

Figurines

ALSO BY JAMIE BOUD

Envy The Rain

Figurines
A Novel by
Jamie Bond

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



THE KNOWN UNIVERSE

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This book is a work of fiction. Any references to historical events, real people, or real places are used fictitiously. Other characters, places, and events are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, or places, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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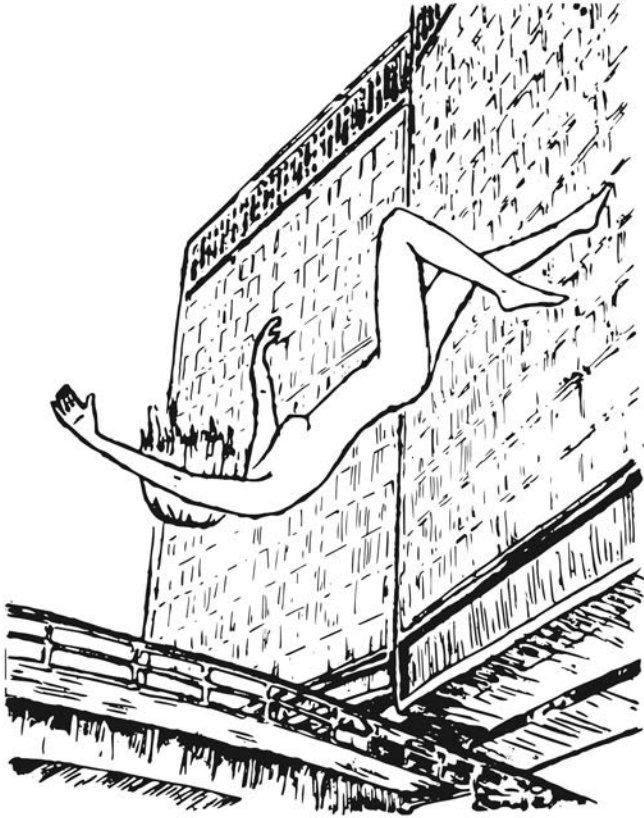
For Deborah and Arlene

O, what a world of unseen visions and heard silences,
this insubstantial country of the mind! What ineffable
essences, these touchless rememberings and unshowable
reveries!

— JULIAN JAYNES

THE STANDARD

August 13, 2011



Dear Guest,

Please be advised that activity in your hotel room may be visible from the outside with the curtains open. We appreciate your consideration of the patrons of the High Line park and the residential neighborhood below.

— THE STANDARD HOTEL MANAGEMENT

Printed on gold-embossed stationery, the note reads as an invitation. I kick off my shoes, slip off my dress, and stand naked before the floor-to-ceiling window. I'm not an exhibitionist, not really; I just want to be seen, that's all. To prove Mom wrong. *Turning thirty-eight means you're one step closer to becoming invisible*, she had said. *It's what happens to a woman. You'll see.*

It was just another one of Mom's lame attempts at scaring me into finding a husband and having kids. But it did sting when she said it, and I do worry a little when no one in the park looks up at me. The ninth floor might be too far away for anyone to notice, so I stand closer and tap a few times on the double-paned glass with my fingernail.

Nothing.

The only eyes I catch belong to my pale reflection, hovering above the crowd like a green ghost.

Pulling back my hair, turning side-to-side, I study my face. Push my cheeks, tug a bit of flesh beneath my chin. I cup my breasts, pat my belly, try to reassure myself. Wasn't the desk clerk surprised when she saw my ID?

"Happy Birthday!" she'd said, as she slid the keycard across the counter. "I would have thought you were twenty-four."

She was exaggerating, of course, but I thanked her anyway.

"Don't thank me," she said. "Thank your mom and dad for those good genes."

I could have told her the truth—that the people I grew up calling Mom and Dad have nothing to do with my genes, and there's little to thank them for—but instead, I just took the key and smiled.

Is looking young the same as looking good? As being hot? Other people have told me I was hot—beautiful, even—and sometimes people still do. *You should be a model*, they sometimes say. I rarely admit that, years ago, I had been. When I think back

on it now, I can't help but hear the words Mom always said to me: *You're not as pretty as you think you are.* If I ever thought I was pretty, nothing did more to disabuse me of the notion than modeling.

I run my fingers across the window and tap it again. With my knuckles this time, but with the same result. What's it going to take to get someone down there to see me? Perhaps if I run as fast as I can from down the hall and careen full force through the glass, that'll do it. I picture my naked body falling in slow motion, engulfed in a swirl of twinkling shards like glitter in a snow globe.

See me now?

Or how about when I hit the park's boardwalk? A crowd is sure to gather then.

What a shame, they'll whisper, she had such good genes.

Startled by a knock at the door, I cross the room and squint through the peephole. On the other side, a delivery man is bouncing in the hall, holding an extravagant bouquet of pale-pink ranunculus, ballooned by the lens.

"One second," I say, throwing on one of the plush white robes I find hanging in the closet.

When I swing open the door, I'm instantly overwhelmed by a floral scent almost too strong to be real—like walking into a fancy soap store. The deliveryman breezes into the room and carefully places the heavy vase on the dresser. I rummage through my bag for a tip and give him the crisp five-dollar bill Mom and Dad sent me for my birthday.

Once the man is gone, I read the notecard: *Happy Birthday, Love, Eric.* Nothing on the other side—no apologies, no overtures. I rotate the vase a few times. I'd chided Eric for giving me half-dead flowers from a corner bodega last Valentine's Day, and it seems that as a result, he's gone overboard. Is he trying to make me feel guilty? Maybe. But no, I'm sure he ordered the flowers before our fight. Who knows why he didn't keep the

room for himself, but after I'd spent all week fawning over pictures of the "teacup bath for two" on the hotel's website, I'm glad he let me have it.

The room is small, but uncluttered. Crisp and clean, like a well-appointed makeup trailer. Or a cruise ship cabin, where everything is designed with rounded corners, so you won't get impaled should the ship keel over. The bathtub looks nothing like a teacup, of course. It would be absurd if it did. Taking up half the room, it's more like a terra cotta cauldron. It will be a while before it's full enough for me to cook my bones, so I turn the tap and get it started while calling Mom and Dad to thank them for the birthday card. I call them every Saturday at five o'clock. That's the routine, or it has been for about a year. Any other day and neither of them will pick up the phone. Any later than five o'clock, and Dad will ramble through all the terrible things he imagined must have happened to me—a mugging, a car crash, a murder. How about falling nine stories from a hotel window?

Funny how things change. During the ten years that we went without talking, no one seemed worried about me then. Eric was concerned when he found out I'd been estranged from my parents for so long, even though I hinted at why. "They're still your parents," he'd said, "They raised you. They were there for the most formative time of your life. You can't just pretend they don't exist. You should call them."

The thought had crossed my mind over the years, and I figured I'd get around to it eventually. Still, I didn't expect Eric's words to persuade me so quickly.

The first time I called, no one answered, so I sent a letter instead.

It's hard to remember what I wrote. Doubtless, some poorly polished version of the truth, which was that my life had changed less for the better over the past decade than I wanted them to believe. I know what I *didn't* tell them: that I still

couldn't hold an office job, still couldn't keep a menial job either, thus was hoping to pay off debt collectors by trying to sell cumbrous, unwieldy custom dinnerware to the same gay husbands of day traders who'd been buying up creations from my studio mates. I was still trying to mold clay into meaning. Still ambivalent about my boyfriend, if that's what Eric ever was. Still drinking. Whatever it was that I mustered up in my letter, it broke the ice. Dad wrote back, probably omitting as much truth as I had done, which led to a phone call, then another, until we fell into our little routine. It has continued in this way for over a year. Not the worst of my habits, I suppose.

Our conversations can still be rocky at times and inspire fits of rage to rival the old days. More often than not, however, the calls are just dull. Dad only likes to talk about three things: the lawn, the dogs, and God. Mom isn't much better, the way she rambles about the birds that come to her feeder. She gives them names: *Lil' Peeper*, *Tammy Faye*, *Jellybean*, *Rambo*, and so on. It's kind of cute, but I find it impossible to follow along. It's better when I can get her to talk about cooking instead. Since the kitchen was strictly off-limits to me as a kid, I never learned how to prepare anything beyond punching a few keys on a microwave. But after telling Mom I've been trying to teach myself how to cook, she's finally opening up, offering tips and sharing recipes. Real mother-daughter stuff, at long last. She tells me funny stories about Dad as well, something we both can laugh at. Dad tends to overshare with strangers, eliciting varying degrees of discomfort in his audiences, be they a supermarket cashier or a mailman, whoever is unfortunate enough to cross his path.

That's the extent of it, though. Mom has yet to ask me about life in New York. Dad is the same way. I don't know why they aren't interested in what I've been up to all these years, but it doesn't matter—I wouldn't tell them anyway, as I have so little to show for it.

Dad waits for the third ring every time.

“Oh, hi, Rachel, hi,” he says.

He repeats himself whenever he’s nervous—and he is *always* nervous.

“Happy birthday,” he says. “What are you doing to celebrate?”

As tempting as it is to tell him I’m standing naked in front of a hotel window, trying to get the attention of total strangers, I don’t want to get off track so soon—especially since I’m eager to know how Mom is doing. If she’s feeling better, I can end the call early and relax in the tub, so I get right to it: “How did Mom make out with the doctor?”

“I didn’t take her to the doctor,” Dad says. “She didn’t go.”

“Why not?”

“On account of the dogs and all.”

“I’m tired of that excuse,” I say. “You guys use it for everything. Forget about the fucking dogs for once.”

“Rachel! Don’t use that word. That’s not how we raised you. What happened? You used to dance all up in the Spirit.”

Doesn’t he know by now? When I used to dance, sing, and speak in tongues the way Dad does, I wasn’t caught up in any *spirit*. I only ever jerked around in violent spasms that way to sublimate my pent-up frustrations.

I had a lot of them back then.

Still do.

“Never mind all that,” I say. “You can leave the dogs alone for a couple of hours. They’ll be fine.”

“Them critters’ll get into everything. Chew my socks. Get germs.”

“Put them in the basement.”

“They’ll get into the sump basin and get sick.”

“Find a kennel.”

“Them places never do what we say.”

“If you mean they don’t feed the dogs cottage cheese and peaches, of course they don’t.”

“That’s what they eat, Rachel. Besides, we ain’t got money for no kennel, anyhow.”

“What about Jack? He’ll watch them. He’s right next door.”

“Jack says he can only come by to feed them and take them for a short walk.”

“That’s all they need!”

“I keep telling you, Rachel, if the dogs get into trouble, I’ll never forgive myself. Your mother don’t want to leave them dogs, neither. They’re everything to her.”

I want to reach through the phone and strangle him. Strangle Mom, too. I’d be doing the dogs a favor. Mom and Dad keep them on a short leash—literally—and are as overprotective of the dogs as they once were of my brother Mike and me. In fact, this whole conversation is starting to feel like an argument over my own childhood. Hearing the dogs yelping and whining in the background isn’t helping. It’s easy to picture us siblings as two excitable Shih Tzus, dusty, matted, and spinning in circles—deluded, sheltered to the point of suffocated, dancing in the Spirit.

“How about Uncle Nick?” I say. Clearly, Uncle Nick is not the best candidate, with his Parkinson’s, paranoid delusions, back pain, and so on. To hear Mom tell it, he’s taking so many medications for so many things, he’s nearly catatonic. But he’s also Mom’s older brother and perhaps the only person alive she truly trusts. “All he has to do is sit in a chair and watch TV,” I say. “Then Jack can come by to feed and walk the dogs the way he offered to.”

“I don’t know. Maybe Monday.”

“Let me talk to Mom.”

While Dad carries the phone to Mom, I adjust the water temperature as it flows into the tub. I glance outside and see darkness on the horizon over the Hudson River—a storm, maybe.

Dad gets back on the line. “Your mother don’t want to talk to no one. Her stomach still hurts.”

“Take her to the Emergency Room, will you please.”

“It’ll be dark by the time we get back. I don’t like to drive at night.”

“Then call an ambulance. If you don’t, I will.” Am I overreacting? Something feels wrong, but when it comes to Mom and Dad, something always does. “Okay, listen,” I say. “Get Mom to the ER first thing tomorrow morning. Don’t wait any longer than that. You hear me?” He doesn’t answer, but I can hear him muttering—talking to the dogs, maybe. “Promise me, Dad.”

“Yes, yes, we’ll see.”



Frustrated and unconvinced, I hang up the phone and stare out the window. Clouds are creeping closer. Silent pulses of lightning begin to flash along the velvet Hoboken skyline. It’s as if the dismal purple clouds that hung over me as a child are coming east to swallow me again. A crack of lightning chisels through the sky. The Hudson River is a murky green, nearly black. The crowd of tourists on the High Line boardwalk grows thin under a light drizzle. When the rain suddenly falls in earnest, the last of them hunch their shoulders and scurry for cover. I trace the angled streaks of rain on the window with my fingertips. The robe slips from my shoulders—no one in the park remains to notice.

The tub is still only half-full as I ease into it. The hot water slowly rises around me. When it's finally deep enough, I submerge my head. The running tap sounds like a torrid rush of river, the white noise of rain. I break the surface, inhale deeply, and re-submerge. Reaching with my toes, I shut off the water and coax the stress from one place to another—from my gut, to my shoulders, to my neck. Eventually, it holds up directly behind my eyes in a gnarled mess, the way it always does.

Growing dizzy from the heat, I eventually climb out. Steam rises from my arms, belly, thighs, as if I am about to spontaneously combust. I read about it somewhere. It happens.

A few guests laugh in the hallway, perhaps headed upstairs to The Boom Boom Room or downstairs to The Biergarten. If I could get motivated to dry my hair and put on my dress, I might follow them. Instead, I pluck a small bottle of gin and a bag of potato chips from the minibar, find the TV remote and nestle into bed.

AWAKENED BY A SHARP KNOCK, I wrap myself in a cold, damp towel and open the door.

“Excuse me, Miss, check-out is at noon.”

“What time is it?”

“Quarter past. If you'd like a late check-out, it can be arranged.”

“No, sorry, I overslept. I'm not feeling well. Give me a minute.”

The bed is littered with snack wrappers and miniature booze bottles. Two Heineken cans lie empty on the left side table, and an empty wine bottle on the right. Shoes, dress, sunglasses, and purse—it doesn't take long to get dressed and collect my things. When I untwist the bedcovers and give them

a shake, salted peanuts rain to the floor. There's an unopened bottle of Chivas underneath one of the pillows. I throw it into my bag and side-step the maid, who has been standing impatiently by the door. Waiting for the elevator, I remember my birthday flowers and rush back to grab them. They're so much heavier than they look.

Steam wafts from the streets as I shuffle down 14th Street to the L train. Settling into an open seat, I rest the vase on my lap and hide behind my sunglasses. The train squeals and grunts from the station. As it chugs crosstown toward Brooklyn, I drop my face deep into the fragrant blooms to mask the humid train car's summer stench. Rocking gently, I whisper to myself in rhythm with the train: *Hang on, you'll be home soon. Hang on, you'll be home soon...*

ON THE STREET, while fumbling with my keys, the vase drops to the cement in a slow-motion explosion, water sloshing and splashing as in a soft drink commercial, the porcelain cracking like an ice cube. Hangovers give me a kind of temporary arthritis—I basically don't have the energy to control my muscles enough not to spill stuff. Aside from a few scattered eucalyptus petals, the flowers somehow hang together in a soggy cluster. I nearly topple over as I reach down to salvage them. Once inside, I toss the tattered bouquet onto the kitchen counter and make a beeline to the toilet. The bathroom tumbles and spins. My knees buckle. Out spews a gurgling mire of hotel snacks and minibar drinks in a burning arc of relief.

AT 4:30 in the afternoon, half-asleep, sweaty, and still nauseated, my phone rings. I don't recognize the number, but seeing it's a Pennsylvania area code, I answer.

"Oh, hi, Rachel, hi, it's your dad. We're at the hospital. They're taking your mother in for surgery. The doctor did a rectal exam. His finger came out all covered in cancer!"

ANNA'S JOURNAL
Thursday, April 23, 1951



My name is Anna Rubik and today is my seventeenth birthday. I live in North Charleroi, Pennsylvania, and am a Junior at Charleroi High School. I live in a crooked yellow house in between the railroad tracks and the Monongahela River, in a section of town that people around here call Lock 4. A lady from the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* came to speak to our class for career day a couple of months ago. She told us that if we want to be writers, we need to write every day. A dream journal is one way to go about it, she said. But she also told us that reporters must never make things up. Since I want to be a reporter more than anything, I've

decided only to write what I know to be true. I'm trying to answer, factually, all the W's that she told us about. I have the who, the what, the when, and the where down, even the how. The last W is hard. The lady said that sometimes we never know why things happen. She said that the journey of trying to find out, though, can be more important than the destination.

For "why", I suppose what I could write is why I spent the last few months at West Penn Hospital, and why I missed so many days of school. The headaches, of course, and the dizzy spells, too, but it started before all that. One day a few years ago—around the time of my thirteenth birthday—my legs became twisted, and my body shook. Something sucked me inwards like a tuft of dust into a vacuum hose. Afterward, silence. My legs were like noodles, twisted, like I said, and I could hardly walk. Panicked. Paralyzed. Ashamed. Was it a seizure like Mother sometimes has? Mother takes medicine for them. She says she had her first one when she was pregnant with me, as if it's my fault. I wish I had someone to blame for mine.

If I had seen it coming, I would have had someone tie me to a chair the way they did to Lon Chaney in *The Wolf Man*.

"Even a man who is pure in heart and says his prayers by night; May become a wolf when the wolfsbane blooms and the autumn moon is bright."

Odd, the things I remember without even trying.

I think maybe God is mad at me about the twisting and the shaking in my legs. In between my legs. I can't explain it, but it feels Wrong, to the point of sinful, which is why I've been avoiding church. I don't want to be in a fight with God, but He started this. Though, refusing to go to school, to church, might be making it worse. The doctor told me that I am not having seizures, and that nothing is wrong with my legs. He didn't understand, and I was too embarrassed to explain about touching myself. That was between me and God, so I let the doctor concentrate on my headaches instead. I still get them,

but they aren't as bad as before, and they said I'll be well enough to return to school in the fall. Hopefully, God will have forgiven me by then. Mother gets furious when I refuse to attend mass. I don't dare tell her why.

"I don't need to go," I say. "I've done nothing wrong."

Though, I have, of course. Mother senses it and wants me to confess to Father Galas—tell him all my secrets. *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. I can't.

The problem with my legs—the twisting, the weakness—that's why I wound up at West Penn. My headaches, too, of course. Dizzy spells. All of it. They took x-rays, but I don't remember much about that. It doesn't matter. They said I'm well now and will have all summer to rest.

About the same time as when the twisting started, a girl in my class named Margaret died from the Donora Death Smog. They said she had been visiting relatives in Donora. It's not far—only a couple of stops upriver on the Interurban trolley—but I've never been to Donora, and I don't understand what happened there. I only know Father stayed home from his job at the steelworks on account of the poison air. He said that it was so thick people couldn't escape. Drivers couldn't see. Margaret is the only one I knew, but lots of other people died there as well. How many, I don't recall, but the newspaper said the town ran out of caskets. They ran out of flowers, too. It went on for days until the rains finally arrived on Halloween night to settle the smog.

Margaret didn't die right away, but the smog stayed in her lungs, and she never returned to school. Everyone in my class assumed she'd been plucked from the earth by the hand of God.

My classmates must think of me that way now, as well, since I missed many months of school—plucked from the earth. I have to repeat Junior year, but maybe that's okay. I can reinvent myself in September and become someone new for a whole new class—the person I want to be. Maybe even popular.

Esther bought this journal for me last weekend at the stationery shop in Charleroi to celebrate my release from West Penn. As you enter Charleroi, there's a sign along the road that says, *Welcome to the Magic City*. Esther said it out loud, practically singing, as we passed. I told her I wanted to live in the Magic City rather than Lock 4. Walter and Esther live in Coal Center, but Esther thinks it's an ugly name and likes to tell people she's from the next town over—Daisytown. She thinks it's okay for me to say I'm from The Magic City if that's what I want to do—the same way she tells people she's from Daisytown. But, since I'm sticking to the facts, I live in Lock 4.



Esther is my sister-in-law. She's a lot older than me but not as old as my brother, Walter. He's twenty-six—nearly ten years older than I am. My other brother, Frederick, is old, too. Twenty-four now, which makes me feel like an only child. Walter left home when I was seven. Frederick got drafted not long after that, so in a way, I was an only child for a little while. But Frederick moved back home when he got out of the Army. While he was away, Father rented part of our house to Mr. and

Mrs. Demski, though, which left Frederick without a bed. Now he sleeps on the davenport in the living room. Frederick resents me for it, but it's not my fault. Mr. And Mrs. Demski are from Poland, like Father, so Father will never ask them to leave.

Mother is from Austria, but she speaks a little Polish, too. Mostly when she is telling Father something she doesn't want me to understand, which has been happening more and more.

The lady from the newspaper told us if we want to write, it's good to read a lot, too. So, after we went to the stationery shop, Esther took me to the library, and I borrowed a book. It's called *Cheaper by the Dozen*. I saw the movie, so I know it's about a big family, which I guess is why I borrowed it. I wish I had a bunch of brothers and sisters—or at least one or two near my age. Maybe then I wouldn't be so lonely. Honestly, I don't remember much about the movie, because I'm still foggy and my mind wanders. The facts are that I enjoyed it.

Watching movies is my favorite thing to do. I'm going to watch a movie on TV called *Caravan* tonight. I love my movie magazines. It was reading about the stars in Hollywood that made me want to be a reporter. I plan to move to Hollywood and write for *Modern Screen* or *Screenland* someday. It's been hard to read the stories lately, though, so I've mostly just been looking at the photographs. If you study the pictures hard enough, you can almost imagine them talking to you.

Well, I think that's good enough for my journal's first entry. Writing makes me tired, but I'm determined to do it as often as I can from now on.