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Dog Beach, 2013
Egg tempera on wood, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY

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Something Miraculous

I'd been praying for something miraculous to happen; yesterday seemed like it might be the day until my cat threw up on the floor. The glob of star-shaped food matted into the carpet made it hard to imagine anything out of the ordinary. Today, my cat was fine. She woke me by brushing her whiskers across my cheek, and we spent the morning lying in an aquarium of light.

I poured a bowl of cereal even though I didn't have clean spoons. The prize came out first, rattling around in the bottom of the bowl. It was a new spoon. I could tell that after years of failure things were turning around. The Earth had shifted on its axis while I was sleeping and was spinning the way it was always meant to.

I read the newspaper but skipped the parts about children disappearing and fires burning near homes. I read a story about a man who saved a boy from drowning in the Pacific. Maybe life had been dirty and cruel because that's all we ever see. Maybe the world was like the surface of the ocean, where seals are flipped in the air by sharks, but underneath lie symbiotic relationships of cyclical beauty.

I decided to start a magazine that would only report good things. It would have pictures of pets that had been found, not lost. Instead of pictures of kids with distended bellies, we'd have children playing baseball or eating a bowl full of rice donated by generous people who could possibly even be us. Our front cover would not say 45 Ways to Get Him Hot in Bed. It would say 45 Ways to Love the Beautiful and Unique Person That Is You.

I didn't know if the world was ready for my happiness, so I started sweeping the floor. Sweeping the floor has always made me sad because it goes back to being dirty so fast. When I was done, I put the broom next to the stove and called Sally, the only other woman who understood me. I told her that something miraculous was happening today.

While waiting for Sally, I looked out the window; the sky looked like a bowl of cream. The air was still, and the bases of the mountains were visible. Their black outlines rose into the clouds, making a cap of light-gray snow. I thought about how geologists find the skeletal remains of long-dead sea creatures on mountaintops and the millions of years it takes for the sea to recede and the shifting of the Earth's plates to turn a valley into a mountain. I thought that if we had millions of years here something miraculous would happen to us all.

Sally drove over, and I tried to let her in but the buzzer didn't work. It should have been my first clue that nothing was different. I walked downstairs, barefoot, in my bathrobe. The cement was cold, and one of the neighbors whistled at me through his window. I wanted to turn around and say, "Screw you!" But I didn't because today I was an integral part of a beautiful world.

Today, my neighbor was a really handsome doctor who worked daily on flattening his abs. He was single, modest about his good looks. He liked girls who lived alone with cats, which wasn't always easy to find. Most men prefer dogs because, like men, they hump indiscriminately. He wanted to tie me up on his bed so we could play "doctor" and have mind-blowing sex. He wanted to kiss me slowly on the spine first because he knew that's what I liked.

I tried to ignore the warm feeling that spread up my legs. I pushed the button, and Sally came in the rusted iron gate. She pulled me close and buried her nose in my hair. "You smell like peaches," she said.

We walked upstairs together, but no one whistled. He probably thought I was a lesbian now, so I forgave him. I'm always forgiving men for not loving me. In the house, we sat and drank cups of tea. Sally complained about her ex-husband and started to cry. I held her hand in my own and whispered "Shhhh . . . shhhh," as if she were a child, and I was the wind drying tears.

I told Sally about the Earth spinning in a different direction today. I asked her if she had noticed the change in the quality of light. I told her that I thought we were all underwater now, but because we weren't thinking about it, we were breathing just fine. It was like we were back in the amniotic fluid of our mothers, safe in the womb of the world.

"You're insane," she said, smiling at me anyway.

She had always loved me because I am a dreamer.

She looked at me. Her eyes were deep wells that I imagined swimming into, taking long smooth strokes through the emptiness of the iris until I reached the exterior, where I would lie on the white sand beach of her sclera as waves of brown sadness lapped at my feet.

Perhaps I loved her; it was hard to tell. I have always loved men and cats.

"If we're underwater, I guess I better start swimming," Sally said, lifting her hands over her head, pretending

to swim the crawl. She turned her head to the side and breathed in on every third stroke. Her hair curled over her face, left a shadow on her cheek.

We laughed together, and Sally put her hand on my thigh. She leaned forward, and we started to kiss because she was the only person in the world who almost understood me. She wrapped her arms around my waist and then moved them up my ribcage, light fingers on my chest, a strange sensation of drowning. I pulled away from her and leaned back into the embrace of the couch.

We listened to each other breathe.

I smiled because I was imagining the doctor dropping hot candle wax on my stomach and touching the inside of my thighs with his stethoscope. I kissed her again, imagining him checking my heartbeat. We finished kissing, and I put away our cups of tea.

When I walked back into the room, Sally said, "Is that what you meant? Was that the miraculous thing?"

I looked at the space of carpet between us, the ocean floor—crabs scuttling on the ground, sea stars and sea anemones, thousands of things waiting to be touched. I knew that she wanted me to swim to her, so we could be alone on the island of the couch. I was still underwater; I did not have the breath to tell her that I didn't like girls, that I'd been imagining a handsome doctor, that I'd spent the morning believing in something beyond me.

So I told her I wanted to start a magazine and that she could help me write articles that would help people change. I told her it was my calling.

"Is that what you called me here for? This magazine?"

I nodded because she wanted me to say a thousand other things that I couldn't. It doesn't change things, wanting to love someone because it would be nice to have a pre-warmed bed.

Sally stood and told me that we should go for a drive on the coast. She put her shoes back on and moved to the doorway. I swam after her into the morning light, walked across the shaded courtyard dotted with trash and the wreckage of children grown up—rusted toys and plastic buckets—the detritus of family life that reminds me of being alone.

We got into the car, and I wondered if I should tell her that I had made a mistake. Maybe I could learn to love her. She had thin lips, which weren't pleasant to kiss, but maybe I could learn to love them too.

"Where are we off to?" I asked, trying to fill the silence.

Sally stared out the window at the sun, a blob of light over the ocean, spreading itself like oil on top of the water. "I thought we could drive by our old college haunt," she said.

And I thought how even in college Sally had probably liked women, but she'd never told anyone, how this was sadder than all the whales being harpooned by the Japanese. I remembered all those nights she'd listened to me talking about men, how bored she must have been. I put my hand on hers, "You're a good woman, Sally."

She smiled, "Fat lot of good that's done me."

She drove down Milpas past the Hamburger Habit and onto the cracked side streets where all the Hispanics lived—chain-link fences, fading pastel houses, moms pushing strollers to the local Laundromat. It felt like we were supposed to be there, driving into our past, that of the million places we could have been, God had chosen this one, and it was going to be okay.

"When you kissed me, did it mean anything?" Sally asked, her voice shaking a little.

I thought about telling her that in many cultures women kiss on the lips as a sign of friendship. And that I had seen my mother once kiss a female friend, their skirts lifting in a breeze. A brief brush of lips before the strollers went in opposite directions home—toward dishes, toward dinner, toward endless cycles of laundry and the smell of my father's cherry cigars wafting in from the living room. But I didn't know if that memory was real; it had the grainy quality of an old movie, of something I had made up.

"Look at how decrepit they've gotten," I said, pointing to the row of pink Spanish-style apartments where we'd lived on Salinas. Rust crept up the drains, and the sidewalks were pushed up by the roots of trees.

Sally turned the car in a slow circle at the end of the street, driving past the apartments again. I imagined the tidal wave that had come in the middle of the night and washed over these apartments. I thought about how water could invade every part of you but still hold you softly, like no lover ever could.

"It's been a fucked up couple of years," Sally said, tapping the wheel with her fingers. "Who knew all the men in my life were going to turn out to be useless."

I wanted to tell Sally that life doesn't listen to you

unless you grab it by the throat, how you couldn't want things to change, you had to make them. That's why I'd been praying for something miraculous, something to change.

"You've been like a godsend for me. Do you know that?" she said, patting my knee with her short, square fingers.

She turned back onto Salinas, and we headed for Milpas. The sunlight crept through the clouds in a thousand different places like bits of water through a leaking dam.

"Have you ever seen *Thelma & Louise*?" she asked.

"No," I said, not sure where we were going.

"It's about these two women who are so messed up by men their whole lives that they start running. But no matter where they try to run to it's more of the same shit. And at the end, they just say fuck it, the cops are chasing them for a murder they didn't commit, and they just drive off a cliff. It's a triumph, and it ends with a freeze frame on the slow arc of the car, and you can just picture them both, sitting in the car for eternity, the happiest moment of their lives."

I told her that it sounded too sad. That they'd need food and water at some point and that they'd probably piss themselves and the car would become an unpleasant place to be. It felt hot in the car, so I rolled down a window to wave my arm through the air.

The men on the porches and sidewalks looked up as we drove, eyes following our movement in one dark line. As if we were prey on the Serengeti and they were tired old lions, incapable of chase.

We came to a stop sign. She rested her head on the steering wheel and started crying. A car beeped, and she put her foot on the gas without lifting her eyes.

"It's okay, Sally," I said. "I like *Thelma and Louise*."

She missed the next stop sign, and a pair of police lights flipped on behind us. "Shit," Sally said. She pulled the car towards the curb and shut off the engine. She looked at me intently, "Didn't you promise me a miracle?"

I nodded. I could tell that things were going to change. They had to.

A bead of sweat ran from her hairline down the side of her cheek. I held my hand back from wiping it away.

The police car stopped behind us and a tall officer got out. I watched him approach in the rearview. He walked with bow legs, spread out, all his weight on the outside of his feet. Sally turned the keys in the ignition and lead

footed the gas. The car's wheels were hung up on the curb and when she straightened it out the bumper banged back into the cement. The engine roared to life, the speedometer hit forty-five within seconds. Dogs behind chain-link started barking, and the children sitting on old red-and-yellow play sets watched with saucer eyes.

"What the hell are you doing, Sally?"

"I'm so tired. I don't know. I saw myself pulling over to the side of the road and doing what the officer said, taking a traffic course online to make sure I didn't get points."

"What's wrong with that," I half yelled, rolling up my window, which was blowing air like a jet stream.

"I could see myself, and you, just doing the same mundane fucking things over and over and hoping for change. Don't you want a real change?" she asked, facing me for a moment, her eyes pure liquid.

"Look at the damn road," I said, my body rigid. I grabbed the door handle and prepared for the inevitable impact. Sally whipped the car into the left lane and accelerated through a four-way stop. A car buzzed past, nearly broadsiding us. The faint sound of a siren started in the distance. She was up to fifty-five now, weaving through two-lane traffic on the main street. A police car appeared behind us.

"Where are we going?" I asked, over the roar of the engine.

Her eyes flipped to the mirror as she sped around a Suburban in the right lane and immediately cut it off to pass a Civic in the left. "The ocean," she said.

"Are we going for a swim, Sally?" I asked, but she didn't laugh. I was trying to remember that time we went skinny-dipping at night, how white her body was, if we'd touched. Maybe if I could remind her of this one thing, our fingertips beneath dark water, we wouldn't die.

The police car was gaining on us and by the time we reached the on-ramp it was next to us. I could see the police officer's face, the sun making a blinding light off the black of his sunglasses. Then the impact as he rammed his car into the side of ours. There was a groaning noise as metal met metal and our car jolted up onto the curb. Sally slammed on the brakes as the police car flew by and over the train tracks before screeching to a halt. Sally threw the car in reverse and spun its smashed-up frame back onto the cement and toward the freeway.

The tires were burning and the car was making sounds like a dying animal. Sally's eyes were fixed on something in the distance. Something only she could see. Maybe this was wasn't miraculous, maybe it was just today, the day I died without anyone ever really knowing me.

"Sally," I yelled.

Sally peered into the rearview and tried to put distance between us and the cop cars. My heart knocked against my ribcage as if it wanted to escape, as if it knew my shell of a body was about to be crushed.

"Do you remember that night we went swimming?"

The speedometer topped out at 140, but Sally kept flooring it. Plants in the median were a blur, but the ocean was a stretch of endless blue, broken by outlines of oil tankers. The tankers looked like pirate ships, warriors from a nation long dead, come back to claim the living. It was as if I was seeing the world for the first time.

Sally's eyes flipped into the rear view mirror frantically. "I've been swimming lots of times," she said.

I didn't remember what I wanted to say, words were trapped in my throat. I felt light-headed, as if I were going to pass out. My body had stopped breathing; it had remembered that it was underwater. I wanted to remember what I was trying to say, so I closed my eyes, imagined myself as a toddler first learning how to swim. The cold hands of the instructor on my belly saying, "kick, kick, kick," when all she needed to say was, "breathe, breathe, breathe," and I would have been okay.

When I opened my eyes it was because Sally's hand was on my leg.

"We're going to be good together."

Behind us, a pair of police cars hovered like vultures waiting for the kill. I wondered if they would have to scrape my bloodied body off the cement, if certain instruments worked perfectly for the large intestine. I wondered if the officer who did it would be cute, if he had a family to go home to afterwards.

I desperately wanted a family, a husband, a green lawn, so many damn things I didn't have.

We blew around a semitruck that blasted its horn as we passed. The sound faded quickly, like the call of a dolphin. I could smell the rubber on the tires burning still. We had jetted through Santa Barbara and were headed up the coastal highway outside of Goleta, passing pickup

trucks and small cars with surfboards attached to the top. A helicopter cast a shadow over the car.

"Remember our fingertips touching," I said. "Remember how we were both convinced that there were sharks."

The trees were a steady blur of green. The birds lifted from telephone wires and swam into the sky. I considered reaching for the wheel. But I could already see the slow arc of the car before it crashed into the sand below. There would be no freeze framing for us.

"We're like Thelma and Louise," Sally said, and touched my knee again.

So this is what it's like when things change, I thought. I knew I would have to find some deep well inside, deeper than the darkest part of the ocean where only the bleached bones of whales lie, picked clean by a thousand creatures on their long fall.

I put my hand on Sally's forearm. "Don't you remember the moon, Sally? The monstrous fucking moon, how we were sure it wanted to swallow us?"

Sally looked over at me; thick lines ran across her cheeks, her forehead.

"Look at the cars ahead of us, Sally; they're split like the Red Sea."

I ran a finger across the back of her hand, tracing the spidery, thin veins.

"It's a miracle. You can stop now. You can stop now," I said, sliding my fingers

up her arm.

She started sobbing, and her foot eased off the accelerator. We drifted toward the side of the road. She pulled off into the dust, a patch of dirt, shaded by palms. The ocean beat relentlessly at the shore below. The police cars rolled in behind us, officers got out slowly.

Sally looked at me with her deep brown eyes. "I love you," she said, as though it might still matter.

I wanted to jab my fingernails into her eyes. I wanted her to suffer because she had made me contemplate how little I'd done in the world. How I'd imagined sex a thousand more times than I'd had it, tried so damn hard to believe that something beyond me existed. She looked out the window; I followed her eyes. The sea stretched out for miles, full of a thousand different creatures who had once been our neighbors until we'd crawled out into this miserable world.

Out over the sea the clouds were dark; it looked like rain, like thunder, like all hell would be loosed on Earth. And I thought that if the world was going to stay the same cracked and broken place, if the bones of the dinosaurs were real, and all the dead were not going to rise from their graves to sing hallelujah in unison, then something else was going to have to change.

So I pulled her head toward my chest as the police approached. I let her sob in my arms as if she were a baby and stroked her hair. "I know, I know."

Andrew Bertaina lives and works in Washington, DC. His work has appeared in more than twenty publications, including the *Threepenny Review*, *Hobart*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Literary Orphans*, the *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Eclectica*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Bayou Magazine*, and *Catamaran Literary Reader*. He is currently a reader and book reviewer for *Fiction Southeast*.