosestrife scatters *loves-me-nots* behind Clay Manor.

### Afterword, or Chapter Ninety-Three

The spearman fidgets with the weight of the narrator's attention on him. Underneath his armour, his skin itches. August, he thinks, is too sweaty for war music. He rests his spear against his shoulder, its blade the shape of a paring knife he once opened his finger with while scalping portabella mushrooms. The spearman peers behind himself.

This and one other spearman stand on McHugh Bluff. They wait for the chorus in Clay Manor to quit singing its bloodcurds. The other spearman tells the first, "Wow. They will be surprised to see you."

The first spearman, of course, is Vincent Clay. The other spearman tells him to wait until the cat comes up to meet them. Vincent wonders if first he'll have to take his glasses off to fit his helmet on. The chain mail underneath his breastplate clinks.

Since the cat (whom Vincent called "Pallas Briefman") buried Theophilus beneath the garden, the cat has lost Clay Manor. Without Marie to help pay taxes, Revenue has seized the property and sold it to a different character. Now the cat (who calls himself "Orizontas" now) comes back with Ouaknin, the bambino he didn't eat, to take back Clay Manor. Ouaknin in the meantime has outgrown his father three times over.

Ouaknin charges up Clay Manor's walk and tramples through the door into the greeting room. His withers splinter the doorframe. The characters inside begin to scream. Orizontas sits outside. He grooms and grooms while his bambino tunes the screaming.

Orizontas wanders outside Clay Manor to the yard, where he prostrates himself beside the loosestrife. From atop the bluff, the *loves-me-nots* and dragonflies are twinkly as confetti. Orizontas hums along when the chorus in the house sings another bloodcurd and he waits.

Vincent says, "Shall I put on my helmet?"

“You can,” says the other spearman. “If it fits.”

Vincent fits his helmet overtop his glasses. Through the visor, Vincent watches James Briar, the thirty-four-foot centipede, climb from Clay Manor’s chimney.

“He’s been hiding in there,” says the other spearman. “All this time, just hiding.”

“That makes no sense,” says Vincent.

“Told you. They will be surprised. You can keep the helmet on, if you want.”

James Briar climbs over the roof and lowers himself to the yard. He speaks with Orizontas and gestures to the figures standing on the crescent road. Vincent overhears them saying, “What? What?”

“It’s now,” says the other spearman. “Ready?”

“Just stab Pallas Briefman, then?” asks Vincent.

“You can stab him twice, if you like.”

Orizontas and James Briar meet the spearmen at the bottom of the private driveway.

“How do you mean by this, Marie,” Orizontas demands of the other spearman. “Why are you dressed as a spearman? Is this a joke? It’s not funny.”

James Briar points his moustache from one spearman to the other. He says, “I have nothing to say.” He leans closer to Vincent and he tilts his head slightly leftwise. “I have nothing to say at all,” James says again.

The big bambino joins his father and the centipede. He recognizes Marie right away, underneath that sunhat and Ouaknin, the kitten who does *not* speak our language says, “Daddy-o. What it means?—that Marie is a spearman?”

“Pallas Briefman.” Vincent Clay lowers his blade. “You have to pay your taxes.”

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