

Proof of Me

Cass Turner moved to San Francisco for Dave, and she stayed because of Tamar, who used to go out with Noah. Except for Kindred, who found a houseboat to rent, they all lived together with Jeremy and Aaron in a fourth-floor apartment on a side street just past Japantown.

Tamar was a sculptor of hungry ghosts and Cass loved her from the start. They'd spent nearly every night together that spring, away from their exes, roof-camping in a blue dome tent. They woke early, even though their schedules did not demand it: Cass handed out leaflets for peepshows and timeshares. Tamar made clay vessels in her studio. One day, without asking, she cut off Cass' hair.

It was cold that morning, and Cass was looking out the window of the courtyard apartment, wrapped squaw-like in a silky sleeping bag when she felt the cool scissors slip across the nape of her neck. The children on the third-floor were eating dry cereal in bed. A waist-naked couple argued as they clutched coffee cups to their barrel chests. The first-floor tattoo artist, exquisite with her pigment, stuck her needle into an early morning customer. Tamar gave the scissors a squeeze. The tip of the blade caught the sleeping bag and its downy stuff billowed in puffs as the amber ponytail fell to the floor. Cass shrieked as though each cut strand was connected to a nerve somewhere inside her. When she stammered "Why?" and touched her head to feel what remained, Tamar held out a vessel.

"You're just not imagining the possibilities,"

Tamar said. "Your hair will do society far more good as artwork than it ever will on your head."

Tamar's vessel had a thin vein of black that cut through the coppery glaze like frozen thread. It came from a hair, she said, that she'd found in a fresh pack of clay.

"Don't you think it's beautiful how something so random like a strand of hair can change everything?" Tamar said. "Whose hair is this? Whose DNA?"

Cass looked at her reflection in the window, her hair now just reaching to her earlobes in an unsteady line, her expression a scowl. She grabbed the scissors from Tamar and cut the rest of her hair, as short as she could, using the reflection in the window as her guide.

"Did you know that some painters will only use brushes made from the hair of professional Japanese sea-swimmers?" Tamar asked, as Cass continued to cut. She went to the kitchen to check the tea on the stovetop, and returned with a plastic bag and broom to sweep up Cass' loose strands. Then she sat on the floor and held the secure end of her ponytail between the soles of her bare feet and began to braid it.

"Do the swimmers sell their hair, or does someone just come and cut it off their heads?" Cass asked. She threw the scissors onto the floor. Tamar unbraided the lock and walked to the mirror, holding Cass' hair like bangs across her own black locks, and then her upper lip. She parted it so two hanks hung down each cheek.

"Cassie, my love? There's a new sheriff in town," Tamar said to the mirror, imitating Cass' North Carolina twang. The timer went off in the kitchen. Cass found her Sharpie marker began to draw a small bird on her inner wrist.

"Tea's ready," Tamar said.

Later that week, Tamar took Jeremy's crescent moon nail clippings from the coffee table and embedded them on a cup's lip. When Kindred emerged from her houseboat cloister to have dinner with Tamar and Cass, Tamar collected a jar of her spit to fold into clay. In two weeks the living room was filled with vessels that contained the DNA of nearly everyone Tamar knew, but she wouldn't say whose vessel was whose.

"If it's part of you, you should know when you see it," she said. "Like those reincarnated lamas in Tibet. They always know to pick which spoon was theirs."

Ever since she moved to the apartment, Cass spent her mornings watching the tattoo artist work. Growing up in North Carolina, she'd always thought of tattoo parlors as part of some nighttime endeavor involving the unfortunate convergence of hard liquor, a sharp needle, and the Tasmanian Devil forever on your back. Cass liked that this woman worked mornings. She longed to be under her needle, to submit to the pain required of an eternal mark. She wanted to sit in the artist's modified barber's chair, endorphins racing, and breathe the burning hot scent of her scarred skin as it filled with color, cerulean and magenta. She'd tell the tattooist, *I know you. I know your work.* She'd point to her window and say, *I watch you from up there every morning.* And from that day on, the tattooist would look over her shoulder, up toward the fourth floor, to see whether Cass was looking back.

But this scenario would never play out. Not because of money, but rather because Cass couldn't imagine what forever on her body was supposed to look like. But she'd

consider the question daily as she handed out leaflets for the peepshow. She'd poll her friends continually.

"A fish? You'll always be Pisces," Noah had said. He'd joined her that day on her leafletting rounds. Offering paper to strangers.

"No fish," she'd said. "Isn't a tattoo just shorthand to tell people who you think you are? I knew a guy with a cornucopia on his shoulder blade. Said it represented his offering to the world."

"Look at what you're wearing," Noah said.

"He called it his *bounty*," Cass said. "What the hell is a *bounty*?"

"Seriously. How do combat boots and jean cutoffs not contrive to say something about you?" Noah said. "Every piece of clothing makes a statement."

Cass tugged at her plaid button-down blouse, which she wore over a plain tank top. She'd worn the same pair of boots since high school. "Fine. I'll go barefoot. I'll go naked."

"You'd get no complaints from me," he said. "But you'd still be making a statement."

"So what can you be if you don't want to be anything?"

"You can be you," he said.

"How can you represent that forever? In ink?"

"Maybe start with what represents you now," Noah said. "And go from there."

That evening, Cass began to draw tattoo contenders in her plain-paper notebook, and after a week went straight to her body. She'd use a Sharpie marker to draw symmetrical, looping patterns below her navel. A daisy chain down her arm. A sprawling cat on her calf. Once she wrote across her clavicle, "Make no stray marks." Once she drew a pencil thin moustache on her upper lip. She grew tired of each design just as the natural cycle of showers and the slough of skin made them

disappear. "Who needs museums when we've got Cass?" Tamar would say each morning between sips of chai.

The day she met Joia, Cass had drawn a honeybee on her arm, just below her shoulder. Cass and Noah were near the shore, handing out leaflets, when Joia walked up to Cass and cupped her hands around her bicep. She looked at her full in the face before she breathed in her ear: "Don't panic. There's a bee on your arm." Cass smiled, trying to calm the effect of the woman's hand on her skin and told her to look again. Joia giggled into Cass' shoulder, her long hair whipping her face. She touched the bee with her pinkie.

"I know, silly," Joia said. "I just love tattoos."

"It's not a tattoo," Cass said. "I drew it myself."

"Well it looks like a real, live, fake bee tattoo," Joia said. "That's something."

Noah walked over, handed Joia a leaflet, and invited her to their weekly potluck. Cass sat down on a bench to write out directions for Joia on the back of the leaflet. As she handed the paper to her, the wind surged and took the stack to the sky. A hundred or more pages scattered across the beach and landed in the ocean, on the sidewalk, pink sheets pushed across the blue horizon. It was a beautiful waste.

Joia arrived to the house that evening looking positively Egyptian. Everything on her draped and clung to her body. She wore bangles above her elbow. Her nose had a triangular quality to it that suggested triangles were emerging from her hair, her shoulder shape, and the insteps of her bare feet, once she removed her gold spangled sandals. Cass regretted she hadn't changed from her over-

alls cutoffs and sweaty plaid shirt. Joia had made a salad, leaves deep green from the farmer's market tossed in a wooden bowl. At dinner the hairs on Cass's arm stood at attention as Joia reenacted, with her mouth full of food, how she was tricked by the bee on Cass's arm.

"I thought it was a professional tattoo," Joia said. "You have an artist in your midst, I tell you." She surveyed Cass' cropped copper hair, her natural scowl, the hair whose tips she'd dyed bright red. "Look at those spikes. Like a woman on fire."

It was then that Tamar began to tell Joia about her vessel project, her fascination with DNA infusion, the long dark strand of hair that had changed forever the possibility of her art. How she'd collected the DNA from her housemates and friends.

"You should have an exhibit, an opening here," Joia said. "It's a perfect space for it. Just like a gallery."

Cass found herself caught up in Tamar her description of her work. She liked how vintage-sweet she looked in cat-eye frames and a green dress of Cass's that no longer fit, her black hair swept into a ponytail. Cass looked at the vessels Tamar had made, certain at least a few contained her hair. The vessels were impossibly tall and they took up most of the space in the living room. Tamar had coaxed smooth planes of clay into oblong bowls, made warped spheres from mesh, shallow basins, frozen goblins. They had thin necks and huge belly-bases. Dave brought out his guitar after dinner and Tamar and Joia walked around the living room, pretty visions dressed in jade and plum, talking about each piece as the others cleared the table. Then Cass heard her say to Joia exactly what she'd said to Cass when they first met.

Containment, Tamar had told Cass, and now Joia, is what gives space meaning.

"You can put in anything you want." She cupped Cass' hands, then her own, in example. "Look. You could piss in it. Make a shrine. Hold a baby."

That night in the blue dome tent Tamar and Cass made love, sharing sweat and spit and fingertips all sticky warm, and Cass was grateful for Tamar's touch even though Joia was on her mind. The next morning, Cass was at her window watching the tattooist etch flames around a woman's navel when Dave's door opened. Joia placed a single finger to her lips and smiled. As she passed Cass, the knot on her sarong slipped and she bent, bottomless and tanned, to collect it. She glanced back at Cass in a way that suggested she had perhaps let it fall for her benefit.

"I think Joia stayed with Dave," Cass told Tamar when she arrived with tea.

"I know," Tamar said. "I joined them after you fell asleep. She's amazing."

Instead of responding, Cass focused on the tattooist below, trying to remove from her mind the combinations of Dave with Joia, Joia with Tamar, Tamar with Dave. She finished her tea quickly, swallowing the granules at the bottom of the cup. She returned to her blue dome tent and stayed there for the rest of the day, breathing deeply, telling herself it was important to remember that she had no claim on any other person.

Joia came to dinner that night, and stayed with Dave the rest of the week. Tamar kept joining them after Cass had fallen asleep. But one night, and then the next, Tamar didn't return to the blue dome tent. Then she didn't even stay at the apartment. Cass asked her about it after a week had passed.

"It's the tent," Tamar said. "It smells too

much of you. I'm sorry. I don't know how else to say it." Cass spent half a day's pay washing out her mortification at the Laundromat, airing out the tent, smelling everything for signs of her own scent. She'd sewn the spot on the sleeping bag where Tamar had cut. Still, Tamar never returned to the blue dome tent. When she was not downstairs, she stayed at Joia's.

When Joia came over, Cass took her meals on the roof, and at night she'd snake an extension cord for her lamp. She'd draw in the blue dome tent, as she listened to Tamar and Joia make plans for the art opening. Dave and Jeremy played guitar through the open windows. She'd listen and draw until she was too tired to do much else but fall asleep.

On the afternoon of her opening, Tamar had Cass go to the art institute neighborhood to hand out fliers to "people leaving the better art galleries." But most of the people Cass had come across were panhandling for change, not looking at art. Cass didn't want to invite any of these people into her home, art opening or not. She threw the invitations in the trash. She wanted to go to her tent, but knew if she returned too early, she'd have to shell peanuts for pad Thai or frost a cake for the reception. For weeks Tamar and Joia were full-throttle planning for the opening. The apartment was filled with all of Tamar's artwork, each object transported up four flights. Joia helped her to select and arrange the best pieces for the exhibit. They'd reconfigured the living room, moved the sofa to the dining area, spent nights labeling postcards. They wrote to the local weekly arts papers, and the papers actually ran photos of Tamar's work. When she saw the news clipping on the refrigerator, Cass knew they didn't need her to make the reception a success.

That afternoon, Cass went to the library and read through the classifieds in the *Examiner*, thinking maybe she wouldn't ever have to go back to her apartment if she came across the right ad. Where do you go, she thought, if you don't want to be anywhere? There was so much possibility in each typed classified line: Dancing Shoes for Sale. Treadmill, never used. Escort Wanted. But was it a car, or a woman? Cass thought. She found a large atlas and studied the shapes of land, the stretches of blue pocked with pink little islands, the strange names of nations just north of the Lowlands, south of the Arctic Circle, just next to Russia: Svalbard. Jan Mayen.

She looked through every page of the atlas, taking in the topography, the capitols, the major cities and their insets, the landmarks and street names. She found California, eventually, and a small map of San Francisco. She located Japantown and traced Fillmore all the way to the public library where she sat, startled that she was somehow, however remotely, represented in the book. She looked at the pink rectangle until the library lights flickered in signal of closing. When she looked at a wall clock discovered it was nearly nine. She was late for Tamar's opening.

The apartment was crowded when Cass got home. Nearly everyone was wearing *pince nez*-style masquerade masks with colored feathers across the brow. The vessels were aligned on the floor like pupils at desks, in columns and rows, a great physical matrix of all the people who had given Tamar a piece of themselves. Cass found a little stool, her usual perch near the window, and had a seat.

Tamar had been making each of her friends come before the crowd and guess which piece was theirs. She'd called on Noah to select one of

his pieces. After he chose one correctly, Tamar placed his name on three of them. She'd done the same with Dave and Kindred, Joia and Jeremy. Cass had found some carrots to eat as Tamar said her thank yous to everyone, and she took in the scene behind her by looking at the reflection in the window.

"Thanks for showing up," Cass heard. Cass could see Tamar behind a feather mask in the reflection. In one hand she held a drink, in the other, was the mask's delicate stick.

"I'm sorry," Cass said. "I got caught up at the library..."

"I don't care about the library," Tamar said. She set down the mask. "I called your name first tonight, out of everyone. I told them how you'd sacrificed your hair for art, for me, for my vision of you, and you weren't even here. How do you think that made me look?"

Tamar walked to one of the vessels and picked it up and talked to it like it was a baby. Tamar took the vessel from its perch and began to toss it lightly, from one hand to the other.

"Tamar, would you put that down, please?" Cass asked. "You'll break it."

"No, Cass, I'll break you," Tamar said. She stared at the pot as she spoke.

"That is not me," Cass said.

"What's you, then? You spend the day killing trees for peep shows, scribbling all over yourself, thinking you're going to get to the meaning of life from some stupid drawing of a duck on your ass," Tamar said. "And here you deny something that actually contains a piece of you?"

Tamar tilted the mouth of the vessel toward Cass, in a way that suggested that whatever she'd say, the vessel would absorb it. But Cass didn't say anything. Before Tamar went upstairs to the roof with Joia, she threw the

vessel at Cass, underhand, like a softball. Cass barely caught it.

"I am not your creation," Cass said loudly. The few guests who remained downstairs held their masks to their faces as they looked at her, and Cass imagined each mask was a lens staring her down, taking in her greasy chopped hair, the faded Sharpie marker-design on her forearms, her unwashed, supposedly unfit-for-peepshows body. Cass fled the party, stomping down stairs in her heavy boots, and sat on the stoop of the apartment. She rummaged through her backpack and found one of the leaflets and realized the peepshow itself was probably open. She'd applied to work there when she first got to San Francisco, but the manager told her that she'd need to get her own costume, and "even then she was probably not peepshow material." He told this to her halfway through her striptease audition. He must have felt sorry for her because, even as she picked up her bra from the floor and slipped into her cutoffs, he told her he could set her up as a "promotional assistant" and distribute leaflets instead.

Cass was glad the manager who'd hired her wasn't at PixiDust when she got there. She found a vacant darkened closet and poured quarters into a slot to watch behind the plexiglass window a brightly-lit roomful of bored women in fishnet tights and crotchless panties open and close their legs for the other patrons. One turned cartwheels in high heels. Another gyrated her hips, making the little spangles jingle and move on her skirt.

Cass would not have survived long in that bright box. She was much better with leaflets. Out of habit, she started to draw a few lines on her forearm with her Sharpie, not sure yet what she wanted to draw. She tapped at the plexiglass and asked one of the women

through the voice box if she could have any tattoo, what would it be. The woman smiled at Cass and pushed her rear against the window. On the woman's left cheek Cass saw a pair of red lips and the words "Kiss This" in black cursive lettering. As the shade lowered shut, Cass got up and left.

No one was up when Cass returned to the apartment. Cass did not go to her blue dome tent. Instead she wrapped herself in a blanket and sat by the open window. In the dark she could make out the shape of Noah's bicycle that hung on a cord from the ceiling and thought back to the first time she rode it across the Golden Gate Bridge, convinced the wind was going to blow her into the bay. Maybe she'd ride it home now to see her Uncle Andy. She'd cross the desert at night, her path marked by sand and snake on either side, a lone Joad in reverse, back to North Carolina.

It was just light out when the golden spotlight of the tattoo artist's studio came on. Cass woke up sore from sleeping upright. She knew then she'd never get a tattoo, never sit in that woman's chair. She wondered whether the money she'd saved for her tattoo would pay for a ticket to Svalbard. Perth. Biscayne Bay. Cass crawled over to Tamar's exhibit, each vessel still in perfect formation, a vigil sustained, and unable to disperse. Assembled as such, and with nothing but the dark, quiet space around them, the vessels looked eerie, a few with long necks like some inhuman orifice, stretched mouths, forever open and imperfect. Odd bodies, naked and waist-high, aligned for inspection. Some of the porcelain basins were so shallow they could hardly hold water.

She rearranged the name cards Tamar had placed in front of each vessel. *Kindred Mavis I* became *Aaron Charles II*. *Aaron Charles I* was *Noah Antrim III*. *Joia Loo* moved to

David Quentin. She found one of hers, *Cassidy Penelope I*, and kneeled before it for a moment before she picked it up and brought it to the open window.

Before she released it, Cass pressed her palms over the glazed grit. The wispy veins of her hair carbonized into a webbed pattern across the vessel, like a cave painting, the physical result of the spontaneous and the deliberate. She spit into it so it would not go down empty, and it slid through the tips of her fingers and plummeted to the garden below. The tattooist turned her head toward the window as the sounds of something broken echoed through the courtyard. She looked skyward for the source, and gave a slow, uncertain wave when she spotted Cass.

Cass waved back before she returned to the exhibit, taking in the woman's bullring, her close-cropped crew cut and pale blue eyes. She found in Tamar's formation another vessel that contained her hair, a tall one, unglazed, like a thin-necked bird's nest. She let that drop, too, and, after it landed, tried to find a pattern in the bone-white bits that had scattered across the cement courtyard. But there was none. Cass imagined at the next rain the little shards of clay and charred hair would find a home in the garden soil and begonias below, and, realizing she was no longer at home here, almost felt sorry she'd not be around to see it happen.

Aaron Shurin

An Archeology

and the fine ribs of the chairs playing the wind, the wind, the wind... shaken the gasping through thick, shiny leaves at night, pulling the hair of the wind, the wind... hu- bodies — take my swollen hands — the blue drifting toward yellow and white — skeletons — seethes among the pleasure seekers — grain by grain, finer than dust... I curl on the in the whirling grind in my unitard skin, removable as a sleeve of silk, while the bleach flay at the wind, the wind, my fingers play at the wind... Or if on a bright day bone light down though *Dido will not dissolve... into sleep... she will dissolve... into wind... Inside the harbor, pitched forward to seize the incline in a gust... as if filling sails... with my and gray hair churning...*

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