The A train winds its way uptown like a drunken serpent, and we disembark disoriented, emerging in Columbus Circle. The trees along Central Park West, still barren this early in March, are reflected endlessly in the glass-and-chrome behemoths that loom over us like disapproving elders. My companion wrinkles his nose at the particularly gauche tower that is, for better or worse, our destination. In an effort to salvage this first moment of our miniature vacation, I start in with one of our favorite pastimes.

“What’s my name?” I demand.

He cocks an eyebrow.

“We’re going to pick different names for ourselves,” I say. “Uptown names.”

“Why?”

“Because whenever you introduce yourself you sound like you’re apologizing for something, and we need to blend in. Now, what’s my name?”

“Well, what would you like it to be?”

“Daisy.”

“Miller or Buchanan?”

“Miller.”

“Then no.”

I pretend to storm away, as I am wont to do when he is right. Eventually, we agree on the terms of our new identities (Charlotte and Thomas Reed, button manufacturing kingpins from Bethlehem, Pennsylvania) and set off into the lap of tasteless luxury that is the Trump International Hotel.

These are not our first aliases, not by a long shot; we make up new names for ourselves every chance we get. During one unfortunately long layover in
Atlantic City, we were Jordan and Steve. While down the shore over New Year’s we were Marty and Lucy. If neither of us is able to make our mark in New York City, we’re going to buy a trailer in Arizona and live as Maggie and Dale. Even before we’d officially met, I had privately dubbed him “Blue,” after the color of the cardigan he wore most days. It wasn’t until after I’d fallen in love with him that I learned what he was really called.

We’ve always been rather funny about names.

I gather my hair into an unceremonious bundle at the nape of my neck, lest it tumble into the bath water, and lean back against the edge of the basin. My second favorite thing to do in hotels, apart from crafting alternate identities, is to take long, unnecessary baths. There are three bathrooms to choose from in our suite, but this one is the biggest and by far the most ornate. There’s a little nook built into the far side of the room, featuring a well-lit dressing room mirror straight out of a Bette Davis film and a little pouf chair. The whole thing is overly cinematic, and I don’t much mind.

He wanders into the bathroom and grins at my penchant for simple indulgences.

“For you,” he says, placing a glass of twenty-dollar scotch on the edge of the bathtub. I accept it, grinning at his penchant for simple indulgences. There is a book under his arm, as ever. I ask him what it is, and he holds up the paperback for my appraisal: Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.

“It seemed appropriate for a sleepover at Midas’s palace,” he says.

“Can you read me some?” I ask.

“If you’d like,” he says. “Which part?”

“Guess.”

He lets the book open to its natural crease, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. I’ve read it so many times that I could probably recite it from memory, but I like the way his voice gets when he reads aloud. As Orpheus descends to the underworld in pursuit of his love, I slide a little further into the water until I am submerged from the mouth down. Orpheus suffers a moment of doubt, turns to confirm Eurydice’s unwavering devotion, and she is lost forever. A rogue drop of salt water slips down my cheek and into the soapy tub. The lovers’ despair reaches me from across the gaudy bathroom, off the page, through a translator’s careful verse, and in someone else’s voice. From this far away, it’s a beautiful story. I kick the plug from the drain and let sorrow swirl away with the bath water.
The suite's glass walls look down onto a traffic circle where toy horses trot beside taxi cabs. I stand in the cavernous living room with bath-dampened hair and will my skeptical mind to be silent. I am trying to find my way to the shore of Lethe. Sarah Ruhl's words are waiting for me there, a passage from her *Eurydice*. My old man's bath-time invocation of Ovid has led me to counter with this dramatic rendering. It's not in my nature to shy away from the mythic.

The seed of my adoration for Ruhl's play lies in her author's note: “Eurydice and Orpheus should be played as though they are a little too young and a little too in love.” I, being guilty of both these “little” extremes, delight at Ruhl's permission to locate the mythic within my own life's narrative. For weeks I've been struggling to approach this play, struggling to find a way past myself, into a soul without a body. It is not going well.

I give myself a shake, as if to dislodge my stubborn actor's ego from its perch. “To My Husband's Next Wife,” I recite, beginning with the end of the play:

Be gentle.  
Be sure to comb his hair when it's wet.  
Do not fail to notice  
that his face flushes pink  
like a bride's  
when you kiss him.  
Give him lots to eat.  
He forgets to eat and he gets cranky.

When he's sad...

But it's no use. The words whine through my teeth and fall, lifelessly, into space. I hide my face in my hands and sink into an overstuffed armchair, squirming and shifting as if I could squeeze into the role of Eurydice like a too-small dress.

“I can't do it,” I tell him, slapping at the armrest. “I don't know how to imagine it.”

“You're thinking too hard,” he says from across the room. He's been observing my struggle, doing his very best to diagnose my dilemma without quoting Jung at me. “How are you going at it?”

“I'm trying to imagine what it would be like,” I say. “To give those instructions sincerely.”

“Yeah, Jesus,” he says. “What the hell would that take?”

“Selflessness,” I say, drawing my knees into my chest. “Some unearthly kind of selflessness.”
“Is that the root of those lines?” he asks.
“That’s just it,” I say, “there is no root. She’s completely uprooted.”
“Right. So, what’s that feel like?”
I scoff.
“Don’t do that. Just . . . here.” He places his hand below my ribs, above my navel. “Feel it from here, right here. Let yourself be tugged away.”
I swallow a frustrated sigh and close my eyes, trying to ignore the neon emblems gleaming through the parted blinds. What would it take to be unmoored? What would I have to lose, what would I have to forget, to let myself be ripped from the world?
I try it from the beginning this time:

There was a roar, and a coldness—
I think my husband was with me.
What was my husband’s name?
My husband’s name?
Do you know it?
How strange, I don’t remember.

As I say it, I realize that it’s true. I blink against the darkness that exists beyond time with eyes that are no longer there. I feel that I’ve travelled an impossibly long way from home, but I can’t remember where or what home was. I invite myself to feel something, anything at all, but you can’t light a match in an airless place.

Something flutters against my ribcage, faint as the stirring of a phantom limb. Before I can wonder at the subtle sensation, the moment of stasis has passed—it collapses in on itself like a dead star and rips the veil away from my eyes. At once, I remember everything. I can see the world’s narrative straight to the end. The roaring approach of inevitable loss forces the air from my lungs, and my words rush away on the expulsion:

It was horrible to see his face
when I died. His eyes were
two black birds
and they flew to me.
I said—no—stay where you are—
he needs you in order to see!

I reach for him, and my outstretched arms close around air. I remember all I’ve lost at the very moment it slips, irrevocably, through my fingers. A seam splits, wrenching open an impassable chasm; he is there, across the gorge, all that I hold sacred. I am here, but where is that? And who is he? I don’t remember.
I forgot his name.
I forgot all the names . . .

I can’t go on for weeping. On the very brink of drowning, my rational mind gives a mighty kick that propels me back to the surface. My cheeks, wetter than bath-damp now, are red with the agitation of experience. I look down and am startled to find him still there. A sorrow that does not belong to me is reflected endlessly in his eyes. I rub away my baffling tears—their presence signifies my failure.

“Well, that was a disaster,” I say. “Look at the stage direction for those lines: She tries to cry but finds that she can’t. How the hell . . . ?” I’m alarmed to see that his eyes have gone misty. “I’m sorry . . . I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t,” he says, doing a bad job of keeping the sadness from his voice, “It wasn’t you. You weren’t even in the room, but . . . Where were you?”

“I have no idea,” I say. “Where were you?”

We wonder at our penchant for sorrowful things and share another nip of scotch.

“Oh, Thomas,” I sigh, “we’re becoming a couple of sad bastards, aren’t we?”

“But Charlotte,” he says, “isn’t that what people long for, being in love?”

Having spirited away as many hotel toiletries as possible, we descend once more from the tower. The gold-leafed lobby is particularly blinding in the early morning sunlight.

“Will you make it back downtown in time?” he asks.

“Oh, sure,” I say. “The audition’s not until three.”

“Do you feel prepared now?”

“Not really. But it’ll be good enough.”

“It’s not the first monologue I’d think of for Elizabeth Proctor, but it seems right.”

“I hope so. Eurydice’s never failed me yet.”

Act Three of The Crucible is building to a fever pitch onstage, where it is February in Salem, Massachusetts. Backstage it is still December in New York City, the beginning of an ambivalent winter, and I am far too young to be playing Elizabeth Proctor. Wiggling into the cotton-and-gauze contraption that lends me the bulge of pregnancy, reminding myself to stand just a bit more to the left at the end of the act, I am nothing but a mechanic.
A bell begins to toll beyond the thick black curtain that shrouds my dressing room from the theater proper, and I go to stake out a corner of the backstage world. The man who is playing my husband leans against the wall, exhausted, and we trade feeble smiles. In a few moments, I will not have seen him for months; I will be swollen and stooped with the burden of carrying his child; he will be condemned to die at sunrise. But that's all moments away, centuries away from now. Asking the mechanic to step aside, I depart to an oft-visited daydream to fetch what I need for Elizabeth's sake.

A feral cat yowls her discontent into the darkness of the garden below. In the densely fallen twilight, her moans rise, disembodied, and I wish that I didn't believe so strongly in omens. A chubby projectile crashes against my hip and sticks there. My little one is always quick to hear spirits in the hours before midnight. I comb my fingers through his bath-dampened hair. “Did she scare you?” I ask, invoking the keening beast of the yard below.

“He's supposed to catch her!” he wails. His eyes are so much bluer when he's been crying. “He said he was gonna catch her and tell her to mind her manners!”

“Dad said that?” I ask. It's something his father would say. The mention of “Dad” sets off another round of despondent hysterics. It's been hours since our cat-wrangler should have been home. There are times I wish he'd let someone else put things right in the world. But I don't suppose I'd love him, if he could stand to.

“Is Dad going to fix it?” he whispers into my hair.

“Yes,” I say without asking what “it” is, “of course Dad's going to fix it.”

My mechanical self, watching from centuries away, prompts me to let the narrative race toward its inevitable end. I do not have the luxury to linger, wondering whether I am strong enough to confront the mythic; I need to seek that sacred despair I've only glimpsed fleetingly through others' eyes. I go to unmoor myself, but find that I am tethered, pulled back into the reality of stage makeup and lines memorized by rote. As Act Four rushes onward, I realize that I've let my well of imagined experience run dry. I turn to The Crucible itself, hoping that the circumstances at hand will incite sorrow on their own.

John Proctor is going to die, I tell myself, begging the play to affect me. But that is Elizabeth's narrative, her despair, and holds no sway over me. I remain unmoved. Frantically, I begin invoking other stories that never fail to fill me with sorrow. Think of Seymour Glass! I plead with myself, Think of Francie Nolan! Think of Septimus Smith! For God's sake, think of Eurydice.
But thinking isn’t good enough, and I cannot be moved, not even by Orpheus’s bride. I realize with cold panic that I am unprepared, no longer ahead of the thought. Left with no other choice, I cede my control of the moment. As I relinquish my carefully laid-out preparation, a foreign image begins to materialize in the recesses of my imagination. I lean in closer to inspect the diversion, and instantly, I am engulfed.

The vitality drains from my body, and I feel my face harden into flint. My eyelids are ironclad, but I don’t think I’ll ever sleep again. I lift my gaze and look out across an endless, barren desert. An icy wind sends dust snaking around my ankles and something beyond the range of my vision speaks, telling me he’s gone.

I wrench my face away from the acrid, decaying breath of inevitable things, and see him lying prostrate in the unclean sand. His face is unfamiliarly gaunt. He is grotesque and I crawl to him, bloodying my bare knees. I gather as much of him as I can into my inadequate arms. Rage rises like bile in my throat as I remember my ridiculous wish to understand this bottomless shadow, this ultimate loss of love.

“Please,” I moan. It is all I can manage. “Please, please, please . . .”

Heavy chains fall on my wrists and I am ripped from the world of despair I’ve created. I’m shoved unceremoniously into an anteroom, my bare feet scraping against the stone floor. The town fathers of Salem look on, erect and petrified like cloaked columns. My husband is led into the room, and as we move toward each other, the columns hide their eyes for shame.

From beneath the cloak of character, my mechanical self observes the proceedings. I know that I should relinquish this guarded part of me, but it would be so painful to bear the action fully. I’m not as brave as the woman I’m pretending to be, but still I cannot cower. My body forces me to take a breath and I am dragged violently to the surface. The disorientation of ascent brings me to tears. My husband, my sacred companion, stands beaten and diminished before me. I realize that I cannot bear to lose him and that he was never mine to keep.

The joy of communion between self and character might leave me riven in two as they drag John Proctor away. I run to the window of the courthouse, look across the barren ground, and see the gallows. I can see to the end of all things as they slip the noose around his neck.

“Please, please, please . . .”

I hang Elizabeth’s dress on the rack, smoothing its wrinkled bodice with my hands. My family and close friends are assembled beyond the curtain,
waiting for me to emerge from the dressing room. I'm stalling for time, lingering here as long as I can. I suffer from the sort of stage fright that waits to strike until after the curtain has fallen. The thought of mingling after performances has always made me cringe with anxiety, and tonight I am especially wary of post-show socializing. I am not yet ready to have my arms filled with flowers, for celebratory drinks, for praise, or queries, or opinions.

I conjure up a convenient lie with which to ward off questions: *When a performance is going well*, I'll tell them, *I can't remember it afterwards*. It isn't true, of course, but the truth is too complicated for dressing-room doorways.

The truth is that I'll remember everything, whether I want to or not. Even after I've bid farewell to Salem, I won't forget what passed through me there. I won't remember the lines I dropped or on which night we received a standing ovation. Instead, I'll remember the look on my husband's face as he died. I'll remember my son, and the battered man in the arid desert.

I'll remember these images with as much clarity as I remember the look of sorrow on my old man's face as he sat on a garish hotel sofa and watched me unmoor myself for the first time. Imaginary or not, these moments are sacred, and they are not mine to divulge. They may have passed through me, may have moved me, but they did not begin with me. These made-up images, these lies of experience, are not just fanciful daydreams; they are run through with truths so vast that only the mythic can contain them. I cannot claim them, flaunt them as my own; I am not so vain as to rob Eurydice of her due.

I won't recount *The Crucible*'s moments of sacred despair so flippantly. I don't care to spoil Elizabeth's sorrow by mining it. For how could I ever admit that at the moment of Proctor's death, I was not thinking of him, or even of Orpheus, but of the man in the desert? And how could I even account for that desert, except to say that I live in fearful and rapturous certainty that I will one day be forced to return to it?