



THE MERCURIAL SCIENCE OF THE HUMAN HEART

No one notices the tumult of Norah's walk to work—the somersaults, the aerial walkovers, the faceplants, her body peeling from the sidewalk, a paper-doll curl that sets her upright and wobbling just in time to return the wave from Billy, the line cook at The Flatiron, and again in time to insert her key into the front door of VanBochove's Flowers. Ever since she left Steve, took Adeline and moved into her new apartment, the world for Norah has refused to stand still.

Before work this morning, she moved from sink to stove by way of the space of wall above her kitchen table. On her way to the toaster, she used the ceiling light as a sling, grabbing hold as she floated by, whirling like Apollo 13 around the dark side of the moon, like a breadcrumb that won't quite wash down the drain. She's learned to roll with these motions of her apartment, these motions of the world—for though she knows that from the perspective of others she is the one unhinged, to her it is the world untethered, the planet a cosmic gutter ball, banging through the trough on its way to the dark mystery at the end of the lane. She managed to keep Addy's plate of scrambled eggs and toast upright until she could deposit it on the table along with a





“You’re welcome,” to which her daughter, between her headphones, made no reply.

Only inside the flower shop do the world’s motions calm, and then Norah suffers only an occasional tremor as a customer speaks of a wedding anniversary, or of a wife, or a girlfriend, or any woman whose name happens to be two syllables and ends in *y* (or *ie*—or once just *i*, as in Candi). But most of her business between holidays is for hospital rooms and funeral parlors, and in these contexts when an order comes for the bedside or the memorial of a Mandy or a Marcie or a Candi she’s able to smooth her shirt, perhaps to smile, and to create an arrangement so lavish that it borders on celebratory.

This morning, Norah’s work is sober as she prepares a funeral arrangement for Mrs. Potsdam, who had been her twelfth-grade science teacher. Norah has never forgotten the lecture Mrs. Potsdam gave on the concept of a block universe, how she had said that there is no flow of time in a block universe, no motion at all, but instead a model of the entirety of time and space, complete in every detail. Think of a cartoon flip book, Mrs. Potsdam had said, the book being the whole of reality and each panel a snapshot of a moment in time. You feel as if your life is unfolding, but, in fact, the book is already written. This theory had lodged itself somewhere near the surface of Norah’s consciousness, so that even now she remembers it often and with great sadness—each version of herself as whole as the next, each filled with a full measure of hope, a full measure of love, of grief, each trapped on her own page unable to touch the others.

Norah weaves angel-choir lilies and black dahlias into Mrs. Potsdam’s wreath, filling the gaps with heather





and smooth aster. When the arrangement is finished she cleans the workbench. She culls the flowers in the cooler, clips stems, and transfers bouquets to buckets of fresh water. This is her favorite part of the day, the greenhouse aroma of wet stems more moving to her, somehow more essential, than the dry perfumes of the blooms. And for a time, gravity operates on Norah in the same predictable manner that led Einstein to his general theory of relativity.

When lunchtime arrives, she flips the 'open' sign that hangs in the window to the 'back at' sign, with its hands that point always to one o'clock. For a moment, she stands inside the open front door, arms hanging heavily at her sides until the blood tingles in her fingertips. Then she takes one trepidatious step, and then another. And then, just as she begins to smile, the world tilts, and Norah spills onto the sidewalk.

She lunches every day now at The Flatiron, not because she likes the food, but because the walk is only half a block and not so painful as the walk to The Terrace, where she used to meet Steve for lunch. She sits in her usual place, the corner booth with the view out the window. From here she can see The Clothes Post, Meyer Hardware, and, on the far side of the alley, Crossroads Bank where Steve works in investments.

Billy takes her order of egg salad and soup of the day—tomato bisque. Billy is always there to take her order, stepping from behind the counter, past the waitress.

Billy graduated from high school last year, and though he talks about college Norah doesn't believe he'll go. She doesn't think he lacks ambition, but there is a languor about him that makes her think he's in no hurry. It is a





languor that shows in the time it takes him to cross the room, in the long, slow motion of his arm as he places an order on the counter, and in his smile, which is slow to dawn, not sinister but lightheartedly conspiratorial, as if in response to some subtext playing out between him and his co-conspirator. He is strong and long-limbed, was the quarterback of his high school football team, and Norah sometimes imagines him in a game, standing in the pocket while the defense converges, looking downfield as if he has all the time in the world.

Norah and Steve had dinner at Billy's parents' house years ago, and she remembers Billy watching them as they sat in the dining room drinking wine. An hour after his parents had put him to bed, they discovered Billy eavesdropping from behind the couch. He was wearing only his underwear, and the image of him in his white briefs sticks with Norah. He was eleven or twelve years old and was in the middle of a growth spurt, so that his legs and hips seemed those of a man, his upper body still a boy's.

As Billy writes her order on his pad, his pencil moving evenly and unhurried from letter to letter, Norah adds, "And a sparkling water." She sits with her knees braced against the bottom of the table, the diner rocking as if she is in the galley of a ship at sea.

"Soda water off the gun okay?" he asks.

"Sure," she says.

Norah is looking out the window when Billy returns with her food. He runs a dishtowel over her table and flips it onto his shoulder before he sets down her plate, bowl, and glass.

When Norah says, "Thank you," Billy smiles as if her thank you means something more. He slips his hand into





his front pants pocket. His t-shirt is short and untucked, and as his hand presses into the pocket his pants slide down to expose the waistband of his underwear—not white briefs now but blue-striped boxers, above them a strip of tanned flesh, a thin line of dark hair bisecting his stomach.

“Say hello to your mother for me,” Norah says.

Billy nods once, cracks a smile like a wink and says, “I’ll do that.” When he’s gone, Norah turns back to the window and sees, through the steam of her tomato bisque, Steve walking down the alley, and buffeting in his wake, as a scrap of burned paper rises on the convection of air above a fire, a black and charred thing the height of a woman.



Adeline stands in the lunch line. She looks at a cheeseburger, its cheese melted just right, and feels a pull deep inside herself, a hunger as acute as thirst, but she moves on to the cottage cheese and pineapple plate. Because, well, fuck them. She waits for the server to hand her a plate, but after the woman serves the girl in front of her, she serves two boys, football players who ask for two burgers each. Adeline waits as the boys walk past. But the server moves on to the next student in line, and the next, and, okay, fuck you too.

She carries her tray to the salad bar, places on it four baby carrots, six celery sticks, and a hardboiled egg. She sits at a table with two girls with whom she had been close friends last year, but who both showed up at school this year ensconced in relationships. Their boyfriends are sitting across from them, and Adeline





sits on the girls' side, one seat removed. She asks for the salt, but one of the boys speaks at the same moment and no one hears her. The boy is saying something about a campfire and vodka, an inside joke, and the four break into laughter. No one looks at Adeline, though she feels, as she pretends she is part of the laughter, as if everyone in the lunchroom is looking at her. She nods tiny imperceptible nods as the others at the table nod, laughs tiny imperceptible laughs as they laugh. When she peels her hardboiled egg, one of the boys sniffs the air and rises from his seat, a mockery of a man on a mission, and says to the room, "All right, folks. Who's ripping the juicy ones?"



Steve drops his keys onto a small table inside the front door of his house. He slips off his shoes and walks to the kitchen, enveloped in a fog of thought that clings to him, warm and moist. He pulls a glass from a tall cupboard, turns it upright on the counter and pours in bourbon from a crystal decanter. As he fills the glass halfway and then a splash more, he sees that the dining-room table is gone. He tries to remember if it was there this morning. He thinks it was. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe it has been gone for days. He leaves the stopper off the decanter, walks to the living room, and sits in a recliner chair in front of his television. Beside his chair is a TV tray, the only other furniture in the living room, on it a lamp and remote control. He sets down his drink, picks up the remote, and turns on the TV. The local news appears, the commentators young, the anchor's suit a size too big.





Steve looks again at the space of dining room where the table had been. The chairs are still there—upright, throne-like, six of them standing formally in two straight lines. He tries once more to remember if the table had been there this morning, but his act of remembrance is insincere, a ploy designed to keep his mind away from those primordial thoughts that fill his house with such humidity and rank, swamp air.

But the ploy doesn't work—the gaseous pool of unexamined thought and the static of anxiety too volatile a combination to suppress—and the thoughts spark to life, single-celled, born in the roots of his sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. A flash and there are Norah's eyes following his phone as he slips it still ringing into his pocket. A flash and there is Adeline, framed in his car's rearview mirror, standing in her socks in the driveway. A flash and Brandy's thighs press against his ears, the sharp insistence of her fingers on the back of his head.

Born, the thoughts grow, wet and embryonic. Amebae emerge from the pores of his skin, flagella whipping, cilia gyrating. Larval mosquitos slide down his temples. Newly hatched snails, shell-less, ride their slicks of mucous down his neck. The thoughts dampen his starched, white shirt. They moisten the bottoms of his socks, cause black-mold footprints to form, invisible, on the underside of the oak floor. The organisms evolve, molt, and fly into the air, thickest in the space between his easy chair and the television, so that when he goes to bed he often realizes that he has seen nothing of what was on the screen.

Now, as he sits in the growing dusk he feels the first hatching of larvae against his skin, hears the soft tear





of cocoons, and the insects rise. His phone rings, and he pulls it from his pants pocket. It is Adeline. He answers, but he has a hard time hearing, her voice distant, hollow, as if she is standing at the far end of a long tunnel. And on his end she is drowned out by something large and winged—a dragonfly?—that circles his head. She asks if they're still on for Sunday. "Sure," he says. He thinks, "Sunday, Sunday, Sunday," and the word swirls around him, an echo that vibrates through a chorus of insect wings. He hears Adeline say, "The Flatiron," and he says, "Yes, breakfast." Something large bumps his ear, and he drops the phone and swats at the air around his head. When he puts the phone back to his ear, Adeline is not there.

He looks for a while toward the television, blinking as the insects brush his eyelashes. Then he taps Brandy's name on his phone and raises it to his ear. "It's me," he says. A cloud of tiny moths swarms in the phone's blue light. "No," he says. "I just wanted to talk. I just feel—" A boy on the news says, "Hot tomorrow. Humidity near one hundred percent," and Steve says, "I feel like I just want to talk." He says, "No. Of course not," and he says, "Yes, of course." A tadpole slides from his nostril, and he sniffs it back up and says, "Okay. The door's open. Let yourself in."

At twenty after nine Adeline sits in a window booth at The Flatiron, the booth she's always shared with her father during their Sunday breakfasts, a routine that dates back further than her memory. She won't say that





she's missed these breakfasts, and so she won't say that she blames her mother for their ending.

She's drinking coffee—she wants to be a coffee drinker—and she looks often up the street as she takes small sips from her mug. At nine-thirty she pulls her phone from her purse and calls her father. When he doesn't answer she leaves a message. “I'm here,” she says. “I've been here for half an hour.”

She waits another fifteen minutes before she walks to the counter to pay for her coffee. No one is at the register, and no one answers when she leans over the counter and says, “Hello?” She calls again, and when no one comes, she puts down a five-dollar bill

As she's walking away from The Flatiron, Adeline sees her father's car driving toward her. He's speeding. She steps forward, but he doesn't slow. And as he races past she sees, through a film of steam on his windows, the silhouette of a woman in the passenger seat. The woman is thin and dark and perfectly rigid. Then the car is gone, racing up the hill, a trail of black exhaust in its wake.



Norah lies on her back in bed, an empty Burgundy glass and an open issue of *Vogue* on her nightstand. Her arms lie at her sides, immobile as iron posts, her fight with gravity finished for the day.

Her eyes are open, her head turned toward the window where Steve sits in his car, driving. He is both here, floating in the darkness outside her window, and somewhere else. Norah doesn't know how this can be, but she suspects that it has to do with affinity, some





bond between them strong enough to warp space, open a wormhole, a quantum door, and to connect these two bodies in sympathetic union. A penumbra of dissonance encircles his car, where the darkness of his night transitions to the darkness of her own. The road treadmills under the car's wheels. Steve squints against a flash of headlights and yells, "Brights, dickhead!"

His phone rings, and he pulls it from his jacket pocket, looks at it, and puts it down on the passenger seat. From the hallway outside her bedroom door, Norah hears Addy say, "Where were you? Why don't you ever, ever answer your phone? This isn't fair. I hate it here." Then Norah hears the tinny whisper of Addy's headphones, which fades with the closing of the bathroom door.

Steve spins the steering wheel. The car slows and rocks to a halt. His windows are down, and the sound of crickets rises as he cuts the engine. He pulls a pewter flask from his armrest, opens it, drinks, and screws the cap back on. A minute passes, and he puts away the flask and picks up his phone. He touches the screen, and his face glows blue. When the light dims, he touches the screen again. Then he taps the phone twice, quickly, raises it to his ear, and Norah's phone rings from the top of her dresser.

Norah tries to rise, but she can't. Breathing is hard enough, the weight of the world pressing her down. She relaxes, and then heaves, as if to surprise something—the world? herself? she's not sure. A lock of hair slides down her forehead and tickles her ear. The phone turns circles as it rings.

Then the ringing stops, and the hinges of a screen door creak somewhere in the darkness outside Steve's car. A woman says in a dry, coarse whisper, "What are

