



The Ravine

By Chin-Sun Lee

The sound of a wasp near her ear made Julia startle, upsetting her porcelain teacup. The cup produced a loud clattering noise against its saucer. Some hot liquid spilled onto her hand and the broad wooden table.

Doris said, “Careful, that’s my grandmother’s Wedgewood.”

“Isn’t it early for wasps?” Robert asked idly. Music from the phonograph drifted from the sitting room through the screened patio doors, the horns and strings of Percy Faith building to a percussive, cheerful crescendo. Doris made a face; popular music was not to her taste, but Julia had selected the record, preferring something uplifting to offset the company. No one inquired whether Julia was all right or moved to wipe the table. She dabbed at three small dark spots with her linen napkin while Doris watched. Doris was Robert’s stepmother, a statuesque, imposing woman in her early fifties. She had been a neighbor and friend of his mother’s until her death; two years later, she married Robert’s father. Then he developed tuberculosis and, after several years of illness, also died. As these events occurred when Robert was already a young man, he still called Doris by her name and not ‘Mother.’ Their relationship was strange to Julia; they rarely conversed yet seemed to have an understanding beyond the need for words.

She’d insisted Julia call her Doris too when they first met. “Goodness sakes,” she said, “Mrs. Quindlen would just be confusing now, wouldn’t it.” Friendly words delivered with a

dour, thin-lipped smile. They did not like each other and had pretty much dropped any effort at pretense after the first week.

This was hard for Julia initially, for such frankness was not in her nature; but now she found it liberating.

Sometimes the only satisfaction of her day was in doing something she knew Doris would find displeasing.

The older woman said, "I think there's a nest outside your window. I'd keep it closed, they might come in."

"Oh no," said Julia. "I'm awfully scared of wasps and bees. Someone once told me a frightful story about a man who was napping in his yard. He opened his mouth to yawn and a wasp flew right in and stung him! His head swelled up and he died—some allergic reaction, I think."

Robert frowned and said disapprovingly, "That's rather morbid, don't you think?"

"I have always been morbid," she retorted, then immediately wondered why she would say such a thing. And yet it seemed the most truthful declaration she'd ever made to him.

It was late in February. There was still snow on the mountains behind them but the vast plain overlooking Summer Lake was dry with tall field grass and bare willow branches. Julia had pictured Oregon crowded with forests, lush and wet and green—and driving up from California, they had passed through areas like that—but where Doris lived it was arid and empty, yellow and brown. There was some beauty to it but there was nothing to do, nothing except watch the changing colors of the sky and the cloud formations, and mist-like dust storms off in the distance. The weather could change at any given hour. In just three weeks she had seen a blizzard, howling windstorms, and hard lashing rain. Sudden bursts of sunshine appeared—with vivid, hallucinatory rainbows—then vanished just as quickly.

The last two mornings had been warm enough for them to have their breakfast on the front deck, set out with Doris' china and silverware. She liked such niceties sometimes but on other occasions scoffed at the mere suggestion of glamour. When Julia mentioned (foolishly in the beginning, trying to impress) that she'd once worked at Warner Brothers Studios, Doris said, "Oh, Hollywood," as if it were some diseased metropolis. But Julia knew

she rifled through her belongings. She came back from a walk one afternoon and noticed the tulle edge of her petticoat poking out from her closed suitcase, and in the small wardrobe she shared with Robert, her pale pink rabbit stole hung askew.

Robert said, "It looks like the sun might hold today. I think I'll drive to Silver Lake and take pictures of those petroglyphs. I'll phone Harrison to round up the crew."

"May I join?" Julia asked, keeping her voice neutral. Robert did not like people begging for favors.

"Julia," he said patiently, "we're not going there to conduct a tour. It's an excavation."

"I don't expect a tour," she said with a light laugh.

"Good. Then the matter is settled." He stood, scraping his chair back, and she knew by the way he folded his napkin she'd been dismissed.

"Naturally, since you've decided." Now she didn't care how she sounded. He went into the house and she wanted to cry. What would she do today? She bit down on her lip and looked out at the playa, away from Doris' satisfied smirk. Before the trip, she'd assumed she would participate in Robert's research; he'd made it sound as if her skills would be helpful. But since they arrived he had kept her excluded from any fieldwork. Her assistance, he said, would come later, when it was time to compile his notes. It appeared that her contribution to mankind was to be strictly clerical.

She had been lonely before she'd married. It never occurred to her she could be just as lonely tethered to someone—lonelier, as there was no reason to be.

"You should learn not to have expectations," Doris now chided. "Robert's not one to hold. That's how he's been, that's how he'll be. Married or no." Julia was affronted by her forwardness, but before she could think of an appropriate response, Lucille came out to clear the table. She was sixteen years old, stricken mute since childhood, and the daughter of the caretaker who tended Doris' ranch a few miles south, near the town of Paisley. She wore her brown hair back in a thick long plait and scuttled around the house, a pale shadow, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Julia found her creepy but, feeling forlorn, had once tried to make friends. She'd touched her arm lightly to get her attention and the girl shrank away, making a throaty hissing sound. It had been shocking—like seeing a deer bare its teeth.

The thought of another day spent cooped up with these strange, hostile women was intolerable. Julia had read all her books and issues of McCall's and Confidential, and was bored to death with the two nearby walking trails she'd explored along the lake's perimeter. There was nothing to see in the nearest towns and anyway, Robert often took the car. She couldn't imagine how she would occupy herself for the next twelve days before they could finally leave for Vancouver, where Robert lived and taught two archaeology courses at the University of British Columbia. Julia envisioned lecture receptions, faculty dinners, a steady if small social circle.

She followed her husband into the house. He was in the study, his back toward her, talking on the telephone. She went to their bedroom and changed into her walking clothes: a long-sleeved shirt with dungarees, galoshes, a wide-brimmed straw hat, and large sunglasses. Returning to the study, she found him folding up his tripod. "Robert," she announced, "I'm going to walk a bit up that mountain trail today. I'll need one of your knapsacks—and those extra binoculars, if you can spare."

He looked up with a scowl. "Are you mad, hiking on your own? That trail is seven hours back and forth, and it gets rough after the first few miles. You're hardly equipped and besides, it's highly improper. May I remind you that this is a small town?"

"Oh, who's around to care? And I don't plan to go the whole way, obviously. I just want to see something different. You said before the first part was easy. Please, Robert, I'm at wits end. If I don't do or see something different soon then I will go mad!"

"Don't be dramatic. You haven't even the proper shoes. Those galoshes have no tread."

"She could borrow my mountain boots." They both turned in surprise to see Doris standing in the doorway. "That is, if they fit."

"For god's sake," Robert said, "don't encourage her."

Julia was skeptical of Doris' sudden impulse to help. She wondered if it was to make amends for her earlier, presumptuous remark. More likely it was because she too wanted Julia out of the house. "Well, that—it's awfully kind of you to offer." She could not quite utter the words 'thank you.'

The boots were heavy and mud-caked and a bit snug (Julia had always been self-conscious of her height and long feet) but for a few hours they would do. "They're good,"

she said. They'll work just fine."

Robert looked dubious. "Don't be too adventurous. We're expected for cocktails at the Lodge at six.

The Harrisons have invited us to dinner—Paul and his wife Marjorie."

"Oh, that sounds just lovely!" Julia was thrilled at the prospect of an evening out, with new company.

Perhaps she and Marjorie could amuse each other for the remainder of her stay. "Don't worry, I won't be long. Enjoy your day, then," she said, and impulsively kissed his cheek. She'd never done anything like that before, much less in front of Doris. He flushed with annoyance, but Julia didn't care.

"So," Doris said briskly, "I'll tell Lucille not to expect you for dinner." She turned abruptly and left the room. Robert took the car and drove away soon after.

It was late morning, past ten, by the time Julia set out on her hike. She'd packed a haphazard lunch of bread, cheese, some fruit, and a thermos full of water, whatever she could assemble without getting underfoot in the kitchen. The day was glorious, sunny but crisp, and up above, a wash of cloudless pale azure seemed to stretch on forever. All around her were low dried sagebrush, manzanita bushes, and lacy gnarled tumbleweeds; and further back from the trail, ponderosa and juniper trees. The vegetation varied only slightly, but each curve in the trail produced a new panorama that captured her attention. The bright sun after so many weeks of chill felt wonderful.

A pair of hawks circled the sky in a graceful series of arcs that appeared at once lazy and purposeful. She stopped for a moment to watch in admiration. Raising the binoculars from around her neck, she focused the lenses to peer closer. At first there was nothing but sky. Then one of the hawks' wings came into view with sudden, sharp relief. She heard the sound of flapping and gasped, dropping her binoculars. The hawks appeared to be circling lower and closer...she felt a clutch of panic and froze. Then they flew slowly higher and away, and she chuckled at her foolishness. Of course it could not have been the hawks she heard but the wind.

She walked north along the hilly dirt road toward the Fremont National Forest, until she reached the beginning of the trail, marked by two rough stone pillars. It was less than a

mile from Doris' house; she looked back and could just make out the white clapboard structure with its peaked green roof—a tiny, insignificant place, she thought, containing even smaller, more insignificant people. Turning toward the trail, she breathed in deep and exhaled. She felt feverish and elated. She began her slow ascent.

Julia married Robert because she'd mistaken her surprise at his proposal for romance, and because she was thirty-seven years old and whatever looks she had were fading, as were her chances of future proposals. She was frightened by the prospect of being alone, and so tired of never accomplishing what was expected of her. Long ago, back home in Richmond, she'd taken drama classes and been told she had talent. She looked like Katherine Hepburn, some said; Jeanette MacDonald, said others. She saved the money she earned as a bookkeeper's assistant and, just before her twenty-sixth birthday, went out to Hollywood to see if she could be something. At her first open audition, the casting director set her straight: "Listen, doll, you're too tall and too old. You'll never get the lead. If you're lucky, you'll play a nurse or secretary." She became his secretary in real life and, for a few weeks, his mistress. When that ended, he was not unkind; he kept her on as his secretary.

There were other jobs after that, and different men. At some point she was aware she could become a certain type of woman, and became more circumspect. For a few years there was nothing. No suitors, and as time went on, fewer friends. In truth, she'd never been able to sustain a deep friendship with anyone, though she desperately longed to. When she was younger, she made friends easily; her looks drew attention, and she enjoyed gushing over people as well, giving them compliments even when she didn't mean them. But somehow those attachments never lasted. Eventually, her girlfriends would marry, and drop her. Even the few women she knew who were also unmarried seemed uninterested in socializing beyond the occasional lunch or movie. It puzzled and pained her. She did not know how her life had become so hollow.

She met Robert in late November at a luncheonette near the Natural History Museum where she worked, cataloging reference books in the library. It so happened he'd been spending most of his time at the museum. He was on sabbatical for a year doing research for his book on agricultural societies of Western North America during the Neolithic Period. He had been in California since September and was scheduled to leave in January. She noticed him sitting at the table across from her two days in a row. They exchanged one brief, direct look. He was not handsome; his features were in fact rather coarse—but

there was something behind his eyes that stirred a response within her. On the third and fourth days he wasn't there, and she forgot about him. On the fifth day he returned and, approaching her table, asked, "May I?"

His courtship was both determined and distant. They met for lunch almost daily, he phoned often to make evening appointments—but there were long silences between them, silences he seemed unperturbed by but which made her fidgety and, to compensate, too talkative. And he did not touch her. This pleased her at first, but after several weeks she found it perplexing, for she sensed that he wanted to. Perhaps he was old fashioned, she thought, and this was the way proper gentlemen behaved. She did not think he was light on his feet. On the contrary, he stood tall and sturdy; at six foot three he had five inches on her and made her feel almost diminutive, even in heels. He had a way of nodding his head when engaged in a subject, causing a forelock of his dark hair to fall over his right eye. She'd want to push it back and wonder if she was in love. There was one instance when, guiding her through a crowded theater, she felt his palm, warm and heavy, on the small of her back. Another time, while expounding on the merits of radiocarbon dating, he pressed his hand briefly on her wrist to make his point. She felt a jolt of heat through her body and, for a suspended moment, lost her train of thought.

Was it as simple as that? Because it had been too long since a man had touched her?

And because she had liked the idea of being an archaeologist's wife? As for his reasons for marrying her, she soon learned they were not dissimilar to her own. He must have decided it would be more advantageous to his career to have a wife and appear settled than to be a bachelor at forty. People made speculations and gossiped. But if they had questioned his manliness they would have been wrong.

They married on January 22nd, 1952, at a county clerk's office, and consummated their union hours later. Their tacit dynamic did not change; it only took on a strange new aspect. Nightly, he moved over her, silent for the most part, grunting occasionally. She felt herself to be quite incidental. His body was heavy and surprisingly hairy. She once imagined him as a bear. Then she thought, How silly, a bear. She'd never even seen one in person. He was adamant about not having children and always used contraception. Sometimes after he rolled off and lay next to her, she could tell he was still awake. At those moments their awareness of each other was painfully acute. She would want to speak, or have him say something, but what would that be? He could converse at length about his research, which she actually did find compelling. Otherwise their exchanges were brief and pertained to the every day, things that had to get done or be told. On the surface their shorthand lent

them the appearance of having been married for much longer, though technically they were still on their honeymoon.

Honeymoon. What a stupid word.

In one of her books she came across the flowery term 'lovemaking' and let out a harsh laugh. What they did was not that; it was two bodies bluntly yielding to their respective purposes. The next day she would feel shame and gratification and the desire to wound him. This was how it was that first night and for all the nights after, from one motel or lodge to the next, until they reached Doris' home, when their relations abruptly stopped. She did not know if she minded. Yes, possibly she did.

For the first part of the trail Julia walked leisurely, enjoying her sense of freedom and the widening view of the lake as her elevation increased. It was breathtaking, and she wished she had brought her small camera along with the binoculars. Turning her gaze to the zigzagging line up the mountain, she almost tripped over something on the ground. It was a curved, narrow bone, about the length of her hand, with a sharp hook at one end. At first she thought it was a claw, but when she kneeled closer, she saw the row of teeth and realized it was part of a jaw. Robert would know what animal it came from; she put it in her knapsack to show him later, as proof she wasn't squeamish.

As she continued along the steady upward incline, Julia could feel the strain in her upper legs and calves. She came upon a shaded cluster of large rocks beneath a tree and decided to rest. She was ravenously hungry and thirsty. She took huge gulps from her thermos and ate her lunch with her fingers, letting the juice from the fruit run down her chin. Wiping her hands on the front of her dungarees she thought, What a barbarian I am! And laughed.

When she stood up, however, she realized she might have jinxed herself, for she felt the sudden, urgent need to urinate. It was terribly inconvenient. She blushed at the ridiculousness of her modesty. After all, she'd encountered no one on the trail so far and the chance of someone coming along now was unlikely. Even so, she stooped behind the large rocks for concealment. Squatting awkwardly, she pushed down her dungarees and underpants and urinated as quickly as she could. She had only her lace handkerchief to wipe herself. When she was done, she nudged it underneath a shrub with her boot and,

picking up her knapsack, walked quickly away from the rocks. A moment later she laughed again, out loud, at her silly predicament. Now that it was over she felt oddly exultant.

After another mile the trail cut west, deeper into the mountain, and she could no longer see the lake. The trees were thicker and denser here, the sun shining through only in random dappled patterns. She considered turning back at this point—but it was only half past noon, and the air felt so cool and refreshing. She decided to press on. Soon the trail became crowded with brambles, and the ground muddy in some parts, with patches of melting snow around the tree trunks.

Every once in a while she saw a familiar pile of what looked like dried red mud on the ground. The first time she'd seen them, not far from the house, Doris told her they were coyote scat, pronouncing 'coyote' the way they did here, without the long 'e.' "What is 'scat?" Julia asked. Robert said after a pause, "It's dung," and then Doris felt the need to emphasize: "You know, feces. Shit." It was an offensive, extreme example of her constant efforts to undermine what she perceived as Julia's affectations of delicacy. Julia felt her judgment to be neither fair nor true. Still, she was glad she had yet to see a coyote in all these weeks, though she had heard their howling on several nights.

Suddenly she came upon a clearing with a sharp drop-off and a vast, startling view of the lake, now far, far below her. She had no idea she'd walked up so high. Inching closer to the edge, she stared at the lake below as if hypnotized. It was utterly still. The surface of the water mirrored perfectly everything above it: the placid ridge of mountains and pristine blue sky with its sparse, unmoving clouds. She could not distinguish the difference between what was real and what was reflected. The effect was spectacular but unnerving, as if time had somehow detached. A strange chill passed over her heart and she shivered.

She looked up toward the top of the mountain; it now seemed a formidable, endless task. Her wristwatch showed it was just past two. How had she lost track of the time? She still had to bathe and dress for dinner; if she made them late, Robert would be so cross. She turned back on the trail at a brisk pace, confident that walking down would be much faster than up.

The sun's intensity had begun to wane. After some time she came to another clearing, this one larger and set in a small basin. She could not remember passing it before, but in her fatigue it was getting more difficult to tell what looked familiar and what didn't. She found a path that looked like a trail and walked on it for several minutes, then stopped abruptly.

Before her, rising up to the next hill, she saw at least an acre of burnt pines, their branches stripped and charred. Most were tarry black but a few looked ashy and white, almost skeletal. Some still stood upright but the majority lay in scattered patterns, like a battleground of carcasses. The dark silhouette of one lone tree stood near the hilltop, sheared off diagonally at the trunk, its jagged end seeming to point in accusation at the sky. The blood drained from her face, not because the scene was eerie—but because she realized she was lost.

“Dear god,” she whispered. “Oh no.”

She whirled around and started running back to the clearing she had passed before, certain that was where she’d made her error. When she got there, however, she saw no sign of another trail. Everything seemed covered in thickets, but she noticed a slight indentation extending out in a new direction that might be a rough trail. It was almost four. The sun would start to set in another hour. Surely by now Robert was home and wondering where she was; perhaps he was already on his way to look for her, he and his men. She climbed down the hill and walked resolutely onto the new path. It seemed promising for several minutes, but then stopped at what appeared to be another drop-off.

The drop-off overlooked a deep wide ravine. She noticed heel-shaped prints on a narrow dirt strip leading down to the bottom. They were not her footprints—she would have remembered climbing up such a steep incline—but they were someone’s prints, which meant they must lead to a trail. Slowly, she made her descent, grabbing onto tree roots and rocks to steady herself. She was halfway down when she heard a faint sharp screech. It seemed to come from somewhere below her, but she could not tell if it was animal or human. Seconds later, muffled laughter echoed from the ravine, past a curve of the incline beyond her view. These sounds were distinctly human, and male. She started to yell out, but some ominous note in the laughter stopped her. She would have to investigate; the alternative was to risk staying lost after nightfall. Shakily, she continued her way down until she finally reached the rocky bottom of the ravine, where the tracks stopped.

Beyond a low ridge opposite the cliff, she could detect a thin rising tendril of smoke. She scrambled to the top of the ridge and came upon a dried grassy path. It was a trail—and it appeared to wind downward, toward the lake. Walking along further, she could smell the smoke and see it pluming thicker and higher against the now pinkening sky. After a short while, she saw a small flicker of flames through the trees. Drawing nearer, she heard the sound of glass breaking, and laughter again.

When she was several yards away she saw the camp: flames shooting high from a large bonfire encircled by rocks; broken bottles and cloth bundles scattered about; and what looked like a makeshift tent of branches and blankets nearby. She wondered fearfully if she'd come across the hobos she heard Doris mention once, itinerants from the Shevlin Company who'd been dispersed after its logging camps dismantled. Over the fire, small unrecognizable animals were charring on a spit—she smelled the meat, her stomach twisting first with hunger and then revulsion—and also the harsh fumes of liquor. She heard low laughter again, and saw a shadowed movement beyond the tent. She approached cautiously and hid behind a tree, pulling up her binoculars. When she looked through them she gasped.

A thin naked woman knelt in the dirt on all fours, pushing her rear into the gaunt-faced, grizzled man mounting her from behind. He was fully clothed except for the pants crumpled around his knees. Another man stood in front of the woman, one hand down his own loosened pants and the other gripping a bottle, watching the two before him with a drunken grin. He was much younger than the other man but had the same long nose, sunken cheeks, and hooded eyes. The woman's head was down, her matted blond hair trailing on the ground. Suddenly she flipped her head up and Julia, to her shock, saw that she was young, just a girl, barely older than Lucille. She was gurgling, her face stained with sweat and dirt, and her eyes had a dumb, rapturous expression. The younger man poured his drink into her open mouth while she lapped and slurped it down. Then she let out a high-pitched, hysterical screech. The older man looked up and growled, "Quit playing, boy, now you git her from the front."

Julia stood transfixed with horror at the sickening tableau. My god, she thought, they're all crazy. Slowly, she backed away from the camp, keeping as much distance as she could without losing sight of the trail. When she was far enough away, she began to run. She trampled headlong through a low thicket of brambles, heedless of the thorns scratching at her clothes and skin. The sky had darkened and was now a burnished copper, glowing with streaks of fuchsia and lavender. It was magnificent to see and unbearable;

it meant that soon the light would be gone.

Robert had returned from Silver Lake just past three, and upon hearing of Julia's absence, was at first annoyed, suspecting her loitering to be deliberate. Lately she displayed an

injured poutiness he found most unattractive. “Foolish woman,” he muttered. “What could she be up to? Damned nuisance.” When she had

not come back by four, however, he grew concerned. He was not one to raise a fuss; he particularly did not like to raise a fuss that was unnecessary. He felt another flash of irritation at Julia for forcing this dilemma upon him. But it would soon be dark, and if she were not found...what he could not abide was a scandal. Finally, he called the Deputy Sheriff’s office and explained the situation. He hesitated to cancel on the Harrisons just yet, in case Julia did show. After his phone call he went and sat with Doris in the kitchen, waiting for the Deputy Sheriff to arrive.

“What time did she leave again?” he asked. “When did she say she’d be back?”

“She didn’t, as I’ve already told you. I suppose she left shortly after you did.”

“You didn’t bother to take note of the time?”

Doris drew her spine up stiffly. “Don’t try to make me responsible, Robert. She’s your wife.”

He ignored the provocation of her words and remained silent. But now she was riled. “You shouldn’t have brought her here. If you meant to punish me, you’re only punishing her. And yourself.”

“You know a lot about punishment, all of a sudden,” he said calmly. “That would seem to contradict your reputation of caring for the infirm.”

A deep flush stained her face. He noticed with satisfaction the crepe-y texture of her neck. It was remarkable that he had ever found her handsome.

“My god,” she said, “will you never forget? You gave me no choice! I took care of him, didn’t I?”

“Yes. In return you got his name, and all his worldly goods. Those priceless things every woman feels entitled to.”

“But not from you,” she said bitterly. “At least your father cared enough to give me ‘those things’— since you wouldn’t. I’m beginning to feel rather sorry for Julia. You haven’t changed. You’ve only become more cold.”

“Have I? Coming from you, that’s quite a commendation.” He got up and left the kitchen to pace alone in the foyer. He would not give her the satisfaction of seeing him upset. He took deep breaths, clenching his fists, and tried to focus on the matter at hand. What he should do now was phone Harrison and have him meet him near the trail entrance. The more men searching, the better. At the very least he owed him the consideration of canceling dinner. He should prepare for the search too before the Deputy Sheriff arrived; gather his lantern, matches, whistle, a blanket in case of hypothermia. He remembered Julia wore only light clothing, as if she were going to a picnic in the park. Again he cursed her foolhardiness, her impetuous disregard for propriety or even common sense. She had seemed to him in the beginning malleable, manageable—but she’d proven him wrong. It was not the first time. His mind churned and boiled with unwanted memories from his youth, long buried, of women’s enticements, betrayals, demands, and reprisals. The female mind was forever elusive and cunning. If it were up to him, he’d almost feel inclined to just leave her in the forest for the night; then she would surely be taught a lesson.

Just before the sun sank, Julia came upon a crest and finally saw the lake darkly shimmering below. She tried desperately but could not outrun the fading light. The sky turned an ever deeper blue, and then a dusky grey...at this realization of her worst fear she panicked and began to scream as loud as she could: “Help! Somebody! Hel-lo-o?” Each time she paused and listened for a response. But all she heard was the sound of her own voice echoing back across the hills. Where was Robert? Surely someone would find her soon. Now, even the thought of encountering the hobos seemed more bearable than being left alone in the dark.

Soon it grew so dim she could only see shadowy shapes in the foreground. She became too frightened to make any further noise. She found a large shrub and pushed back into the rough leaves, hoping it would provide some form of shelter. It was still too cold for snakes but the thought of wild animals running loose in the night was petrifying. Would they be able to smell her? Or hear her? Her heart pumped so hard she could hardly breathe. She huddled with her arms crossed tightly over her chest, teeth chattering, each hand tucked into the opposite sleeve for warmth. Squeezing her eyes shut, she mouthed a fervent silent prayer: Please dear god oh please. She began to weep in terror and self-pity.

It was so cold. She had never known such obliterating darkness, as if the forest had closed in and entombed her. Her body ached from exhaustion and chill. Time lengthened and became interminable. She began to tally the seconds and then each minute on her hand,

but every strange crackle and gust of wind made her seize up and lose her count. There was at least a sliver of moon, and stars clustered so dense and low she imagined she could reach out and touch them. She twisted around to lie on her back so that all she took in was their brightness.

The sound of coyotes in the distance jerked her awake. At first there was only one, but soon more joined in, three or four of them filling the night with a sharp chorus of yips and howls. She lay wide-eyed, rigid with fear, listening to their baying escalate, then grow thinner, and finally cease. When all was quiet again she sat up stiffly on her knees and looked around. She had no idea how long she had slept. The crescent moon hung a bit higher in the sky and the night seemed less pitch black. She could just make out the murky silhouette of hills and trees. As she looked out at the faint landscape, a dark shape on one of the hills seemed to lurch and move. Then it was gone. She stood and squinted hard in its direction, unsure if it had been real or an illusion—or perhaps just a swaying tree. A deep, guttural breath came from the top of the hill. There it was again, and now the shape appeared larger, tall and lumbering. Something about its movement seemed familiar.

With a jolt of recognition she ran toward it. “Robert?” she screamed. “Robert!”

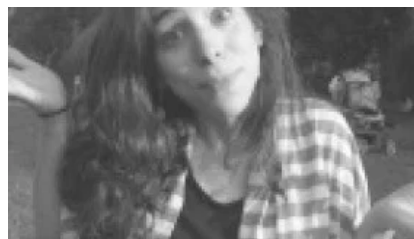
Chin-Sun Lee’s stories and essays have appeared in *SLICE*, *Shadowbox Magazine*, *Art Faccia*, and *SLAB*. She is a contributor to the anthology *Women In Clothes* (Blue Rider Press/Penguin 2014), edited by Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits, and Leanne Shapton. She collaborated and performed in the video “Spinning World” by the art/ literary/rock band The Size Queens (also featured in *Medium Cool* at *The Doctor T. J. Eckleburg Review* in November 2012), which premiered on PANK’s blog website on October 3, 2014 pankmagazine.com.



Swallow



Naga Barang



The Contract