

Kevin Lichy

## Invention of a Galaxy

Most people think you start with a circle and close the space off so you can create inside of it, but Dad says starting with a circle is a mistake, because a circle collapses without the scaffold of the eight to hold it together, and without the eight everything becomes chaos. Dad says you begin with a figure eight, because a figure eight outlines the potential space that might exist. A circle comes second; define your borders, Dad says. He pours quickly, from the wrist, but carefully. Without care, he says, you'll get wild arms flying everywhere, a mess.

When Mom was here, she helped. She'd stand behind Dad and whisk the powder into batter, their backs pressed against each other. Sometimes I had to crawl between their legs to get from one side of the trailer to the other. At night, she helped me catch fireflies in the fields when it was warm enough, taught me how to cup them in my hands so they would illuminate the spaces between my fingers. We'd sing a song to them, blow into the hollow of our hands, and let them go.

Most nights we found Dad sleeping under the foldaway table when we got home. Mom said he slept that way because he spent three years running away from monsters who wanted to eat him in the jungle, and when he came home, he thought he'd be safe, but he found monsters here too.

Sometimes, Mom and I would make a circle with our arms, and we'd spin and spin until I lifted off the ground, and I would fly around the circle of our bodies and feel the world pulling at my feet, trying to take me away, but Mom held on so tight.

When Dad was done with a funnel cake, he would fish it out of the fryer with a pair of tongs and let it drain before releasing it onto the plate in my outstretched arms. He started to let me powder them when I was seven, and I remember then that on clear days when the sun shone in through the front windows, the powdered sugar looked like stars falling through the cylinder.

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One day Mom let go. I remember it like a release, like I was unstuck and floating free of everything until I fell to the ground and all the wind was knocked out of me. I lay there in the grass for a long time, heaving and waiting for Mom to come rushing over and pick me up. I watched an ant crawl across my arm in circles, its antennae waving. After a while I stood up and looked around, and she was gone. Dad says he doesn't know what happened to her, told me that the best thing to do is to just draw a circle around my heart and close it in. Here, he said, giving me a funnel. He dragged a stool over to the two fryers, looked me in the eye, and patted the seat. The first thing you have to do is make an eight.

People come to watch Dad create. He's a calligrapher. They come to the windows and watch him funnel out galaxies into the oil, his wrist light as air. What he creates is both crisp and soft. Most people say it melts on their tongues almost as if nothing was ever there. Dad says it's because he pays more attention to the spaces between where he's pouring. He says people don't understand this because most people think a circle comes first, but a circle comes second.

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## The Closeness of Everything

Every year we go to Greenbelt for the Labor Day festival. We spread out over the asphalt parking lot sandwiched between the police station and the community pool around midnight, erect the scaffolding of our lights so that on Friday morning the children and their adults and the adults of their adults could come and ride the hurricane and eat candy apples and funnel cakes and throw up on the Zipper and dunk their friends in the pool and kiss beneath the lights of the Ferris wheel and donate to the Maryland Democratic Party who sponsors the event and requires a party worker to be present inside the booth of every station (5 percent to the reelection committee). This meant that every year I worked from midnight to seven in the morning on Friday, and then, covered in oil and grease and dust, with blood on my knuckles and knees, I would check in to the Holiday Inn. This is where I would stay for the holiday weekend where I would eat potato skins for room service and swim in a pool already turning to ice and sit in a basement tanning salon and stare at the pictures of the tropical sun behind the counter and talk to the teenagers who worked there, who let me sit and talk for no reason, and look at the tanning beds like alien seed pods and watch movies in my room until Dad came home around one in the morning covered in the smell of the carnival. And he would ask how my day went, and I would say good. And we would eat cold pizza he brought back in a box gone translucent with grease, then fall asleep on the same bed.

I take my key from the desk man, who always stares sideways at his manager after I tell him I forgot my key again and carry my tiny suitcase up to whatever floor my room is on (the higher the better). In the room, I peel off my clothes and throw them on the floor or sometimes in the hallway or the elevator. And I turn on the air conditioner to high and stand in front of the window and look down at the green belt of trees around the mall and the highway and the Denny's and the office building across from me and

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cool the slick from my skin. And then I open my tiny suitcase and find my bathing suit, the red one with the Superman symbol on the butt, and put it on. And then in the secret pocket cut in the bottom of my suitcase I feel for the lace of a ribbon, pull it out, unthread Mom's clasp, tiny and square and pewter and covered in rhinestones, and walk out of my room, take the elevator to the basement floor, and step out. And it's dark and beautiful and mine.

And I pad across the concrete floor—past the laundry room, the pipes, the supply closet, up the stairs, and out onto the pool deck, walk to the deep end and hear the water *clack clack* against the skimmer. The air on my bare chest, already autumn chill, pulls the goose flesh out around my nipples. No one else is ever there.

My ritual: I hold Mom's clasp in my hand and drop it down into the water and watch its distorted rhinestones shine in the deep and watch me back. I stand on the "No Diving" sign and breathe and breathe, dive in, and kick my feet, and down I go, feel the pop in my ears, the rough concrete bottom as I close my fingers around the clasp and surface, heave in a shivered chest of air. And I climb out and throw it in again, dive down, retrieve the clasp, back up for air. The water pulls me down, heavier each time. And I throw it farther away, dive down longer, stay on the bottom longer, feel the mute of everything under the surface, the closeness of everything, hold the clasp in my hand and open my eyes and watch the surface ripple the sky above me.

I come up for air, and a girl is standing at the edge of the pool watching. Her bleached hair. The curve of her hips. The space where her legs meet the red of her suit.

You were down there a pretty long time, she says.

Yeah, I say.

What's your name?

Daniel

My name's Amy.

Hi, Amy.

You here by yourself?

I hold up the clasp. The rhinestones glitter in the sun. I shake my head. My mom, I say.

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## Their Velvet Lips

Llewellyn, the pony-ride man, used to let me feed his ponies sugar cubes in the purple darkness before the sun came up, the velvet of their lips curling around my fingertips as they pulled the cubes into their mouths and crunched. He told me the lips of a pony were like the lips of a woman. And when I said my mom's lips weren't like theirs, he said, Not those lips, you idiot.

He once said to me that his ponies were the freest ponies in the entire world. And when I said to him, But they're yoked and have to walk around the same circle all day long with strange kids on their backs, he said that they're free because they're yoked. He said they're free because their entire world is that little circle in the ground and those kids. He said they don't have to think about anything else besides that world, and in that world they're free.

He showed me how the basketball rims were bent to look straight and how the milk bottles were unbalanced so they would never fall at the same time and where the teenage girls gathered behind the arcade tent and pressed their bodies against the men who wandered to them. The only thing the man wants to do is to take and take and take, he said. I asked him who the man was, and he told me everyone is the man.

So, are you the man? I asked him.

Yes, he said.

Llewellyn is a wise man.

He was the first one to tell me I didn't need to be a carny. He said that there's more to this world than asphalt and dirt and fried food and lights and vomit. He said my dad did what he did because he didn't know how to do anything else, said it was because he couldn't do anything else, because he couldn't exist anywhere else, because no one wanted him to. He said, Is that how you want to be?

I said, Why not?

He turned my head and said, Look at those ponies one more time.