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THE WHITE MAN'S INCREDULITY FURROWS HIS BROW

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Judged by Lydia Millet

REGGIE'S DAD IS IN A FOUL MOOD and it is turning into one of those nights when Reggie is picking things up and putting them down, picking them up and putting them down. A tight ball seizing his throat, he grabs his new jacket, the one from Unique Thrift that doesn't look like it's from Unique Thrift with its back saying "American Eagle" in swirly writing like how an important person would sign his name. He darts out the back door of the apartment building, cloaked in the jacket's corduroy and leather, and strides down the alley to 25th Street. There, amid the garages and bins which he knows as well as his own burlap-hued face in the mirror, his head lifts for the first time since asking his dad an important question an hour before. On 25th, he turns east. No question he's going where he always feels welcome, where he always goes to rid his throat of the ball—that angering pressured lump—the pet shop at 22nd Street and Lyndale Avenue, Paws N Claws.

Reggie talks to dogs in pens. To the snowy kittens bedded in shredded newspaper, he says, "Y'all are gonna have ink all over you." The fish suspended like puffy little orange blimps in burbling tanks never listen to anybody, least of all Reggie, so that's nothing new. There is one new thing though: ferrets. For a long time, Reggie looks at them with a kind of queer frightened inquisitiveness, peering at their pink-white noses and twitchy whiskers which are thinner than his own virgin mustache. Their backs are snakelike and their fluffy tails wiggle seductively. He had not known that a person could keep a pet of this kind but feels now that he was right to believe, as he always has despite the lack of evidence, that the animal kingdom has more to offer than dogs, cats, fish and birds. Now it is confirmed. Reggie is bent over, his hands on his knees, smudging the glass with his nose when the Paws N Claws man comes around, the blowzy one with the red beard and kind blue eyes.

"Hey, Ricky. What's up? Your dad giving you trouble again?"

"Reggie," mutters Reggie. "My name's Reggie."

"Oh, sorry! Reggie! I knew that. What's my problem today? Geez, we talk all the time." The man—Redbeard—laughs. "Don't touch the glass, okay? You're getting the glass dirty, buddy. *Paws* off the glass, all right?" He makes a clicking sound with his cheeks.

Reggie stands up and looks, puzzling at the sound. Redbeard winks at him like they are buds—which Reggie wouldn't mind, if it were true. But it isn't true. Redbeard isn't his friend. It's not that Reggie doesn't have friends. There are boys he crosses Loring Park with to skulk through alleys between downtown and South Minneapolis—in those neighborhoods like Stevens and Elliot that white folks call up-and-coming or "transitional," where glassy condos throw shadows over vacant lots like a suffocating blanket. He and his friends stay away from Ventura Village, where hairy Indians sleep on the sidewalk, and after school they stand outside SuperAmerica by the car vacuum, drinking sodas, his friend Jerome always waving at cars that he says are people he knows who would buy them vodka if they would only stop.

"So what's up with these here?" Reggie says.

Redbeard is always happy to talk shop with customers. Because of Redbeard, Reggie knows about dogs' colorblindness, knows that an extra-toed cat is a polydactyl, knows that a parakeet is a better talker than a parrot. Reggie happens to know that Redbeard is a vegetarian, and Redbeard knows that Reggie lives on Harriet Avenue with his dad, a maintenance technician at the airport. (Reggie lives with his mother too, but she never comes up.)

Pointing to one wire cage and then another, Redbeard says, "This is Madeline, and this is Don. They're only six months old, but for a ferret that's like being a teenager. They're curious animals. They're rambunctious!" Redbeard says with pleasure. "Know what rambunctious means?"

Reggie does not know. He says, "Y'all should put them in the same cage. Put Don up in dis one."

"I can't do that!" Redbeard laughs. "Don't you know what'll happen?"

At Core Fitness on Lake Street, in the Carag neighborhood, Nyla presses her knees into the pads, with the pin under the third plate. That's one more than last time. The muscles that she's learned from the diagram on the wall are her *adductor longus* hurt,

and she winces, gripping the handholds. It's worth the pain though because it is *sculpting*, and sculpting is the way to get the look that she wants, svelte and eye-catching but also kind of pronounced. *Seven, eight.* Her legs quiver and then give out, and the plates land with a bang that she can hear even under the thumping Rihanna in her ear buds. Nyla gingerly rises out of the seat and stands. Every time so far that she's come to Core Fitness, which is four times now, she thinks of the \$45 monthly membership fee—it's like half of her SuperAmerica paycheck. (Because of her age, fifteen, she can only work part-time.) It's not cheap, but Core Fitness is close to her neighborhood, Kingfield, where she lives with just her mama, and it's totally worth it because there's not that many meatheads, and the machines are new and clean. Her plan is to slim all her parts, and she knows that if she sticks to it and resists the Kit Kats and Cokes that everyone's always inhaling behind the counter at work, it ought to get like Krista's. In one of the mirrors that are everywhere, she looks at her pelvis, taut in tights, without being too obvious. What she's looking for is kind of there, but mostly flat, which is not great. She's going for more pressy-outy so you can notice it, which is what they want.

By *they* she means guys.

By *guys* she means Rob Dertzman. Ha ha! Rob! Oh god. The room gets filled with helium and Nyla clutches the bar of the hamstring curl machine. She woozes to the bench and drops her head between her knees until a woman taps her shoulder and gesturing like people always do in gyms, silently saying, Are you done using/still using/about to use the machine?

"Sorry!" Nyla yells—but oops, *she's* the one with music on, not the lady. She blushes and gets up, the stars almost gone.

The drinking fountain—water has no calories. It's a trek to cross the room, and bending to the burbling jet, she savors several mouthfuls. She is recovered—she won't pass out—but dazed, and stares at the row of TVs hanging before the treadmills only to realize it is starting—the show that Mr. Harwood the Social Studies teacher assigned her class to watch. And she had totally *planned* to watch it here (even though she forgot momentarily) because she is responsible and she knows that the only way out of her neighborhood and her mom's house is via education.

Ten identical gorgeous women in blazers holding microphones, all HD and plasma-glittering. Nyla climbs on the inclined bench, just under one of the last TVs

in the array, where she feels she can be alone to admire the anchorwoman's beauty, and diss her female faults. With her ankles hooked behind the padded bars, Nyla lies back. Blood fills her skull, like she's inflating, which is pleasurable, an escape from her fifteen-year-old life. A sign on the TV shows 97.1 FM for sound, and she thumbs around in her iPhone looking for the radio. She can't find it, so she texts Jerry, her mama's boyfriend, who gave Nyla the phone. Nyla had been like, *It's obviously stolen, Jerry, it's got somebody's name carved on it*, pointing to the engraved initials on the back. Jerry showed her his knuckles, which he thinks is funny even though he's not exactly joking.

Does this thing have radio. xo

She usually saves xo's for boyfriends, but she doesn't have a boyfriend, and xo's are how you get Jerry to answer. One time Nyla was locked out and her mom was asleep. She texted Jerry with xo's asking to come and he did, so it's okay to use it that way because it's helpful. She relaxes for a while, inverted. The blood flowing up to her head—its cranial pulse—feels good, like a reminder that she's alive.

Men walk onto a small stage in an auditorium. They shake hands with each other in a fakey way, with the formalism of a royal reception. The men stand rigidly, grinning. Then they sit on stools like perching birds and start talking one at a time. Nyla cannot hear what the men say, though she can see the earnest concern on their faces, their furrowed brows.

Reggie picks up a pouch of dog biscuits from a nearby display and puts it down. He picks up a pouch of dog biscuits, puts it down again, and makes a suggestion that to him is obvious, because something should be added to the cages of these ferrets with the bald friskiness of their twitching tails and slinking backs and that wild desire in their black BB eyes that says something needs to be added or they will burst like an arrow-split apple.

"Throw them mice in!" Reggie says.

"Ferrets *eat* rodents, Reggie. They're enemies," Redbeard says.

The door chimes and Redbeard walks to the front of the store, Reggie following—eyeing Redbeard's puffy blue vest with a mind to how it stacks up against his American Eagle jacket. *Got that shit beat.*

At the front are a brochure rack about spaying and neutering, carpeted cat towers in the display window, and a machine that grinds out tags with whatever people type in. There's also a TV mounted high in a corner, and when the arriving customer heads into the food aisle, Redbeard stands watching it from behind the checkout counter. Reggie watches too. There's men in suits on the screen, one of whom Reggie does not want to see. He stands near the checkout picking up and putting down the pens that have dog biscuits tied to them. He's always liked the accessories. Unbelievable things. Chew toys and catnip. The pig's ears are obscene, but to an animal, that's a real treat, like the ice cream Reggie's father occasionally buys him. Today, a fuzzy pink collar catches his eye. He pets it, not fooled into thinking it's real.

"Reggie," Redbeard says brightly. "There's a customer who's going to come up and check out."

Reggie likes Redbeard—he never gets in a foul mood, even if you get in the way, which Reggie is always doing at home now that he's seventeen and the keeper of this spaghetti sack of a body that he doesn't always know what to do with.

"I know."

Redbeard watches TV intently. Reggie looks too. Two men stiffly gesture and make short trips around a stage in suits. Reggie looks to the ceiling and sighs.

"How come this isn't like a store?"

"It's a store, dude. You know that. It's a store."

"Ain't no ceiling," Reggie says, pointing up to the girders.

"Some stores are warehouses, that's all. There's different kinds."

Still, he isn't crazy about the inauthenticity. His haven has a sudden imposter appearance that he hadn't noticed before, and it angers him. CVS has a dropped ceiling with cameras in it. SuperAmerica has a dropped ceiling with tinted camera domes in it.

"Y'all should get a real store."

"Really?" Redbeard laughs, without looking to Reggie. "Why?"

"For the animals, man."

"The animals don't mind." Playfully, Redbeard wiggles his eyebrows and smiles at Reggie. "The animals like it here!"

Redbeard turns back to the TV, leaning on the counter. One of the men, the white one, says, *China is a currency manipulator. My first day in office, I would name them as such.*

"Sure you would," Redbeard says knowingly, which makes Reggie listen up. Immediately he wants to find a way to diss the man. He watches now. The second man on TV says his piece about currency and the first man says again the same thing about currency. *The fact is, China is a currency manipulator. The American people know it, I know it. . . .*

"I know about currency," Reggie says. "In Science, man, we lighted a light without no socket. I bet you ain't done that. We took a paper clip and a battery and a light bulb—"

"That's *current*. Electric current, Reggie. These guys are talking about *currency*. Money."

Reggie doesn't know what to say. He picks up a rubber squeak toy, like a planet with explosions coming off it, and squeezes it flat. Just then a short woman in a purple coat whumps a huge sack of dog food before Redbeard. He beeps it with a gun and whips the woman's credit card through the box. "How's J.J.?" Redbeard says.

Reggie knows some dogs in the neighborhood too—certain ones that snarl and bark at you and certain ones that you can pet through a fence. Jerome, his friend, drags a pit bull around on a spiked chain some days, when his brother lets him. That's not really the kind of dog Reggie cares to know though. Jerome yanks it, taunts it, laughs at it when its natural evil is riled. Someday Reggie would say to Jerome that it ought to be taken away from him and his brother. He has a line that he has said to himself and will use when he gets the courage: *Y'all niggas is like Michael Vick. Shit ain't right.*

The customer turns away with her swinging purse and her rustling armload, smiling warily at Reggie. She passes, and Reggie lets out an airy *pffff*.

"Y'all don't know me," he mutters.

Redbeard turns the TV volume up. The white man, who looks to Reggie like the inevitable victor, says, *China play by the rules, China play by the rules, level playing field. Jobs, jobs.* The other guy is really getting his throat stepped on. He's shifting and smiling creakily and Reggie can tell he wants to throw his hands up and go, *Man, fuck that!*

The camera catches this man in close up. Reggie laughs and points at the TV. "Ha ha! Shit, son, he's pissed as hell!"

Redbeard agrees flatly: "He is not a happy camper."

The fact is, China is a currency manipulator! The white man's incredulity furrows his brow.

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Jerry doesn't reply to the text so Nyla is like *I need it for my homework!* Then she notices on TV the captions, white-on-black text running up their chests, rising like waves that will drown them. Captions are perfect actually because "Lady Lumps" is on and it's her favorite. Nyla spots the words *economy, China, currency manipulator*. The text comes late and the camera goes back and forth between the talking and the non-talking one, and still they scroll up like a heavy snow. It's kinda funny because she doesn't know which man is saying what.

She does her incline crunches, and they are harder than flat on the floor, but that's good. Her eyes blip back and forth between the TV and her area, which is not flattering from this angle. The men, high above her and elongated by her perspective, leave their stools to roam across the stage in contemplative arcs, in grays and blues, always returning and resting one butt cheek on the stool as if that's natural. The moderator speaks, and they are polite like students at a spelling bee awaiting their words. They smile and nod, which is good, they could work checkout like Nyla. Miss K., their manager, a short fat white lady with a pumpkin butt, is always saying, "Smile, girls. Girls, smile!" Smiling is important in life, along with saying *Thanks for shopping at SuperAmerica*.

After a set of twenty, Nyla dismounts and checks the mirror. The runners on the treadmills all have their eyes raised to the screens. One woman wears a worried squint. A beanpole, gray-bearded jogger looks to be suffering mild pain. Nyla doesn't know how she feels about the men. But it's fine—Mr. Harwood would tell everyone how to feel.

Her phone buzzes in the waistband of her tights where she keeps it. Julie, finally.

U can come now

KK luv u

KK

She throws in ten hamstring curls and studies the mirror one last time, sideways now, an acute angle, Mrs. Thompson the algebra teacher would say, pressing her pelvis out.

It's getting better maybe?

*

"Okay, Reggie," Redbeard says, "the animals need to rest now, so you should go."

Reggie touches a leash on the way out, adding, "See about getting a real store." The door chime chimes, and there's that ball rising in his throat. It's a kind of bubble, only harder, the size of a small apple or the handball he found once by the outdoor courts over in Stevens Square. He has to shove it back down, which is fine, it's just part of life. But it's like stuffing a basketball underwater at the pool, which he's done. The ball always wants to burst to the top, there's nothing you can do. It's not too bad right now, though. He's got in under control as he dodges through a crowd of people pouring off the 4, front doors and back—students with backpacks, businessmen, everybody. Everybody is going somewhere. Reggie walks, shrugging the jacket up his shoulders with every step.

In the locker room she does her eyeliner until 7:32, when she dashes out just as the 4 pulls up. She takes one of the sideways seats at the front, facing the aisle. The ride is herky-jerky, and it smells like chewing tobacco, and she thinks about Rob Dertzman's eyes, his clear green eyes—their depth, the kindness loitering at the backs. Rob is seventeen, and seventeen is the perfect age for Nyla, because younger is out of the question, that's lame, and the same age is too boring, and one year is next to each other like you're hooking up with a neighbor just out of convenience. Two years, though, that says there must be something special between the people because it's a little far, so it must be worth the trouble. Like how Julie will take the bus to Snap! in North Minneapolis just for their fries. A two-year difference also says the girl is probably mature, which Nyla is, and the guy must be understanding, like, he would be okay with her not knowing so much about life. And then finally with two years you know that he teaches her things. That's important.

Rob will know the main thing and be able to teach her, which is why Nyla wants him to be the one. Rob has already done it with Shayvon Reese—everybody knows that. Everyone also knows that *she* hadn't, and that worries Nyla. Her friends are talking shit.

She thinks of Jerome, this smart-ass punky boy who is always bugging her at work. Jerome says—and it is a good point maybe—that Nyla should get the first time over with, just with whoever, it doesn't matter. Jerome's funny, because he's obviously crushed out on her. One time though he wouldn't leave it alone so she gave him a porno from behind the counter and was like, *Y'all need to go use this.*

Nyla gets off at 22nd by Paws N Claws, the closest stop to Julie's. She smoothes along in a crowd for a few blocks, doing her eyes-straight-ahead-thing, telling herself to get real though, because—hello—who is she, she'd better think of some other guy who had done it, when all of a sudden she's behind these broad shoulders, and even though she hasn't seen the jacket before that says "American Eagle," she's like *OH MY GOD, Rob Dertzman!*

"Rob?" she says, yanking her ear buds out.

The boy turns around. He is cute—but not Rob.

"Sorry!" Nyla laughs. "You're not Rob!"

"Could be." The boy drops back beside her, sly but innocent, somewhat scared looking.

"Oh, it's you."

"Them tights supposed to be tight?"

Nyla blushes. "Don't look at them, damn what are you."

The boy walks with a spastic high jounce that is either reckless cool or total clueless.

"I'm a look all I want. You know you want me to." He gestures around at the sidewalk, broad Lyndale Avenue, the buildings, the sky. He is confident, and though light-skinned, it's a black kind of toughness, which Nyla likes. She groans uncertainly, but she's smiling. A white man would never proclaim on that—looking at her. Hell, she'd caught white men in suits eyeing her downtown. She'd meet their eyes, and they'd hang their heads in shame like she might tell their wives.

"Anybody can look at whatever is there," this boy adds.

Nyla grouses her face, keeping him in check. It's an excuse to look at him. He's got nice hair, shaved tight with thin sideburns like Usher. He doesn't have it going on like Usher but then Nyla never saw anyone who did in this banker town with all its freckled-faced Thorklesons. Back in Chicago there'd been dreamy ones—the trick was finding one clean, not a baller. There was even one she loved. Then Jerry had gotten the idea to take her mom and her to Minneapolis where there were *opportunities.*

"Ain't I seen you at the S.A.?" the boy says.

"That's me. You buy Swishers Sweets. You tight with Jerome and them."

"Sure, sure. Where you going to?"

"My girl Julie's."

"Oh, yeah? What be at Julie's?"

"Nothing, I just can't go home for a while."

The boy wants to know how come, and Nyla says because her mama is working.

"She don't want you hanging around by yourself?"

"Nah, she don't want me up in there."

"Man, what she care when she's away?"

"She *is* there. I'm telling your ass, she work at home."

"Oh, shit, well what she do?"

"..."

The boy contorts his face like he stubbed his toe.

"——." Nyla widens her eyes like *I know, right? Cray-cray*. Though widening them also stops the water from beading out.

Then the boy puts on a face like he ain't heard you right, then like he's saying, *Hell no*.

"Damn, why'd you go telling me that?" he yells.

"I don't know. You seem like you could handle it."

They walk for a while without saying anything. They are connected now. He wouldn't just veer off. The boy has slowed his strut/shuffle to remain beside her, and his hands are stuffed deep in his jacket pockets as if to contain some anger or excitement she has awoken. Nyla has him. *Nigga is hooked*. She looks down her chest and past her stomach. It is working! She might let him try it out.

"Imma go with you to Julie's," the boy says at last, slowly now, not so cocky. "We could see about them tights."

"Mmmm." She hums skeptically.

"Julie won't mind."

"Ha."

"Right?"

"We were gonna watch TV or something."

"Oh, see, I love me some TV! What be on?"

"I don't know. *Mad Men?*"

Something passes between them like a secreted item, like contraband through cell bars. The boy nods and mmm-hmms several times. "Dat's right, dat's right. Dem mad men." His hands come out of his pockets and he looks around away from her, his shoulders jouncing again.

Reggie surprises himself making that move, walking down Lyndale, but the girl has said yes, in her way. Suddenly the whole block looks different. He knows these houses, these alleys and streets.

"If you coming with," the girl says, "better tell me your name."

He tells her, "Reggie."

"I'm Nyla."

"Cool."

They cut over to Colfax Avenue, where he tells Nyla that this is the street where that kid Devon got nicked on the ear by a .44 bullet just sitting on his couch one night. Devon is always showing off that missing chunk, claiming he didn't even feel it he was so high.

They arrive at Julie's house, a rickety one midway between 27th and 28th at the spot where the tree roots push up the sidewalk, leaving treacherous concrete ledges that you skateboard over in only one direction. It is a one-story house with a rocking chair on the porch. Reggie hangs back while Nyla knocks, and when Julie opens the door, she makes introductions. Then Julie lets them in to a small room that smells like a daycare. Julie has a beautiful face and patches of vitiligo on her neck—pink ponds on a dirt-brown landscape. Her tire-black hair is straightened and worn up from her forehead like Michelle, but she is chunky and wears a too-big sweatshirt nearly to her knees. She plops directly back in a massive sofa chair and grabs a bag of Twizzlers, pulling a red twisted strand out and dangling it to her mouth.

Nyla and Reggie sit on a couch to her right, a bit behind her because Julie's chair, a recliner, is away from the wall, nearly in the center of the room.

They all face a big TV. Julie flips through the stations.

"I did thirty reps on the *adductor longus* machine." She talks about the inclined ramps and kettle bells and describes creepy men's comb-overs. Reggie doesn't know

what place Nyla is talking about exactly and doesn't ask. She's talking about white women and their sweatpants.

"Man, white boys all be wearing T-Wolves jerseys," Reggie adds, because it seems to fit.

"Her man Dertzman wears a Garnett," Julie says, laughing.

"Girl, Dertzman ain't my man!" Nyla looks at Reggie. "I don't even *like* him. Anyway, I'm too good for him," she says.

Reggie likes the way she plays, hard but not for real, like a puppy that pretend-bites your hand.

They flip past a couple channels carrying the same thing—the two suited men on stage—in varying color densities.

"Oh, this is hilarious. Are you watching this?" Nyla asks Julie.

"No."

"We're supposed to, for Harwood."

"Shit, I didn't know!" Julie yells. "I was out today. My sister got sick."

"Mr. Harwood assigned it!"

Reggie says, "I saw this already. These brothers are all up on currency."

"Put on *Mad Men*," Nyla implores.

"No, y'all, we need to watch this," Julie says. She's working the Twizzlers as if they had the answers to the questions Mr. Harwood might ask tomorrow and eating them put the answers in her brain. "If you can say one thing about homework, Harwood'll get off your back."

"I know—right?" Reggie says.

"Shut up!" Nyla laughs. "You don't even have Mr. Harwood. You're a junior."

Reggie laughs back.

In the next half hour, the sun goes down, and they see the debates conclude in the dark, the muddy light washing over them like a curtain of water. Julie puts something else on TV. Reggie is not watching. He stopped watching long ago. He's been twitching his eyes to Nyla, and all the while it's been like an ostrich egg being shoved up his gullet from below. He moves close to Nyla, and she slouches so far down that her lap is flat and seems to invite Reggie's hand to creep over. He starts on her belly and inches down, arriving at her waistband like a knight to a drawbridge. He gets his fingers under her tights and then the pressurized, kind of hot-pepper-tasting spike in his throat. His hand is frozen. He can't move it.

The thing that had happened after school was asking his dad, Patrick, if it was true what Ms. Deloit, the English teacher, had said, that he could be anything he wanted to be, even the president, because she had been talking about America's first black president who was now running for reelection and was debating his opponent that night, which Ms. Deloit said everyone should watch for the pure spectacle of history. *Son*, Reggie's dad had said, gripping a skillet in one hand and about to flip it with what he called, when he was in a good mood, his "patented maneuver" (and Reggie's mom called "Can't afford a spatula"). *As long as you got what you got, as long as you is what you is, you can't be no one. I hate to say it, but you may well know now so it won't bother you findin out later.*

What about Obama? Reggie had asked.

First off, you ain't him. Second, if you think he's getting in again, you a bigger fool than you look. It's a fluke he got in, and he ain't getting back in any sooner than you is.

He was in one of his moods. They just hit when they hit, and Reggie could never tell when that would be, which was bullshit because he wasn't even Reggie's real dad. His real dad had left sooner than Reggie could remember and his mother had joined up with Patrick when Reggie was nine, and they'd all moved up from Atlanta when Northwest Airlines merged with Delta and they needed techs at Minneapolis-St. Paul Intl.

Patrick wasn't his real father, but his word was gospel, and that about settled it for Reggie. He went to his room and walked back and forth picking up his baseball cards and putting them down, picking up his math textbook and putting it down, and the Mercedes hood symbol he'd wrenched off a car once, and the *Penthouse* magazine that Jerome said the cashier at SuperAmerica had given him. With each item passing through his hands Reggie had moved closer to a plan, as if they were notches he was cutting in a key, a sequence that had to be performed like tipping certain stones to get a tomb wall to open. Finally he did it, he put the answer in place on what he'd been wondering about for a while—whether people who were *somebody* started that way or what. It was clear now, undeniable. These things got settled early on, and there wasn't anything Reggie could do about it. Some people came loaded with current, and their lights lit up bright. Not him though. Reggie was like a dead battery, which is what had happened in lab when he and T'shawn Reynolds put on their safety goggles and tried to touch the nodes with the wires and create a circuit for Miss Ingersoll, the tiny

white lady with the tiny white lady butt, who didn't even care that it wasn't their fault, didn't care that they didn't do anything to break it.

When Reggie had broken free from the apartment with his jacket on, that had helped, but really everything since had confirmed Patrick's words to be the consensus of the universe. Reggie would never know enough to remark sarcastically to politicians (*Yeah, right*, Redbeard had uttered) and animals and their enemies would always be kept in separate cages, even people he liked would forget his name, and he would never get with a girl who would plunge the ball underwater forever. He'd have to pop it himself.

It all infuriates him to the point of exasperation, and on Julie's couch, paralyzed, unable to get his sweaty hand a millimeter closer to Nyla's thing, though he wants to, and which he's pretty sure she wants him to touch because it is so kind of *out there* in her tights, he tips over and lands his chin on Nyla's shoulder with a sadly final thud. She turns her head a bit and looks as if curious. *You look like you could handle it*, she had said. He cannot. Reggie shuts his eyes, shuts out the TV's blubbering blue light. *You can't be no one*. He keeps his hand where it is and stretches his jaw wide. He puts his lips to the bare skin beside the tank top strap—perfume and salt on his tongue like earth. His throat is too swollen to breathe and searing with pain. He snaps his teeth down on her flesh.

Nyla screams and leaps to her feet, the waistband of her tights snapping as Reggie's hand pops out. She slugs him on the head with her open hand.

"Hey!" a man's voices calls from the back room of Julie's house, a thunderous, mean voice. "Julie!"

Julie leaves the room and comes back saying, "You guys gotta go. My dad's sleeping."

Out on the busted sidewalk, Reggie is relieved and terrified—now he'll have to go home. He asks for Nyla's number.

"I already got a boyfriend," she says.

Reggie can see she is clearly lying. But he is out of fight. "A'ight den," he says.

He shuffles slowly up 32nd Street to Aldrich, sniffing the spruce in the fall air, dragging his feet through heaps of leaves—wind-fathered, wind-gathered. A heavy truck chugs by on Lyndale Avenue that sounds like the truck his cousin drives for a beverage distribution company. *His cousin said he thought there might be something*

in the plant, driving forklift or filling orders on the line. It is probably him now that he hears, Reggie figures, but the engine rumble fades. Before turning the corner he looks back to Julie's. *Damn.*

Paws N Claws isn't open. It's been closed two hours.

He walks on, looking at houses, into honey-yellow dining rooms. Does he really know these houses? He reaches Bryant Ave., and there's something new: a dog in a yard, fenced in. He knows this yard. It has a canoe under a blue tarp by a woodpile. But it never had a dog before. It's a new dog. Reggie stops and looks at it sitting on its hindquarters behind a chain-link fence, with a small square snout and short pointy ears and alert eyes. It's all keyed in on Reggie yet doesn't bark.

Reggie crouches down and puts his fingers through the chain link to pet it, but the dog backs up. Not frightened really, or being tricky, just retreating with the same look on its face like it has an expectation of him. So Reggie stands and leans over the fence, but he can't reach. Just then the dog whimpers as if he wants Reggie to come in. So in one swift move he'd done a hundred times he hops over into the yard. He crouches, takes the placid pooch in his arms and stands. He's holding it and petting its scruffy neck and ears, when suddenly, as if startled, the dog scurries up Reggie's chest and springs over the fence, landing with a jangle of its collar on the sidewalk.

Just like that, the ball is back, and he realizes it never went away, he'd missed with trying to pop it in his teeth—trying to bite it, chomping the girl instead. Reggie is clutching his throat when the porch light comes on at the house of the yard he's standing in. He is blinded by the bright white light, its rays streaking in his eyes like laser beams. He stoops as if he might duck it. A door creaks and a voice calls, "Michael? That you?"

It's either a woman's regular voice or a man's lifted by familiar tenderness, something that Reggie knows from old shows on TV—prairie dramas and green acres like they had in olden times.

The yard is silent a second. The city too. The dog, sitting on the other side of the fence, docile on his hindquarters again, looks alert still, like he has a stake in this, but only a few dollars. The wide long street is behind him like a getaway.

"Tommy?" the voice calls.

Reggie answers, "No, I ain't Tommy."

"Oh," says the voice. "Who is it then?"

Reggie puts his hands in his pockets. "Nobody, I guess."