We Could Leave This Place Together

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Introduction

Arriving at the Page

In the hallway of my mother's apartment hangs a blown-up photo of me, age of four or five, leaping through the air in a silk tunic and staring directly into the camera. A veritable entertainer. My mouth is slightly open, my face pink from physical exertion, and my magenta underpants are visible beneath my costume, which lifts around my waist as I perform this sloppy, grand jeté. Admittedly, this gesture might sum up who I am better than anything I could ever actually articulate straining, oh-so-earnest, moved from something deep within all the while casting my gaze outward to an audience.

The first people I knew were artists, and the first artists I knew were dancers. This is to say that both my mother and my father were classically trained in ballet, met in graduate school at Ohio State where they studied the art of modern dance. The majority of photos I have of them are ones in which they wear outmoded styles and look perfectly happy: my father with his voluminous orb of hair and my mother with her soft bohemian shift dress standing under a tree in some university courtyard. I remember stories that my mother told me about their early-days romance involving an innocent yet sure-footed love, like how, when they were only sweethearts, my father once nudged my mother backstage at their dance recital and pointed to a patch of the wall where he had carved their initials, or when my mother first realized that their names, Karen and Miguel, were words that people had begun to say in a single breath, as if one implied the other.

Movement has always been a big part of my life. From an early age I put on mini dance recitals in our kitchen. They always began the same way, with me begging my mother to put the spoon down—to pleasepleaseplease stop stirring the spaghetti sauce

so that I could show her my urgent rendition of Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal.* This was a beloved and obsessively revisited number of mine. I have no memories of her refusing me—only agreeing to sit down and watch. She would place the spoon on a napkin, turn the sauce on a low heat to simmer, pull out a kitchen chair, and wait for my big-hearted, four-limbed improvisation to begin. With patience, her eyes followed me—I could feel them, they were my fuel—until the finale when I would, in a painful and aspirational show of acrobatic prowess, force my legs into a half-split or wrench my torso into a breathless backbend. Every time, she'd applaud. It may be for this reason—that someone indulged with me in the fantasy that my creative expression was important—that I even have the nerve to write.

My mediums changed over the years. Though it was once dance, theater came later, also music, drawing, and of course, writing. Despite a step-ball-change, I was always attempting to get at something a little wilder and truer than what I perceived to be the pantomime of real life. From an early age I knew that I wanted a life in the arts. As Stacey D'Erasmo says, "...spirituality and making art are not such different practices. Both call upon the animating force of the unseen." It was the animating force of the unseen that my parents proved was real by being in touch with it themselves. I wanted that depth of experience that so clearly spread across my mother's face in photos where her body was made efficient by the gentle compression of a black leotard, where she reached skyward in an arabesque as if she saw a light beyond the frame, just out of reach.

My father was also a musician. As a girl, I taught myself traditional folk songs using his Spanish classical guitar, with its wide neck and soft nylon strings. It bears a fracture—some hairline scar down its belly where it has been re-glued. I have traced a

sympathetic finger pad along this mark many times, as if that same crack somehow extended beyond the body of my father's guitar and into his own.

Another one of my most treasured family artifacts is the University Dance Company poster from 1976 that hangs on my bedroom wall. Tickets, to my delight and amazement, only $1.50. They used his image on all the printed posters—his strong forward-moving lunge, his arms extended above his head as if they are holding on to something with all his strength. A movement observation report from 1978 says that, "Though Miguel uses all ranges of the kinosphere in his movement repertoire, he is prone to stay in middle or near reach space…" also that, "Because of a tendency to make time the less dominant part of his effort constituents, one can see that he has ready access to spell drive and to states of dream and remote."

Can anyone tell me what this means? Without any VHS tapes of his dancing, I can only imagine what this looks like. The final sentence of his movement report breaks free from the professional jargon and speaks plainly: "One senses Miguel will be someone who will go far, who sees clearly where he is going, and whose work is infused with a warm and caring heart." Raised by traditional Puerto Rican parents, my father taught himself English. He was the first in his family to go to college, was a talented classical guitarist, and built much of the furniture in my childhood home. When I was five years old, he passed away. Since then, my brother and I have always marveled at the ways he sounds like such an unlikely person—a container for all those seemingly discrete abilities and interests. Flipping through his stack of postcards (and he collected dozens from the Metropolitan Museum of Art), we ask ourselves what seems more impossible: the fact that he is no longer with us, or the fact that he existed at all.

To me, making art always meant moving into a territory that was of my parents, their spiritual and emotional evolution. There is no doubt that their history is one that will always inform the thematics of my own work. In this collection, *We Could Leave This Place Together*, the family is both the scar and the salve. It is in the background—the faded wash of woods—and other times it is the bullseye. Most noticeably occurring throughout this collection are many varieties of mothers who cook, drive, dance, pray. Mothers who are observed and examined for their mysterious strength. In the closing story "Mother," she is the event, and in the flash piece, "Day Off," she is the aftershock. I am reminded of Joy Williams when she said that every short story requires "an animal from within to give its blessing." Instead, I have made do with the wild and animate mother.

Re-Envisioning

I imagine myself sitting at the dinner table. To my left is a boy with a grease-stained tee-shirt, pushing his food across his plate, replaying in his mind the moves of his recent chess victory. To my right is an anxious and lonely webinar host despairing for a partner. Across the way, three generations of women—the one in the middle cutting and preparing the meat for both her mother and her daughter. I cannot invite them into my home without automatically seeing them unfold their napkins, pass the salt, extend a nervous hand for a glass of water. This is all to say that the characters who appear throughout this collection of stories, *We Could Leave This Place Together*, are beloved to me and very much alive.

The impulse to re-envision one's circumstances, one's life, and one's self, is the occasion for these stories. A recalibration, a tilting of the palm compass and the adjustment one's course. The "we" of the title is invoked in the titular story when the

protagonist mistakes her own reflection for another's in a moment that is both disorientating and clarifying. She imagines escape. It is that act of re-seeing herself that unveils an unseen recourse. The "we" of the title may also refer to another union of the author and the reader. In this way, I see the title functioning as an invitation to embark on a series of stories that might allow us to re-emerge with a slightly altered perspective. One that reminds us how, after the loss of an ideal, a new possibility emerges. Similar to us, these characters are presented with opportunities to evolve by questioning their worldviews and daring to re-envisioning their circumstances. In other words, they are a community of people who changed their minds.

The Heavy and The Light

I have a long history of being interested in writing the experience of loss, and within it, the fear and threat of loneliness. Some of the stories in *We Could Leave This Place Together*, such as "An Anatomy," "Personality Test," and "Mother," all write toward the threat of isolation by employing heavy and light elements. I am particularly drawn to writers who do so by leveraging both to trigger that two-part reaction—the laugh before the sigh. Perhaps it is no coincidence that one of my favorite novels, *The History of Love,* is brought to life in polyphony—one of the voice's is that of Leo Gursky, an eighty year-old Polish-Jewish poet, who says, "When they write my obituary. Tomorrow. Or the next day. It will say, *LEO GURSKY IS SURVIVED BY AN APARTMENT FULL OF SHIT*." Both the tragedy and humor here hinges on the word *shit*. The punchline that arrives incognito, surprising in its crudeness and self-effacement. You might laugh while simultaneously reflecting the psychological toll of loneliness, the inevitability death, and the anxieties of leaving behind a legacy unworthy of existing. Throughout Krauss's novel, the reader experiences this type of

"oh," over and over again, realizing she has been lead closer to an emotional pressure point, but through levity and play.

In a few of the stories in this collection, such as "Archie's Proof," "Day Off," and "Mercy," explore the experience of isolation particularly when attended by a child's perspective. I've always found this variety of sadness to be interesting. In *The History of Love*, Krauss deploys a undeniably endearing character—a fifteen year-old girl, Alma Singer, who enumerates her life in fragmented realizations that are often centered around her grieving mother, who is widowed romantic and raises Alma and her brother, Misha, on her own. In Alma's sections, Krauss strikes a pitch-perfect, poignant humor. Her first chapter is titled "My Mother's Sadness," and is followed by statements such as, "My mother never fell out of love with my father," as well as the anecdote:

> That year I wore my father's sweater for forty-two days straight. On the twelfth day I passed Sharon Newman and her friends in the hall. "WHAT'S UP WITH THAT DISGUSTING SWEATER?" she said. Go eat some hemlock, I thought, and decided to wear Dad's sweater for the rest of my life.

Krauss was one of the first people I'd read who was able to articulate the sadness of an experience I'd known with such a tenderness, lightness, and precision. And her willingness to be playful, both with language and form (as the novel employs paratext, lists, and large sections of white space), spoke to the kind of delight I hoped to incorporate into whatever back-and-forth I would have with my own readers someday. In a certain manner, her novel was an entry point into understanding my own voice and aspirations as a writer. The way she can dance light-footed toward a big darkness.

A Shift Inward

More and more I find myself reading writers who luxuriate in interiority—particularly, contemporary female authors who use this space to consider questions related to their personal relationships, gender dynamics therein, and larger ideological questions that feel almost confessional. I think of Sheila Heti in particular, and her ability to inhabit scene, to render sensory imagery and dialogue, while also heavily incorporating what are, at times, long-winded passages of self-interrogation. In her novel, *How Should a Person Be?*, she employs the form of the story almost as a roadmap for her character's own philosophical pursuits. Sharply awake and with her attention cast toward the particularities of mixed-gender relationships, the narrator, Sheila says,

> Ever since I was a teenager, I had been drawn to men exclusively...It was men I wanted to grow close to and be influenced by...There was a way in which I felt they would always come home. Even if they could be neglectful or forgetful, they were rarely cruel, and though they weren't necessarily so reliable, they were trustworthy in the deeper sense: I never worried that a man's heart would turn against me—at least not before mine turned against him—and certainly not for no reason at all. There would always be a veil over their eyes when they looked at me, which was a kind of protection. With a woman, who was too much the same, it never felt that way. So much had to be earned—but not earnings built up! Trust had to be won from zero at every encounter...

The passage goes on for the length of the entire next page and, without hitting a false note or overstaying its welcome, it performs self-critique and shares a personal, ad-hoc ideology that emerges from the character's stream-of-consciousness. This type of inward analysis, of being unafraid to put the self on trial, I find so compelling. In a way, I see it as risking the very story-ness of story as it tilts toward the kind of introspection of the essay. In my pieces, "On the Nature of Things," "We Could Leave This Place Together," and "Mother," characters push toward a similar analytic inflection—one that is afforded by a semi-omniscience and the permissions of hindsight. One of these

characters confesses to the reader about resenting the role of motherhood—that it was "thrust upon [her] like a veiled award." When looking at her own mother, another character admits that, "She was not the kind of woman [she] wanted to be: wilding and alone," that, "...the lone duality of [their] existence, mother and daughter, had begun to make [her] feel a part of her [mother's] smallness." These narrators do not embark on tangents as long or in-depth as that which appears so frequently in Heti's novel, but I see the quality of the observations as cut from the same cloth. I see them as other voices joining the same conversation as Heti's protagonist—speaking candidly and with a boldness. Above all things: willing to admit unflattering truths.

Process and Revision

While some of these stories are still close in conceit to their original, first-draft form, I may have learned the most from those that have changed drastically. It wasn't until this collection of stories that I had profoundly re-envisioned a story. In particular, stories such as "We Could Leave This Place Together," "An Anatomy," and "Mercy" underwent such extreme re-writing that only one or two of their original sentences are still intact. This was one of the biggest and most important lessons of writing this collection—figuring out how to even *begin* a revision. Discovering what was emotionally and physically required. On average, it was the older material that required the most attention. To begin, I would cherry pick the phrases or paragraphs that still felt alive, that captured an energy I wanted to explore, and transfer them to a new document, otherwise rebuilding a different story from the ground up.

I was putting in long days of writing. I was sitting down at my computer each day with a cup of coffee, thinking and typing and thinking and typing until the sun went down. That was the period of time when I found myself speaking to a friend on

the phone and telling her, in a regrettably cliched way, that "writing is like sailing." I actually believe it. Though one cannot control the direction or force of wind, one can always adjust her sails. At the start of each day, I decided to tackle whatever work I felt capable of. Sometimes, that meant working on something that felt less time-sensitive or less needy. What was most important to me was not to force myself into writing, nor was it to sit around and wait for the inspiration to hit—I had to locate the direction of the wind, and to tilt my sails. This way, I could at least ensure I was getting *some*where.

There were two tricks that I discovered for myself and used throughout the writing process: one was that I always allowed myself morning play time. The first two to three hours of every day were dedicated to reading something I loved. This practice helped me warm up into language use. It allowed for stress-free appreciation of The Sentence. It drew me closer to the internal climates of particular writers who are good influences: Elizabeth Strout in how she draws setting, Miranda July in how she charges head-first into sentiment, Samantha Hunt in how she weaves womanhood, sexuality, and the surreal, Emma Cline for her accuracy of diction and grace of syntax, Allegra Hyde for her strange intelligence and whimsy, Ottessa Moshfeg for her fearlessness. These women helped me to start my days. As if their stories were little pep-talks over morning coffee. I paced the ground floor of my house in thick socks, clutching bent pages of novels and collections, my own writing scribbled into the coffee-stained margins. To me, this was fun.

The other trick I learned seemed a bit unorthodox: I discovered the way that time spent *unable* to write can actually help create a kind of build-up or artistic congestion within the body. While many weeks I did write every day, there was also a benefit (particularly in the early stages when I was still drafting new material) in taking a few days of not allowing myself to write. An extreme discomfort, inching on pain, would

accumulate in my chest. Then, I would come to the page and open the floodgates. These days, I would produce a great deal of work in one sitting that trembled with an energy I'd never before found.

I find it hard to think about and discuss revision without also mentioning, even in the most incomplete way, how my revision process was aided when considering my thesis director's feedback. Working with Nancy Reisman helped me become, among many things, more sharply attuned to the imagistic and sensory aspects of my stories. As one example, I would find myself ordering my stories chronologically by default, always using time markers to open up sections. Or I would lose track of the seasons, the staging between two characters. Nancy introduced alternative doorways for accessing scene particularly those of image or bodily experiences. She helped me reach for time and space as important infrastructure of the story, requiring specificity and literality. I believe it is due to her heightened awareness of particular elements of story that I have grown in this way.

Closing

A present though discreet interest of these stories is that of the life cycle. The closing of my introduction seems an appropriate place to mention this: how a narrowing is preparation for a re-opening. An ending, the prelude to different beginning. Not only do I attempt to create this in the technical and thematic choices made in the story, "Mother," but throughout the collection as a whole. It begins with "We Could Leave This Place Together," a story about a girl—someone's daughter—just learning the world by looking out to her mother, to an audience, to whomever may be watching.

WE COULD LEAVE THIS PLACE TOGETHER

I was my mother's child, waylaid by sadnesses unknown to me until later in life. She loved me despite our similarities and for a time we were very close though I was unaware of this fact and assumed all daughters felt this way—like their mother's fifth limb—close by and synchronized. My father had left us for a woman older than me but younger than her, whose name I never learned. Because of this, the woman could have been anyone and because she could have been anyone, all women were her, beautiful and feminine and terrifying. One evening, after my mother had had two glasses of wine, she let it slip that this woman was a dancer. *Merengue*, I thought. *Salsa, tango, foxtrot.* "No," my mother said placing her wineglass down gravely. "She's a showgirl." I knew the place. A clearing off Route 301 boasted a cutout of a woman propping her hips on her hands and sticking her legs into the air like two flags. The building had blackout windows and mirrored doors and a girl in my 10th grade class named Mary Margaret wanted to audition for them. She wore satin push-up bras and lip gloss that made the boys' mouths burn. We were in our student lounge one day when she had one leg up on the table. "Practicing," she said slyly to passers-by.

Mary Margaret was not like the rest of us. There was always some rumor about her as if everyone wanted a reason to say her name. Even teachers. One in particular named Mr. Berritt. He taught Algebra II and waxed his mustache. He loved egg salad and would eat it every day on a croissant. Mary Margaret was often seen having private conversations with him before or after class in the parking lot or even once on a Saturday afternoon sitting a few feet apart on a bench in Beasley Park. Our senior year he was found dead in his car parked in his garage with the engine running. Before then

I had no idea that this was a way people could die, and I felt very differently about both cars and garages after that.

Mary Margaret skipped out on that entire week of school and when she returned she seemed different. Gazing out windows all the time, too sad to care when the boys threw Skittles down her shirt. We understood it may have been a coincidence, but as far as anyone could tell, he was very young and she was very beautiful. The truth was, we all wanted that power. For someone to love us and do something desperate like that. Of course it was shameful but desire doesn't care about shame—that's the point of it. Poor Mr. Berritt. He seemed like a nice man. There were days when I couldn't stop thinking about him, my mind returning to his name over and over, like a scab I wouldn't let heal.

Becca, my best friend, was in the business of speculation. So was I. Mostly, we kept to ourselves, tipping Jell-O containers to their sides during lunch and edging our spoons under the ruby silk. We'd been friends since diapers, which meant we didn't exactly choose each other, just grew together due to proximity, like trees planted too close, bending and warping into the shared brokenness.

When the year was up, summer crashed into us head first. A heatwave of record temperatures. Becca signed herself up for fat camp. *I love it here,* she wrote me on a postcard in June. *I'm really meeting my goals.* She wasn't even fat.

Meanwhile, I stayed in town working at the local market, dragging barcodes across the glass scanner and noting the women who moved around the shop with both severity and grace. This was when we were sixteen—a time when confidence itself seemed preternatural. Girls sauntered in with wet hair to buy more sunscreen, hiding their eyes behind oversized drugstore sunglasses. We worked on ourselves like competitive mixologists—a dash of this, a dash of that—how much of one thing could

we be? Smart, dangerous, closed to the world? The truth is, we were no one yet. Small and insubstantial and dappled with self-loathing.

This was the year after Mr. Berritt's suicide, when the school endured a continuum of Mary Margaret's hairstyles. First, long, unapologetically greasy strands of blonde, a chestnut bob, a moody undercut, and then—when there was no more hair left—she pushed a stud through her nose, an emerald in the shape of a half-moon. Most agreed it was thrilling to watch.

I'm thinking of getting a bob or a pixie. I wrote to Becca. *Do you think my nose is too big for a stud?* She never gave me a direct answer, which made me wonder if she had, in fact, read the letter. When people grow too comfortable around each other they stop looking, stop listening—that's what my mother and father proved. And perhaps this was true of me and Becca, after all we had spent countless nights with lying on my floor talking into a darkness—the backdrop of our girlhood dreams, plotting who and how to become.

One long, gravely mile away from the market, where the road smelled of burnt tires and thick polluted air traveled heavily along the trade winds, my mother's house crouched between two bigger more attractive houses. It was small and, though I'd never thought of it as ugly, did not inspire admiration. She cared for the garden frequently, and perhaps too frequently. Everything she planted died from overhandling. White carnations turned dark like they'd been cooked. They dropped their petals like tiny white flags and my mother speared pinwheels into the dirt to make up for lack of color, all of them turning rapidly in the breeze, reds and purples and greens. She was not the kind of woman I wanted to be. Wilding and alone. Maybe this is what it meant to grow-up: sideways glares, separate dinners, quiet mornings. Her garish green work uniform, those curlers mounted on her head like a dozen little

eclairs. It was common for people to mistake my voice for hers when I answered the telephone. This always felt vaguely threatening. I might have feared that inward collapse—a burrowing into the body like a nesting doll—and the very fact that we were mother and daughter had begun to make me feel part of her smallness.

I remember that a storm was coming. I remember that people were talking about the possibility of immanent devastation with detached catch phrases, the way one talks about the plight of a friend's friend's friend. At work, Sandy, the store manager with the face of a brick wall and a holy way of dressing, rifled through her purse as tubes of lipstick spilled out on the counter. She had to pick up her son from daycare and left me in charge. "Don't burn the place down," she said in a way that made it sound like she sort of hoped I would.

Important to note how no one took these warnings seriously on the Gulf. A few reacted conservatively—boarding up shop windows, leaving work early, and the day of, traveling in groups of two or three. A hurricane was passing north of I-4. Paul Dellegatto predicted heavy winds to hit at around four PM eastern. Aside from this, there were no signs, no portent in the sky. Freckled boys chomped on cups of ice, rode their skateboards right off the end of the pier and into the ocean. Girls swung their heavy hair back and forth in wet ponytails. All of them waiting for something new to happen.

I still find it hard to believe that there are people living in that town, rollerblading up and down those streets, waiting for something to fall from the sky and change their lives. I suppose that's the case everywhere. The setting of one person's childhood is that of another person's life. Like my parents, for example—how their marriage seemed so

neatly contained and intentional for a short period of time. Of course, this was before my father went missing. Not missing-missing. Just missing to us.

I had gotten up in the night for a glass of water and found him and my mother sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. In between them, a navy blue bra, both its cups large and facing upward like fruit bowls ready to catch rain. My mother's chest looked like a sleeping animal, moving up and down all on its own. Her nightgown balled into her fists. "Katheryn." Her voice splintered around my name. "*Upstairs.*"

There, I lay in bed, counting down from one hundred until one set of footsteps climbed the stairs to my parents' room. These days, I can't be sure if I imagined it or if it was wedged in from some story I'd heard or movie I'd seen. When I asked my mother about that night years later she refused to speak on it. "Not now," she said, applying eye cream with her pinkie, which only confirmed a slow collapse of truth between us. I can only see her this way, now—ghostly, waiting to evaporate into the weather.

Soon after my mother began venturing into the humid evenings for dinners with men.

Who knew where she met them? Who knew where she met *anyone*? Mothers were mysterious this way. The farthest those men would come was our doorstep as if some invisible barrier kept them from entering the house. Of course, there was no barrier, there was only my mother. She kept two pairs of kitten heels on rotation. "Black or red?" She'd pose in the doorway, turning ninety degrees and extending her foot like she was dipping a toe into a pool. I'd choose one or the other, then she'd disappear into the yard, a chiffon thing billowing at her shoulder blades.

I asked Sandy if she was going to get back before two and she promised she would. My mother had requested help re-potting the daffodils, bringing them inside before the storm hit, then replanting them once the soil had drained. She had asked me that morning after a long, laden pause that was usually the precursor to bad news. Clearly it had taken a lot for her to go out on a limb like that. She knew I hated that stuff.

A few patrons that day: one wearing a seashell choker who came into the store that afternoon to buy an abnormally large amount of beef jerky. He was on his way to the beach and believed that the storm promised great surf. One woman, gray haired and smelling faintly of rubbing alcohol, was buying as much toilet paper and first aid as she could get her hands on. I was surprised when Mary Margaret came in, and even more surprised when she arrived with two boys in tow. The boys looked extremely similar, then it dawned on me. They were twins. *Horsgroves*. The name was right there, I just had to reach out and grab it. They had thighs like tree-trunks, and one of them leaned back ever so slightly when he walked, reclining onto nothing.

I might not have recognized them if, second only to Mr. Berritt's suicide, they hadn't been part of the biggest news story at our school last Spring. The two of them were driving drunk and plunged their car directly into the creek. Some girl, Stephanie, was with them too. She died a few days later in the hospital and our school held a memorial service in the gymnasium. Jason Horsgrove sat in the front, face stern and breaking only occasionally to cringe. It was as if he kept forgetting when he was there, then would remember. I didn't know Stephanie. People spoke very kindly about her that day, and I learned that, like me, she loved yellow.

"Kay, right?" Mary Margaret walked up to the counter holding three six packs of beer and a virgin mango koolada.

I nodded, surprised in the way one might be after being recognized on the street of a big city. I wondered about New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. Who could I become there? I reached for koolada first. "Yum," I said holding up the bottle, letting the orange sludge shift around.

"Repulsive actually." She looked up at me with bored, dark, cat eyes.

Was she being sarcastic? And why did I have to be so earnest? Earnest like my mother, I realized, suddenly angry with her.

"It's Peter's," she said, tilting her head to the boy who was waiting by the door, scanning the locked shadow box of cigarettes. "What time do you get off? We're pregaming the storm."

I smiled a little though frightened by the prospect. The beer seeming to swell larger and larger between us.

"I'm supposed to ask you for your ID now."

"I live on Melody Lane," she said. "It's the big white house, just past the yard with all the oranges. Plus," she looked over at the shadow box where Peter was idling. Both brothers were just standing there blankly. "Jason thinks you're hot."

I could feel something inflate, pour out through the top of my head and onto the counter. Then she handed me some cash and my hands moved mindlessly to the register. I slid the caddies in two wide brown paper bags and she thanked me, throwing on a *babe* at the end. What was it about that word that sounded so right in other people's mouths and so wrong in my own? I had practiced it in the mirror, igniting some affected light behind my eyes as though I had had a clever or sexy thought. The whole performance rigid and painful to watch. It only took a moment or two after the three of them sauntered out of the store that I found myself wishing they would come back.

It was a twenty or so minute trek to Mary Margaret's—crunching the gravel under my tennis shoes, sidestepping the asphalt-smashed toads blistered on the sidewalk, crisped plant life hemming the edges of aspirated swamps.

With some difficulty, I located the lawn on Melody Lane with the orange tree—she had failed to mention the tree was sick looking, the lawn covered in rotting husks. I had paced the wide-set street three times before finding it—a small copse of leafy trees crouching low to the ground and surrounded by a graveyard of dark withered fruit. Indistinguishable conversation floated from a nearby yard. A radio playing top 40 hits—bubbly auto-tuned voices straining for love.

The house next to hers, the one with the orange tree, was in foreclosure. A sign in the window announced this. Now the grass to was grown too long. It sliced my ankles as I wove in between the oranges, my tennis shoes dampening in the tall grass. Every property on Melody Lane let off a faint whiff of wealth—money obtained through unsavory, morally ambiguous transactions, a haven for corporate sharks.

I found the three of them in a backyard, scattered in the sun across a wide wooden deck. Mary Margaret stretched out on a bright yellow towel while the Peter boy lathered her back in an eggshell colored lotion. The boy named Jason was bobbing up and down in the water and I could only see his head which looked happily decapitated. Beer bottles, the ones I had just sold them, were strewn beneath folding chairs. Some empty, tipped on their sides. Some in pieces across the dark-finish of the wooden deck.

Mary Margaret sauntered over to me, her red bikini fitting perfectly over her curves. She lowered a cigarette delicately from her mouth, then dabbed it out in a

powder blue teacup saucer peppered in ash. There was a duskiness in her face as she extended a beer to me—an offering. It was already open.

"Where's your bathing suit?"

"Oh." I looked down at my cargo shorts, my market uniform. "I didn't bring one." Above us, the sky was getting heavier and cooler like a bad mood. I suggested we go inside. They laughed.

I performed a casual swig of the beer trying to seem natural. I'd had alcohol before when Becca and I snuck sips of my mother's pinot grigio that lived on the second shelf of our fridge, hidden behind a tub of picked chicken and next to a Ziploc of lemon halves. I recoiled from the image now. We'd felt a thrill of excitement, but now it all seemed living proof of how silly and plain we were. Apparently, Mary Margaret had a million bathing suits that would fit me. She looked down at my stomach and thighs, then took me by the hand and led me inside, passing the open garage that housed a shiny, silver car. "That's my baby," Mary Margaret said, gripping my elbow and edging toward the sleek, compact machine. Immediately I pictured him: Mr. Berritt slouched in his own garage. I pictured an egg salad sandwich open on his lap, one of his short sleeved button downs, and that mug of pens he kept on his desk. I remembered how it was imprinted with a math equation—all triangles and p's and x's, and read: *Heisenberg may have been here*. It hadn't made sense to me but I had never cared to ask. Now I would never know.

Mary Margaret's house was pure white. White walls, white carpet, white tables and counters and upholstery. There were two stories—spacious and thoughtfully decorated with sterling silver picture frames and heavy roman drapes on each window.

"Where are your parents?" I asked.

But she just glanced back at me and smiled sympathetically.

The walls of her bedroom were covered in posters for black and white movies starring Audrey Hepburn. As Mary Margaret dug through her bathing suit collection, I stood by the window and ran my hands along the drapes. They had a surprising weight and satisfying density. They, along with everything else in her house, seemed to be an extension of her. Substantial, reeking of power. Through the window, the boys were tossing a rotted orange back and forth from the pool to the grass. The sky was even darker now. Jason was drinking a beer with his free hand. Both of them were burning fast—an alarming rosiness blooming in patches across their backs like maps to a different world. I wondered what it would be like to have a twin—what my twin would be holding in her hands and if she would have made the same choices I made to come here.

She said that I would do well in stripes, pulling out a few tops and bottoms.

"Yeah," I said, letting go of the drapes. "Okay." I walked over to the dresser and that's when I noticed it. Blue and white cardstock with the name Martin Berritt in bold type, center aligned, with information below about his memorial service. I ran a finger over the edge and Mary Margaret glanced over, then grabbed the invitation from the dresser and stuffed it in her drawer.

"That's private."

"Sorry."

Mary Margaret glared at me for a moment, then softened. "It's okay. I just hate getting into it."

"Yeah," I said. "I understand."

She looked down at the invitation and then back up at me. She paused for a moment. "I went, you know. To the service." She continued rifling through bathing suits even though she had already picked one out and lay it on the dresser. "It was

really nice, actually. They had it at the yacht club by pier fifteen. Apparently his family donated the fountain."

"Wow."

"Yeah," she said. "There's a lot that people don't know. Did you know he has an ex-wife and two kids?"

I shook my head.

"It's so sad. The kids are adorable. His wife is real nice, too—or ex-wife, I mean. People like to speculate about it. Like how she and I hate each other and whatever, but you know what I've learned? People spread rumors to distract from their own boring lives. Like, obviously *she* was the one who invited *me*. We're good. Real good, actually—we've gotten so close since it happened. Like sisters almost." Mary Margaret smiled to herself. "I've always wanted a sister. You know, the whole thing is kind of funny. Not in a ha-ha way, but still."

"That's awesome," I said.

"Yeah, it is."

"You know, I've always wondered about that."

"About what?"

I shrugged. "About you, I guess. About your role in the whole thing and what made him… *you* know."

Her eyes glazed over, latching on to something in the middle distance above my shoulder.

"How should I know what made him want to do something crazy like that?" she snapped. "People do insane things all the time and it's no one's fault. This time was no different, and let me tell you it's certainly not *my* fault." She was turning red in the face and pushed some hair out of her eyes, taking a labored breath. "See what you're doing?

This is what I hate about our town—people pointing fingers just because they can, because they have nothing better to do. Did it ever occur to any of you that Martin was de*pressed*? Like, clinically? Have you ever known a depressed person, Kay?"

I thought about this.

"A depressed person doesn't think logically, like the rest of us," she said. "There's nothing any of us could have done."

"You don't think your relationship had anything to do with it?"

Mary Margaret's eyes met mine. Those two spears. "We were in *love*," she said. "If anything, I kept him around longer."

The twins were in the pool looking waterlogged. Swollen from beer or sun. One of them had whistled as we walked through the sliding glass door. I felt awkward with my arms crossed over my stomach, but I couldn't bring myself to uncross them. Instead I focused on dodging shards of green glass on the deck. The suit Mary Margaret gave me cut into my flesh, leaving angry marks in my places of excess. The elastic edges flipped open flamboyantly against my rounded skin, their small triangles stretching awkwardly across my chest, turning my breasts into crushed pastry.

"She's shy," Mary Margaret announced, her cheery disposition seemingly returned.

"Get her another drink," Peter egged.

It seemed to me that the two boys had nearly identical expressions—a stoicism that, later years, I would understand not as a product of their tortured inner life and but as that of enduring apathy. They had strong chins, big teeth. Peter had allowed his beard to grow in, though imperfectly, in singed patches, whereas Jason was clean shaven. Small pink bumps dappled his jawline, a few of them scabbed.

We floated in the clear water for what felt like hours, but when I checked my watch I saw it had only been thirty-five minutes. Something distant flickered above.

"*Sick!*" Jason crooked his head back to watch the sky. His Adam's apple was pointy. He looked like a cartoon character that had swallowed something sharp. The absurdity of this image hit me square in the chest, the absurdity of everything descending upon me at once: the twins, this bathing suit, the immanent weather, Becca. Sandy, palming the back of Miles's head like a basketball, unlocking the front door of their house. Becca, dressed in purple spandex and leopard print sports bra, grape vining in the back of Camp Wellspring's afternoon Zumba class. Mr. Berritt slouching forward over his steering wheel. And my mother, transferring the browning daffodils into their pots on her own, glancing up at the sky, moving more swiftly. My legs wiggled in a bend of water, seemingly detached from my torso. The beer bottle had gone warm in my hand. They spoke of the English Football League and some fantastical place they referred to as "the destination," which I had at first thought was made-up before they began referring to other boys who had made it there.

Pop radio tunes played at the loudest volume, rendering the lowest and highest registers of the songs entirely lost, speakers buzzing at such extreme frequencies. Occasionally, there was an appraisal of the music. Mary Margaret passed comments on the singers, always the female singers, and always with a cold and competitive edge. *She can't really sing*, or *Her tits are always out*. I could feel my love of certain songs mutating into her lofty disdain.

Then Mary Margaret disappeared inside with Peter.

Jason was still floating nearby, eyes locked on me with a penetrating stare. I looked away and let my hair down from its ponytail. Then Jason lowered his face

halfway into the water, gathered a mouthful of chlorine, and gleeked it at me. “Ew,” I yelped. Then he grinned and paddled closer.

“Come on,” he said placing one hand on my waist in the cool water. My heart tripped over itself. “Let’s go inside.”

The next thing I knew, he was guiding me through the sliding glass doors into the cool climate controlled living room. My eyes fought to adjust to the dark rinse of the indoors. Air shocked my skin, my damp bathing suit, and the cold carpet thrilled the bottoms of my feet. A small, blue thermostat next to the door blinked the numbers 6 and 0. My skin felt greasy from sunscreen and dirt, and I reeked of my own sweat. Now that I was inside I could feel the filth everywhere. My entire body a smudge in her pristine white house.

That’s when the rain began. A whole ocean pouring from the sky, battering the windows and making everything harder to hear. Jason moved toward me. Slowly but directly as if he was in a trance. His torso looked like a slab of smoked ham—firm and glistening pink—like those blocks we get at the market that Janina slices thinly for customers who are particular. I could smell the sunscreen on his skin as he got close enough to plant a kiss at the base of my neck. He put a hand on my collarbone and pressed gently, though I was already somewhat off balance, causing me to backpedal until we softly hit the wall. I wondered if—from somewhere very far away—this might look sexy.

He grabbed my hair with both his hands and bit my lip softly. It was like night and day. Indoor Jason seemed and outdoor Jason. I pulled my head back to look him in the eyes. As soon as I did he ducked his head below my gaze and began kissing my shoulder with little pecks that seemed at once funny and stupid.

“Hold on,” I said.

"What?" The rain was coming down hard.

"Hold on," I repeated. Long streaks on the glass doors. I could see rain splattering into the above ground pool where we had just been minutes ago. We were all acting like different people now. Caricatures of ourselves. Small splashes of water ejected from the pool like popcorn.

He leaned in to put his mouth on my neck, this time higher. I could feel his breath, small and warm, like it was checking up on me. He moved slowly this time.

"Katheryn Miller." He slurred these words into my ear. It sent a shock down my spine, hearing him say my name. It felt like the most private thing in the world. Then he said it again syrupy, musically, "*Katheryn Miller.* I know you Katheryn Miller."

I smiled a restrained smile and turned my head down slightly. "What do you mean you know me?"

"Well," he said rubbing small circles on my lower back and keeping his face very close to mine. "I know you're in the tenth grade. I know you're best friend is Becca Randall. And I know you're sad."

I scoffed inwardly, then peeled back and blinked at him. What a ridiculous thing to say. I wasn't sad—or hadn't thought I was, but after a moment of letting the assertion hang in the air between us, it felt true. Like the truest thing, even. This sadness crashed over me, a sudden wave of it, a new understanding drenching me in a cold light. Everything so crushingly *sad*—so unspeakably. He moved a piece of hair from my face.

"Why, Katheryn? Why are we so sad?"

"I don't know." I felt myself on the verge of collapse, picturing faces, almost automatically, of Stephanie, Mr. Berritt, my father, my mother. It felt like too much. "How can a person not be sad?"

"*You're* sad," Jason continued depositing small kisses on my cheek, "*I'm* sad," then shoulder. "God. Look what you're doing to me." His erection pulled against the fabric of his bathing suit and I heard a soft, surprised *oh* escape my mouth. Such a casual small sound, as if I had thought it was Tuesday then realized it was Wednesday. He asked me if I had ever held one before though sounded like a statement. Then he smiled. "What?" He moved his hands to his crotch and grabbed the bulge.

"I don't know," I edged. He didn't hear, and began working on the front of his pants with his right hand. His eyes were partially closed as if he were half here, half somewhere else, and his lips parted softly. Through their opening passed the sour memory of beer. My mind was frantic and traveled over the house in a speculative sweep. Is this how it goes? Is this being wanted? This thing that had nothing to do with me?

"How do you walk around like nothing happened? Don't you still think about it?"

Jason leaned back a little, squinted as if to see me clearer. "Huh?"

"About Stephanie," I said. "About driving into that creek. Do you remember it or were you too drunk? I mean, I assume you must think about it—it's so sad. I mean, there's what Mary Margaret did, sure, and then there's what *you* did. It just seems different, that kind of mistake."

Jason's face looked more like marble than flesh, frozen in time. His eyes were open but something shut behind them. "Yeah." He shook his head and stared at the floor. "I think it is." The two of us stood there together quietly for some time, and I knew that was the end for us.

He went to the bathroom and didn't come back. I stayed. I sat back onto my heels and watched the storm. Impressions from the rug revealed reddish constellations on my

knees, and I leaned forward and fogged up the glass with my breath, head spinning with beer, listening to the slur of rainfall. When I blinked and the room began to tilt, I crawled over to the couch and curled up on its cool cushions. A roaring downpour, a sea of ticking clocks. I must have fallen asleep like this since when I woke up the rain had stopped and a quiet gripped the house. I forced myself up and once standing I caught a flash of movement from across the room. It looked like the silhouette of a girl, it was Mary Margaret perhaps, but wan and strange and frightening enough to startle me back into my seat. She hovered there mid-gesture, hair wild, with eyes locked on me, leaning slightly forward about to fall.

"Mary Margaret?" I said. "Are you alright?"

She stood there watching me in the darkness. I did the same and waited for her to move. I wanted to get her out here. Out of this big empty house and whatever was waiting for her upstairs. We wouldn't have to tell anyone that we were going—we could just walk out, leave this place together.

It only took a moment for me to realize, for the shimmery curtain to fall away. Of course there was no girl, there was no Mary Margaret. There was just me and my own drab reflection stretching horizontally in the mirror across the wall, distorting my parts in a fashionably lean way over the low hanging, television. Oh, I thought, and went upstairs to retrieve my clothes.

I knocked on her bedroom door and after a third try with no response, I twisted the doorknob and let myself in. The bed was a tangle of limbs, bronzed from sun. The blanket was pulled up halfway over Peter's shoulders, the pale blue sheets moving up and down with the small animal of his breath. His mouth was wide open, and his throat made a *ckkkk* sound every time he exhaled. Mary Margaret was on the far side of the bed, stretched widely, her entire body facing up like an open palm. Her leg was pinned

between Peter's, but her arms were spread apart, revealing her breasts which sank slightly to either side. Her ribs, her cavernous stomach, her trimmed pubic hair. I never thought that I would see so much of her, and yet, there was something about her that looked evaporated. Like there was less of her than there had been before.

Her eyes fluttered open.

"I'm just grabbing my clothes," I whispered.

She made no moves to cover herself, but cringed as if I'd caused her pain by speaking. I told her I would hang the bathing suit in her bathroom. She looked confused, so I pointed to it on my body and she closed her eyes. A peaceable and departed look spreading over her face. Okay, I thought, gathering up my pile of things, my day of the week underwear, cargo shorts, tennis shoes.

"Keep it," she moaned, rolling onto one side and pulling the covers up. "Don't forget what I said." Before I could ask what she was talking about, her breathing had already changed, sleep pulling her back under.

I gathered my clothes and changed in the bathroom. I draped the bathing suit over the rod of the shower curtain, and on my way out, took one last look at the side of her face before clicking the door closed behind me. In the office by the top of the staircase I discovered Jason. He was passed out on a couch, some sporting event roaring dimly from the TV.

In the night, everything looked shiny and damp from rain. The oranges were red and black wounds spread open like blisters in the grass—a fruity stench hovering around the lawn. They felt, somehow, both dead and alive.

It took almost forty minutes for me to walk across the neighborhood to my house. Everywhere were black puddles with broken leaves charming the surface. Blues yawned across the sky, noisy crickets rattled. By the time I got home, clouds were

beginning to brighten. My mother was standing on the front steps of our house arguing with two police officers. She clutched her purple shawl like a weapon, glowed wildly in the porch light with all that fear. I could hear her voice carrying across the street—a tone that I had never heard. It was deep and unrelenting. *How can you say…* she shrieked. *How can you say…* and then two words, *find her.*

Later, she'd explain that they couldn't file a missing person's report until it had been twenty-four hours. Besides, I was a teenager, they told her. I was probably just acting out.

I watched the scene for a moment, standing stock-still across the street. Before she recognized me as her daughter, I was just a stranger—a girl-shaped outline she hoped was hers, but couldn't be certain. After all, a girl that age can change on a dime, leave home, and just like that decide to be anyone.

The yard's gate was unlatched and open. I jogged, passing the flattened daffodils lying broken in the mud, then bounding up the path to the house. I was surprised by a thought I had, which was that she looked somewhat beautiful, standing there wild and ready in the light. It wasn't the kind of beauty any of us girls were after. Our appetites were broader, less refined. Governed by a hunger that was more individual. None of us had ever really loved—not really. None of us had even thought yet about mothers.

I would be made to answer for everything, but not then. Then, she didn't shout or grab me or fall to her knees. She drew me into her arms, and held the door open, taking me back into the light of the house.

We moved to Delaware the next summer. Some man proposed to my mother—a salesperson who tucked his shirts in and had an eye for antiques. Becca took it hard but to be honest I was glad to get out. To have a new place to try being different, to try

feeling better about the ways people are, but as it turns out everywhere is the same. I learned that soon enough.

As for my father, I might have seen him a hundred times by now. He looks like everyone and no one. I don't know. There are only so many years a person is willing to miss you. Perhaps what I remember most about that summer is the way the storm came and went without my even noticing. A build up to nothing. Cars idling in the street. Mr. Berritt's name hovering on my tongue like the bitterness of beer. Boys' eyes devouring everything, like the world would be so much better if only they could figure out a way to eat it. My mother never said a thing about the flowers—their bodies rent in the mud—and that's how it goes. There were more hurricanes after that. More boys who touched me and I touched back. More disappointments. We plant in the space that is open without any promise, and repeat.

AN ANATOMY

Brain

This is where logic begins and ends. It's where reason breaks down and metabolizes into something softer, more malleable. The week my husband returns from the dead is the week I discover how many ways a body can betray you. It begins with rationality, or rather its absence. How can the brain know what's real? Especially when longing is like a rumor that travels through the body, preparing the mind to believe.

Morning arrives behind a scrim of clouds—the sound of city pigeons flapping muddy wings. My eyes are already open, stark and unblinking, as they have been for some time now. My body is rigid and warm under the sheets. My body is the husk of an insect melted into amber. Tomorrow is the one year anniversary of Cameron's death, which means almost one year of my broken commitments, waking too easily at down to the sound of the dump truck, its hypnotic beep, groan, crash of its loader bucket releasing pounds of broken glass into a compressor. I wonder about broken glass—how different it might sound, depending, in the moment it breaks, for example, does it crack or crunch or rattle or screech? Does the sound disperse like a torrent of rain? How close is it to your head? How conscious are you at the moment of disassembly? I wonder if the body and brain can process sound when blood is rushing to the torso, when a seat belt tightens, when the mind wakes up mid-lurch from a partial dream in which you are on a beach somewhere, or at a concert, or walking through a cool, damp, forest, or even a dream in which you are still alive inside your car.

In grief there are many ways to distract oneself. For example: NPR makes the apartment less lonely, less haunted. The harrowing events of the world made soft,

recalled in the tone of a bedtime story. There's something motherly about mouth sounds. Recently, I was cutting apples when a special came on about the tsunami in northeast Japan. A man built a disconnected phone booth to speak to the dead. I placed the knife down, wiped my wet hands on the back of my jeans. I did not continue cutting for twenty minutes. When the special ended, I swept the cool apple slices into a bowl and carried them to bed.

This bed is where I'll stay—I've made it into my life raft. It's where, on the eve of one year, I am lighting a joint. The navy blue comforter does just that, wrapping around my legs like dark water. *By and large coastal fishing villages were impacted by these floods, sending their constituents into*… Now I can't get the image out of my head—an old bearded fisherman with great posture—no scoliosis or arthritis to speak of. Japan, I've heard, is one of the healthiest places in the world to grow old. I think about this. The fisherman is dressed in full rain gear, speaking into the phone. He's reporting the mundane: breakfast, the ripeness and sweetness of his garden tomatoes, his developing affinity for crosswords. He does not tell her that he's lost his net, forgotten how to fish. He's forgotten how to take his boat on the open water, and instead of making a living, he spends his days on public transportation traveling from the farthest reaches of the city to that wind-tattered booth. A place where he can speak to his wife and maybe be heard. The hope is small and fragile. The hope is like an apricot. The hope is like a baby bird before it's opened its eyes, not existing fully. The booth is a place where big winds blow and lash the sides, rocking it, tipping it back and forth, back and forth until the console tumbles onto its side and unbecomes, reddened glass scattering throughout the grass like dew.

My body shudders. I dab out the joint, turn off the light, and in no time I'm waking up again to the sound of crunching glass, the garbage truck compressor.

I work from home helping people in Arizona and Washington set up their firewall accounts. When I leave the house, it's for pork rinds and weed. I smoke in Riverside Park, like the teenagers. They huddle shoulder to shoulder and glare at me, the lone wolf on my piss-crusted bench. Something unbreachable exists between us, and I wonder what it is, though I'm not entirely clueless. I have not been a teenager for some time.

Next door, Russian tilers glide silver spatulas over the floor. I say *zdravstvuyte* and *kak dela* on my way out. Other than the pet names my mother calls me, these are the only two words I've retained. The tilers respond with a string of indistinguishable phrases that blend together. They laugh. I laugh, too. We all laugh together. I'm not fluent, but pretending comes naturally to me. At times I convince even myself.

Couples with linked arms shuffle through Riverside Park. Fathers drape tired children over their backs and women with ponytails are dragged by their dogs. My legs go soft while the marijuana unravels throughout me, melts my joints, fingernails, and scalp. Little spirals coil inside my brain and I continue watching. The higher I get, the happier and sadder the families seem. The river flashes like nickel against a darkening sky. Circle Line Cruises floats toward midtown, pans slowly past the divorced professionals. The next day, I wake up and do it again. Routines, people say, are good for you.

Voice

"*Zdarova*." My mother is a study, Russian woman who wears decorative scarves around her neck, takes any opportunity to make a toast. These are the things she believes in: that yogurt makes you skinny, that the first real American was of Russian descent, that

every day is an opportunity to become rich. She calls me that afternoon—the afternoon of the one year anniversary. A day I have decided to spend entirely stoned.

"The sun is shining, *moya doch*'. Why don't you stop being sad?"

Her voice moves through me fast and slow, replaying in my mind like a goldfish doing flips. The phone is warm and my eyes are closed. I am falling into myself again.

"Are you still in bed, *lapushka*? I am calling to ask what you think about a red kitchen." She always does this—asks my opinions on things she's already decided. An excuse to check on me, to make sure I haven't leapt out my window.

"Red is good," I say.

"It's passionate. Alive. Would that make you happy?"

"What?" I say. "A red kitchen?"

"Nice Russian men. They are coming this weekend to paint. Your age, *moya doch'*."

"Mom—"

"I can meet you to each other."

"You can *introduce* us to each other."

"Perfect."

"No, no." I lie down, exhausted. "You will not *introduce* us. I'm not *meeting* anyone." She runs the tap, turns it off. From the sounds of her moving over the sink, I can tell she is peeling potatoes. I tell her that I need more rest and hang up.

At some point—who knows when—I became one of those people you avoid on the subway. My eyes shine with hemorrhoid cream that is good for keeping the swelling down around my eyes. My hair smells dankly of weed. As I hotbox the shower, my fingers dampen the rolling paper, leaving wet bruises up and down the joint. I pull the

curtain all the way to one side. Steam and smoke make it nearly impossible to see myself in the mirror. Scalding water bounces and scatters onto the bathroom tiles in a little frenzy. Shampoo turns my hair into a frothy white paste. There is something alien about the human body that reveals itself between drags.

Hours later, body dense and fuzzy with THC, I find myself surrounded by empty bags of shrimp chips and calling Cameron's cell. A trail of greasy fingerprints dapple the screen on my phone. *We're sorry. You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error, please check the number and try your call again.* It doesn't matter if a thing is logical or not. People will do them anyway. Each time, I get three ascending beeps, a robotic voice. *We're sorry. You have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error*—I'd hang up, try again. Three ascending beeps. *We're sorry—*

The day gets eaten up—food scraps, paper towels, Lean Cuisine, soda cans—in my room at night, I map the marks on the ceiling. I consider the night sky. I consider the ocean. I consider loved ones who travel for hours on public transportation to reach the wind phone in Otsuchi. Those who call it a pilgrimage. From the farthest reaches of the town, it can take up to five hours until the bereaved arrive on that wide, green hill, blooming in five different colors in the summertime. "Words are not enough," the fisherman says through my pot haze.

I stay up late, although I don't want to be conscious. I'm sprawling naked on my back, weed nested into the bowl of my glass pipe that's balancing on my chest. The computer is hot against my stomach as I scroll through old photographs. Cameron and I, unshowered, sleepy, sipping coffee in the parking lot of a Diner in Taos, New Mexico.

Those road trips, I thought. All those hours we spent between places together. He was never very good at going with the flow—that was my thing. He held the map. In the next photo the lens is an arm's length away, and he presses my cheek against his lips with a broad hand. I scrunch my face into gleeful disgust, squirming to break free, reaching for something outside of the frame.

I wonder about this woman who I will never be again: a woman before. The bright tingle behind a face that makes you smile—does that come back? I shut my computer, then my eyes. The image of him pressed into my mind and the backs of my eyelids like a light stain.

At three o'clock in the morning, I startle to the sound of nothing. Every light is still on, my computer warm on my stomach, a bone-shaking nausea in my midsection. A foreign animal feeling in my gut warns me to find a toilet, and I make it there just in time to vomit. I stagger back into the bedroom just as my phone is trembling over my bedcover. It produces an electronic warble, flashing a restricted number. Anyone will tell you: only bad things come from calls placed at three A.M. The last time I received a phone call this late, someone delivered the worst news imaginable, nothing has been the same since, and I'm still waiting to wake up.

My finger drags the illuminating arrow to the right.

"Are you okay?" A voice says.

"Who is this—" I say. "Where are you calling from?"

The connection is bad. It sounds like wind is lashing the mouthpiece, like a person is crawling through a tunnel of bubble wrap. "Where do—" his voice cuts out. "It's hard to describe. I don't recognize anything."

"Cameron?"

"I wanted…" the line crackles and pops, "...come… on my..." It's then that I can hear a distant car horn, the ticking of a blinker.

"Cam are you driving?" My heart leaps into my throat. "Are you in a car? Get out of the car, Cam."

"...on...and sorry that...good…"

"What? What are you saying? Get out of the car."

Voices shrink further away. A sound of metal and glass breaks over itself and the line goes quiet.

When I check the screen, it's black again save a blinking, red X. Then there are four knocks at the door. Somehow, it's happening all over again.

Head & Face

The kitchen is dark. Hallway light pools under the front door. I flip on some lights before unhooking the chain, twisting the deadbolt, snapping back the latch.

"Can I come in?" A man with Cameron's face is standing in my doorway. His eyelids are pale, yellowish, and his cheeks are like pits—sunken and cold looking. Was the weed bad? This is all wrong—what my mind has done in collusion with a drug. He is still handsome but in an exhausted way. I cannot read what he's feeling. His belly presses softly against the front of his tee-shirt. Did he always have this belly? I cannot remember him having a belly like this. The tee-shirt registers—it's the Led Zeppelin one I included in the shoebox of his things we buried with the body.

When he moves forward, I subtly retreat. A cool pocket of air passes between us. A smell: rotten, sweet, like slimed flowers. The rancid mixing with his living smell of sweat and—inexplicably—something candied. An odor of peanuts and formaldehyde. He turns to look at me and the color of his skin is bile and ash. My arms remain crossed.

"You okay?" He asks.

I trip over the bucket of umbrellas behind me causing a clatter that shocks me into myself. Cameron steadies my elbow and I snatch it back, glancing at the place on my arm he touched. I look at him then back at my arm. "What's going on?" I ask. "What's happening?"

His looks calm and clueless. "I don't know, babe," he says this he's reading. The floorboards creak when he shifts his weight. He extends an arm to me. "You're so beautiful."

"Oh, come on." The words are an old reflex. He was always telling me how beautiful I was when we both know I was ghastly, grease weighing down my hair and now as vomit still souring the corners of my mouth. The rancid smell coming from his skin is beginning to grow on me. It's a smell that, upon second thought, I don't mind. I might even like. There is something amnesiac in his gaze. He runs a hand along our living room couch like he's trying to remember couches.

"We paid for that to be reupholstered, remember?"

With a hand resting on the back of his neck, he glances at me with confusion or frustration, then cranks his mouth forcibly into a smile. For a moment, he is no one. A collection of parts—a concept that is hardly familiar. Could I ever love someone, I think, who has caused me this much pain?

"You're worried," he says.

"No, I'm not."

"You're high."

I make a face. "No."

"Good," and he steps forward, closing the space between us. "I wouldn't want to take advantage." He speaks my name aloud—coloring the syllables in that warm, bright

way I thought I'd never hear again. This voice is speaking to me. It strikes me like a human hand knocking over a tower of blocks. I disassemble. Any chance of me holding myself together is gone, and I realize that I am willing to never have it my way again—to trade every piece of good fortune I may have lined up for me to stay right here. I'd trade it in for this.

His breath is faint on my face. His fingers interlace with mine. He watches me watch him. I watch him watch me watch him, and when I reach for his chin it feels warm, like a chin. Rough from his razor. I feel for his arms, reach for his wrist and turn his hand over to touch his palm, which is warm like a palm. He uses it to bring me closer. His body is solid and real against mine. The smell gets better and worse. In rigid, confounding rhythms he begins to shift his body back and forth.

"What are you doing?" I laugh—just the absurdity of it all—we must acknowledge this. *Man returns from the dead for one last dance.* His eyes are dark, locked downward on his feet.

"I want things to be better this time."

And how do you respond to that?

I keep my mouth shut, a pressure growing behind my eyes. It takes time for us to find a pace and stop stuttering over each other's feet. We rock back and forth under the pale light of our ceiling lamp—the one we hung and wired years ago. The one we argued about in the department store, the one that I called clinical and he called classic.

Outside, the city is as asleep as it will ever be. The streets sound emptied. An overnight delivery truck screeches to a half, hisses at the red light and a dog barks into the glass of a window, upset by something he smells. Nothing is promised, I think senselessly, and we dance for a long time. Poor dog. Eventually, the windows of the buildings outside turn rose gold.

"Nap?" He murmurs this into my hair, and I let out a soft puff of laughter. This is what we used to call sleep. I nod, and our feet carry us to bed.

Skin

By mid-morning, items of clothing—mine and his—lead out the door and into the living room like a breadcrumb trail. Among the clothes is my rot: cardboard plates of microwavable dinners, candy wrappers, Mountain Dew. Next to me, nude, face down, drooling into his pillow, Cameron.

He is still here.

Perhaps the past year has been a bad hallucination. I've considered this before but only in the morning when I have to remember who I am, where I am, why I am. The hideous sheen of having lost someone turns the year into a dubious story about time, some kind of high-gloss movie. I am wrapped up in someone else's dream, one in which I am bereaved. The dream will end, I know this, but each morning I wake up the garbage truck groaning and clattering, jolting me back into the world where Cameron is gone. But today Cameron is home. Today Cameron sleeps next to me again, peacefully, covered with a white sheet. I have achieved the impossible: reversed the irreversible. I am a weed witch. His hand drapes over my side, and when he shifts on the mattress, the stench returns heavily on the air like an opened sewage vent.

I press my finger into the meaty flesh of his shoulder, and he jolts awake.

He sniffs suddenly, blinks a couple times, sees. His smile is pure and tired, sleep tucked into the corners of his eyes. A small black critter the size of a deer tick scampers quickly across his neck, marching toward his ear.

"There's something—"

Cameron reaches up and smacks the insect. He does so without looking. I expect to see a dark smudge as he lifts his hand, but when he does there's nothing. A sensation runs through me like someone is turning my stomach inside out.

"This place is pigsty," he says.

I look around. I note the cans, plastic wrappers, forks crusted over in globs of congealed cheese. "It's hard living alone," I say, not totally sure of what I mean. "I'm not used to having guests."

"I'm a guest?" Cameron looks hurt, this expression I know, but he lifts my hand and kisses my palm.

I shake my head. "No," and my heart is sent tripping over itself. What about the rules, I think. A tension pulls across my chest—I have been concerned with the rules of what we might acknowledge. Of what is okay to speak aloud. I consider the soap bubble and how it disappears upon contact. Does he know he has died? "What should we do now?"

"Whatever we want, right?" Cameron stretches his fists to the headboard, exposing the individual ribs beneath his papery skin.

I try to relax during sex, to enjoy it like we once did after spells of separation, but it's difficult now. My mind won't stop racing. His hands grab my hips and my ribs in a way that feels starved and empty. Has death made him rougher? Angrier? What has he faced that I can never know? Does he lust for me in new ways? Not only for my body, but also for the things a body implies—its sharp breath and warm blood and racing heart? The things that make hurt.

Afterward, we both rest side by side, somehow defeated. Morning sun lances through the window blinds leaving zebra-like stripes across our bodies, turning us

beastly. He rotates on his side and begins petting a portion of my hair. That's how I know he senses it, too. We breathe with a heavy knowing.

"Not sure what to say."

"That's okay." My eyes follow a piece of dust hanging from the ceiling by a dust thread. "Really."

His head petting picks up ever so slightly in intensity, as if to thank me for this response.

I announce that I'd like to shower, then stand up, reach for my towel. I sense him rising with me, following me to the door. "To clear my head," I clarify. "I think I need to be alone." He freezes in the doorway and watches me go. I feel his eyes as I walk away.

The bathtub is covered in a thin layer of grime. It's always been this way, but it's only bothering me now. I scour the space under the sink for a threatening, toxic looking cleaning solution that will kill bacteria upon first contact. Then I scrub the sides of the tub with a sponge until the acrylic shines. When I step in myself, I crank the hot all the way, allowing the water to blanch my skin clean.

The bereaved are more susceptible to hearing voices, seeing visions, experiencing sensations. I read this somewhere. A word sticks in my throat: *susceptible*. No visitors to the wind phone have yet to report a voice responding, least of all, a body returning. People will still go through the motions, wait on a quiet, rainy street for the clatter of a slow-moving bus to carry them hours up the winding roads into the hills where they wade through mud puddles, approach the mouth of the garden, peel back its thorny brambles, climb inside the glass chamber, thread their fingers through the small holes of a rotary phone, dial some non-working number, wait and wait and wait. They speak into the quiet.

What happens if the get an answer?

Cameron is currently in my bedroom making plans for the day. How do I explain this? Every legal document with his name on it says *deceased*. It would initiate a tedious process to amend them, but at least there exists a concrete end, unlike so many other things in death, it seems doable. Unlike the softer, more human problem of loss, which entails so many closing doors. How do I undo the feeling of it? The chill that remains after many hours in dark water?

And what happens when the bereaved get the answer they've been hoping for? If the voice asks to stay?

I rake the pumice stone over my body in repetitive downward motions. Soon, it's covered in flecks of my skin, and I rip back the curtain to see myself in the mirror. Raw, dewy. Mist rises to the ceiling, little droplets of condensation yellow the paint in patterns that I could never muster the energy to care for. How long have I been in here? I reach for my soap tray and remove a small, diminished joint, then light it in the far, dry corner of the shower. After a few puffs, the pot unlatches something behind my chest. I stay a while longer.

Hands & Feet

By the third day, I've learned his angles—the ones from which he looks best, where his rot can hide and he seems almost like himself. From his left side, slightly below. When I'm sitting and he stands. There's the neatness of his chin, his five o'clock shadow concealing a patchy contusion, a yellow discoloration along his sunken cheeks. Another angle is from the back and slightly to the right—he looks well this way. That ear is not yet withered or pitched to the side. Generally speaking, nighttime flatters.

In the evenings we move through the apartment by candlelight. My rule. No overhead lights allowed. He thinks his dying has turned me romantic. I don't say the

truth: that low lighting allows me to forget the way rot swims through his blood, attaches to his bones, stinks up the house. And for a few hours each night, things are perfect. We lie in bed, and I rest my head on his chest. I think that maybe I am a romantic after all.

There's something haunted in the way he stares—eyes glazed over, watching Sunday morning sitcoms like he's only pretending to see. Eventually, I find traces of him everywhere—entire fingernails on the counter, in the sink, on the door knobs. With every discovery, I gag. Each time he leans in for a kiss, my arms go limp, my hands invent tasks that need doing, my feet carry me away. If Cameron stands by the sink, I sweep beneath the couch. If he lies stretched out on the bed, I stand under the hot spray of the shower or by the front door, flipping through junk mail, reading it with unqualified interest.

This is why I leave the house one Saturday afternoon without telling him. I have begun to resent informing him of my departures, turning toward him, speaking the simplest things aloud. In making these small gestures of kindness and respect, I feel myself always falling short. Better, perhaps, to dismiss kindness altogether.

I pass the tilers who are drinking coffee in the hall. There's a climate of playfulness about them, one that feels so distant from anything I could ever feel again, though I'm certain they've had their own version of this. Everyone does eventually. One of them with a tattoo peeking out from his tee-shirt looks at me and says a string of words in Russian. I pull my coat tightly around the waist, look down, and continue walking. Their disappointed voices slope downward and fade.

There is a leafy detour I never take, but today I take it and it winds me through the park right by the children's playground. Kids take turns spinning each other on the

tire swing. The whirling victims squeal and release their heads behind them like kites they don't need.

The traffic on Broadway is bilateral. I'm standing on the island, sandwiched between the hard breeze of fast-moving cars. Across the street, a marquee blinks the name of a movie—the second installment to a three part comedic franchise, and just moments later I find myself inside the theater, smelling of popcorn and human bodies. The room is full, and I'm holding a ticket stub between my fingers. A few empty seats are left in the front row, so I fold down one of the chairs in the middle and sit, a large tub of popcorn wedged between my knees.

From this close, the figures stretch unnaturally across the screen. Limbs grow freakishly long, faces scrunch into flat little expressions. Obscure and unrecognizable emotions. Beet red lips pull back at the corners to reveal brilliantly white teeth, all stacked side by side like a mattress showroom. A manicured hand hovers over me and wraps around a steering wheel like tentacles. Two heads float by like parade balloons. My fingers shuttle popcorn mechanically from bag to mouth.

When the movie ends, credits creep soberly up the black screen and audience members zombie shuffle toward glowing exit signs. The theater is emptied. *What are you doing?* I say the words aloud to myself. My pocket floods with light and I pull out my phone, which alerts me of twelve missed calls, six voicemails—a restricted number. I switch it off and slide it back into the folds of my pants.

The theater lights come up again, just slightly. Still ads for soft drinks and candy play on the screen. A car-sized chocolate bar. An elevator's worth of soda. The room fills with bodies. The familiar orchestra cues up Paramount Pictures, and it's all happening again: the husband is sneaking around the kitchen in his wife's robe—the dog has chewed up his boxers. The husband gets caught in his wife's elegant, kimono

style cover-up as he is opening the fridge for a beer. I mouth the joke his wife tells. This time I know everything.

Heart

On the walk home, everyone is walking in opposite directions, bundled in fall coats, scarves wrapped around their heads like bandages.

By the time I round the corner of my block I swear I can smell him—stomach curdling, my former my life wafting from the apartment, hanging thickly in the air. A mixture of car exhaust, embalming fluids, and cologne. I stand at our front door for a long time with the keys hovering in front of the keyhole. On the other side are muffled sounds, a distant squeak of the sink turning on and off. Dishes being sorted.

Cameron nearly leaps into the air when I enter. He shuffles toward me with a plain kind of love. "I was so worried," he says breathlessly. "Are you okay?"

Skin seems to have detached from fascia. He looks like a bag. Small insects move and gesture together, collaborating along his joints.

"I'm fine."

"You look like you've seen a ghost." This makes him laugh. It's a spewing, wet laugh, followed by a juddering cough. His hands feel for the counter until he grabs the sink and heaves into the drain a buggy nest.

I ask if I can get him water, and he lifts a hand to silence me. By the time he turns around, he's broken open—a large, gaping tear yawns in the center of his shirt. Inside, the white bones of his ribcage curve inward; two feeble lungs pulse wetly behind them. A heart, throbbing, red, organ cluttered with termites.

"Cameron," I say. "You're dead."

"What?" He stands straighter.

I don't say it again.

He looks at the floor, lips sealed together tightly. "You're angry," he says. "I don't want to make you angry."

"I'm *not* angry." Light blurs in my eyes, and it's not until I say the words that I realize they are true.

We wait in quiet for something to happen but nothing does. The windows have gone dark. We are buoyed by the hush of city traffic.

"I'm going to give you some time alone," Cameron says. "I've been noticing how you want that." He leans in to kiss my cheek, leaving a sweet and sour breath lingering on my face. I nod. Then he goes into the bathroom and turns on the shower.

Water splashes against the tub. I picture him trying to scrub himself clean, knowing he will never get deep enough. Never touch what has already happened.

This is when something else takes over. I go to the table where I drag one of the kitchen chairs to the bathroom door. I wedge it underneath the knob. I don't plan to leave it there forever—just until I'm ready. Just until I know what to do.

Someone has to finish this for me. I have done the work of getting here. What I can say is this: as it turns out, in a weakened state, a dead man is not strong enough to kick through a door. Although he can fight for a while, an endurance unmatched by those who exist, a dead man does not have enough life to hold himself together. He can slam into the wood a disintegrating shoulder over and over for hours, all night, and fail. A dead man grows tired. In the early morning he gives up. He is no one when he gives up. He is no one when you find him. A dent in the plaster, an impression on the rug, an insect flexing its wings. You cry, though you do not have the right. The tears are your final insult, another thing you take without deserving.

Vapor

Rhododendron hang their pink, waterlogged heads. A stone path leads to the base of the wind phone's wooden frame, weathered white against a bright green cliff. On the mountaintop, the fisherman presses a disconnected phone to his ear, takes a deep breath. He asks his wife where she is. Does she know? Does she see her parents or their dog? Does she feel anything? Hungry or cold? Is she confused? Or does she understand what has happened, what must continue to happen, which is nothing. The wind plays her answers against the glass.

The fisherman looks up at the ceiling and places the phone back on the receiver. Waves crash and spray, gulls squawk behind untrimmed bushes. These are the sounds that come to him after it's all been said and he's out of words.

He will go home now—make dinner, shave his face, rise tomorrow, take his boat out again onto the open water.

My mother calls the next day. "The sun is shining, *moya doch'*,"— the day that the contractors are scheduled to paint the walls of her kitchen—"we are all ready for you."

I'm still exiting my dream. The room is too bright. I rub my face to remember my body, since most of me is still elsewhere.

"Are you still in bed, Darya?" She sounds more annoyed than usual. She says she's been trying to reach me for three days. She thought I'd been flagged by the NSA, seized by the FBI. I tell her that I'm not nearly important enough to be of concern to anyone, but she does not agree.

Men are murmuring in the background.

"I'm in bed, but awake." I kick down the covers.

"Come over," she says. "There is food and I'll meet you to these nice men your age—all of them here at nine o'clock on the dot, *lapushka*." Worthy men arrive on time. This is what my mother has always taught me. In all honesty, I cannot think of a time in which my father has run late.

I close my eyes for a second, cling to the final shudder of a dream.

"Darya," she says. Light is everywhere.

"I'm awake," I say. "I'm awake."

The odor is gone. Everything looks pristine—even the dust gathering on high shelves looks like clean dust. No one will ever know what his apartment can hold. In the hallway, the kitchen chair lies on its side, the bathroom door stands wide open proving to me all that has happened. Inside, prescription bottles for my adult acne have spilled out from the medicine cabinet, the mirror is cracked, the toilet seat is torn from the porcelain bowl and sprawls broken, like a fish hook, on the tiles. A termite circles the drain of the bathtub once, twice, and dives down into a black hole.

For the rest of the day, I wonder if I am a horrible person. Perhaps it's unforgivable, what I have done. The thought comforts me.

I am on my way to my mother's and father's. The apartment next door is empty now, the tilers are gone. The new floor is made up of stark white squares lined up perfectly from wall to wall. I am certain the landlord will charge renters a fortune.

As it turns out, the tilers are downstairs having a smoke. For some reason, I am relieved to see them. They speak to me as always, in long-winded Russian phrases that seem to tease and delight. Words unravel between their long, deep drags. I stay with them for a little while even though we'll never find the words. One of them with a large

wiry mustache and limbs like stumps offers me a cigarette. I take it, unthreading it from the pack, then bring it to my lips. Their voices wash over me. My body is charmed. I tilt my head up and exhale, watching the little ghosts escape my mouth and vanish in the air.

DAY OFF

Pastor Emil did not seem like a servant of God; he seemed like a person. A person like Dad who did his laundry on Saturdays and burned the chicken. His desk was covered with paper files tattooed with coffee rings and peppermint candy wrappers that had spilled from a pen cup. The three children sat there in a row. M.K. looked around. She was looking for the peppermint candy.

"So," Pastor Emil said. "Are you ready to confess?"

Remy was quiet for the first time in his life. He gazed out the window, over the arch of wilted plants. Outside, a basketball court was visible. Something about the promise of games focused him. Ava, the youngest, sat between M.K. and Remy, small bows cinching her pigtails, lace socks fanning out around her ankles like little drink umbrellas. She wiggled her legs, shifted her weight from side to side.

"Pee-pee."

Pastor Emil shook his head. "First thing's first."

"We have nothing to confess," M.K. said.

Pastor Emil stood up and looked out the window as well. Now, everyone seemed to be staring at the basketball court. He sighed and lifted his chin, gazing at the sky like he very badly wanted to play a game of HORSE.

"Soon it will be time for pee pee," Pastor Emil said softly. Maybe to God. "Do you know why you're here?"

"Daddy?" Ava said.

"Your father wants us to have a chat. He needs a day off. So, we're going to give him the day."

Moments before, Dad had left without saying goodbye. (*You give me no choice,* he'd said, opening every car door, ordering the three of them to exit. His voice, shredded and thin: *I tell you to stop and you just won't listen. Why can't you listen?*) Ava lunged at the curb wailing while Dad's car got smaller on the road. Remy had to calm Ava down with a game called "Dad Remy" where Remy is Dad and he gives everyone a hug. Everyone played along except for Pastor Emil, who did not want a hug since he was too focused on herding everyone inside.

In his office, Pastor Emil told the children they'd been misbehaving: reciting passages aloud from the Book of John, 11:44, the fall of Lazarus. Building coffins out of pillows, laying Ava inside so that they could practice raising her from the dead. Digging up Mom's clothes from the garage, which Dad had folded into clean little rectangles and packed away into boxes never to be seen again. Chanting their mother's name at night when everything else was quiet: the street, the walls, the air. Dressing up in her sweaters and blouses—whatever still smelled like her—painting their faces with her old lipstick, shouting her signature phrases: *What's the deal, banana peel? Nice thinkin' Abe Lincoln!*

All of this was making things harder for their father.

"So you see," Pastor Emil said, opening his hands like he was serving something. "Your father is tired. He needs you three to leave her clothes in the boxes where they belong. Otherwise, he has to fold them all over again. Do you want him to fold them all over again?"

The children passed time by playing in the empty classrooms used for Sunday school. Remy found a vial of holy water in a cabinet and the three of them passed it around with hushed voices, pretending to drink it and fall down dead. They took turns being

resurrected. Remy was the most skilled—grabbing his throat and collapsing, seizing, and lying still like a drowned insect. He was rigid on the floor for so long that Ava and M.K. got scared. "Remy!" M.K. shook him. "Wake up." His entire body was limp. His arms flailed like noodles and his head flopped from side to side like a cloth doll. When M.K. brought her ear to his chest to check for his heartbeat, all she could hear were the fibers of his sweater brushing against her ear. "What if he's gone?" Ava fretted. "Gone for good!"

Nothing worked until they threatened to get Pastor Emil, and suddenly Remy gasped for air and made his eyes big. Then the three of them marched around the room feeling powerful, announcing to the empty chairs that they could perform miracles.

Dad came after the setting sun. There were still shadowy bags under his eyes, but his face was shaven and there were groceries in the trunk. He kissed their heads but didn't say a word. Remy and M.K. didn't bicker about who got to sit on the side of the car with the working window.

Some time passed. The tires made a *shushing* sound on the pavement and M.K. ran her hand along the seatbelt bannering her chest. Everything felt chilly and new. They were heading home.

"Ice cream!" Ava screeched as they drove past Friendly's.

Dad tensed up. Everyone could feel it the way the car lurched forward. Ava was too young to understand that this was not the time for ice cream. Dad could leave them somewhere else and this time it was dark and there was nowhere else to go and everyone worth caring about was in the car or buried.

"Shut up," M.K. spat. "Don't be stupid."

Ava burst into tears. Remy continued gazing out the window, pressing his small pink palms together. Dad ran a red light.

"Please," Dad said, but it didn't sound like he was talking to anyone.

To the children's surprise, he slowed down and made a U-turn. Back to church, M.K. thought. But as they approached the Friendly's sign, he made a sharp turn into the parking lot.

Inside, the four of them squished together in a shiny red booth and Dad ordered three sundaes and one coffee. The children waited quietly for the woman with tangerine lipstick and a gummy smile to bring them their desserts. Once the ice creams finally came out, they looked more beautiful than anyone could have imagined. Tall piles of white and pink slopes, rainbow sprinkles, melted chocolate running down the sides, as if Dad himself had reached up into the sky and scooped out the moon. He watched them eat with his absent look, sipping at his black coffee.

"Ick," Remy said. "Nasty."

M.K. made a face, too. The twins pushed their bowls away and Ava followed.

"What on earth is it now?" Dad said. Ava began to cry again. Dad slammed his fist on the table, rattling the three spoons. "No more," he said. "Just eat goddamnit."

Each of them bowed their heads and drew their ice creams sheepishly toward themselves. They continued eating under the bright lights, spoons ticking against the bowls, *tick, tick, tick*, digging, eating, digging, eating, digging, digging digging until there was nothing left.

MERCY

The Pottingers lived next door to us for years, but it took until seventh grade—those carpools home from soccer games—for our moms to realize they needed each other. They tried to make friends by making us friends. "Such a nice boy," my mother said absently, searching her purse for a Rolaid. We were staked out in the car again.

We dropped Mickey off at home after our scrimmages. Each time, he shut the door looking apologetic for having to slam something, then made his slow-dash toward the house—a flash of his green jersey disappearing into a mudroom. It was a horrible sight: his forward-thrusting hips, drawn-back shoulders, spine resting slightly on the air behind him as if his upper half was in a recliner. Coach put him on defense on account of what we called his idiot feet. One time he got possession of the ball, dribbled it down the field in the wrong direction and scored. The other team cheered, coach threw his clipboard, and after the game, we yanked his pants down in the locker room and took turns whipping him with towels. From then on Mickey spent games getting shoved face-first into the mud. We might have stopped if it seemed like he minded, but he didn't. Mostly, Mickey laughed and went along.

"A very nice boy," my mother said again. Who cared if he was nice? She told me not to be fresh and we both peered inside and waited. It was a known fact that Mickey had a disabled brother, Jared. He went to a school that was a ways away and could accommodate his needs. My mother told me this one day as she drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, and I wondered what Jared's school was like—if they covered the same chapters in History and if they even had a soccer team. I wondered these things every time we dropped off Mickey, every time my mother and I waited in the car for

Mrs. Pottinger to come out and say hello. And the two of us would sit there quietly as I squinted into the dark windows of their house, hoping to see something shocking.

Even when it was raining Mrs. Pottinger would trudge over in her galoshes carrying her wide umbrella, lean inside the open passenger window of my mother's car, and talk forever. She was an older, girlier version of Mickey. Her cheeks were round and freckled and one of her front teeth was discreetly snaggle-toothed, folding over the other like a curtsey. Mothers could worry about anything. The rate of erosion impacting local real estate, the spike in Lyme disease, the toxic levels of fluoride in our tap. I waited quietly while they worried, rain tearing across the roof of our car and beads rolling down the front of her umbrella. I watched her footprints leach into puddles and water getting sucked back into the earth.

It was only the beginning of October. Already, skeletons from Fun World were draped precisely over porch rocking chairs, clumpy white spider webs pulled taut between arched doorways, and the air at dusk was sugared with the smell of cheap acrylic and burning cookies. My friend Raphi was going as a pizza slice. Melanie, the US president. And porky Charlie, who we all called Chins, was going as a haunted house. The five of us gathered in the parking lot across from school one day, planning it all out.

"—the hell," Chins said, lifting one foot. An ant colony of giant proportions. John bent over and blew on it with the full power of both his lungs and a dozen or so ants hurtled through the air. We took turns passing around a Gatorade, Cool Blue flavor, and doused the gross little city. Red specks scattered in the expanding turquoise. I bunched up the fabric around my crotch, scratched. Soccer season left me with massive heat-rash, rosy blisters, sneakers that smelled like warm bagels.

"Flounder should go as a flounder." They called me Flounder since I couldn't swim—just sank to the bottom of the deep end. It happened once in gym class, and there was that unforgettable feeling of water everywhere, in my mouth, my eyes, my ears. Then the muffled whistles from above, the whoosh of bubbles as our coach dove in to grab me off the concrete. Everyone watched me sit there like a drowned moron. Take their diss and make it your own—I knew that much by then.

"What are you guys doing?" Mickey stood a few feet away with his hands shoved into his pockets, and frowned at our miniature genocide.

"Murder," Raphi said without looking up.

"You missed these." Melanie pointed to a swarm of ants overwhelming a peach pit. John doused it and a cluster of them clung tightly to the pocked surface, to the tendrils of fruit meat. He kicked it into the bushes.

"Can I try?" Mickey produced a water bottle from his backpack and wagged it in the air. No one answered. "Hi, William."

"It's Flounder," I said.

"You two friends or something?" Chins was always calling me out.

"Our moms are," Mickey chirped. "Will lives—I mean, Flounder lives down the block from me."

"It's a small town," I said.

Mickey winced like he was in physical pain. What I wanted to ask him was, What are you doing talking to us if you can't take it?

"All dead now," Melanie said. She crouched to examine the wreckage.

"Nice!" Mickey put the water bottle back into the side pocket of his backpack. Was it nice? As soon as Mickey said it was nice, the whole thing became loserly. John threw the bottle into the woods beyond the chain-link, Mickey's eyes followed it to an

indistinct patch of leaves. A rush of distant highway traffic. Just like that we were bored again.

My father could be a real hard ass. Unemployment turns a man into a wolf. That's how my mother explained it: the recession. It was the reason he gritted his teeth whenever he had to re-align the car while attempting to parallel park. It was why he'd plunged his fist through a rotisserie chicken on his fiftieth birthday, grease splattering in every direction. He wasn't always like this, my mother swore, but for as long as I'd known him, he was. I told kids at my school that my father worked for IBM, which had been true once, so it wasn't a complete lie, and I enjoyed the flecks of truth in saying it.

My mother was a nurse. Because of that, she was always very careful, trying to protect everyone from harm. In the mornings, she set out my father's Lipitor with his coffee, and whenever I was in the car with her, she would flip her blinker on just to turn into our driveway, even when no other cars were on the road. These precautions meant that when all three of us went somewhere together, my father was usually driving. He didn't have time for it. Once, they got into a fight about keeping a defibrillator in the pantry. "That thing costs two grand," my father said. He was sitting in his chair drinking a beer. "I know you're not planning on keeping it." The unwritten rule was that no one else could sit in this chair. It made things very awkward for guests who did not know this rule—all of us watching nervously as my father paced around the house like something was burning and only he could smell it.

"It's not like *we* paid for it," my mother said. "The hospital has extras. They donate these kinds of things all the time, and frankly they're just good to have around."

Three towns over, a boy had recently collapsed. Just like that—in the middle of a basketball game—his heart stopped. My mother and Mrs. Pottinger had worried over it

through the open car window, the two of them like birds sharing food, but my father wasn't concerned.

"We'll sell it and put it towards our mortgage."

"And if the day comes that our son drops dead in our driveway, you'll still be glad we put that money toward our beloved wood and cement?"

"It's that Isabel Pottinger," he said. "You know why she has no other friends? No one can stand her—she makes people paranoid with her theories."

"How dare you." She placed a hand with frighteningly slowness onto her hip. "I'm a nurse, Roger. I know the difference between being paranoid and taking precautions."

"All I'm saying is that this equipment is expensive and highly unnecessary." His voice was low and smooth and controlled in a hideous way. "We're getting rid of it."

She scoffed. She was at the stove pushing the cubes of potatoes around in the pan and I was pretending to watch cartoons. Oil in the pan popped and crackled, an odor of burnt starch filling the room. She prodded a few of the bigger chunks and my father put his beer down.

"Janet." Whenever he spoke her name aloud, it landed like a hammer. Janet. It's a nice enough name, but my father has always had his own special way of saying it. Special-bad.

"We're *keeping* it."

Then for no reason at all, my father looked at me. His eyes taking on a heat, as if I was responsible for all this. "Get off the couch. Do something useful." So I clicked off the TV, stood up, and left.

Upstairs in my room, the Battleground menu was already up. Ominous theme music cycled in 20 second increments, the big red letters RESUME GAME pulsed on

tempo. My Razer Kraken Chroma headset was big and cushioned and gave my skull a hug—like maiden hands might hold a wounded head. The sound quality was spectacular and made the war uber real—machine guns and grenades exploding around me, from inside the house, downstairs, the bathroom, my parents' room. It was always the same, ultra-committed online players: *Wrath_52_Attack, TheFirstSergrentEver, Bone_Breaker_01.*

TheFirstSergrentEver: ur dead meat mercy

No_Mercy385: looking forward to blowing your brains out, sarge

[*steelbullets41* logged on and is in close range]

[*killfightwin* logged on and is in close range]

TheFirstSergrentEver: ur ass is grass

Bone_Breaker_01: will u 2 kiss already?

A bright yellow light meaning *damage* bloomed across the TV screen. The controller vibrated in my hands. *Damage. Damage.* Someone kept hitting.

My mother poked her head through the door crack and moved her mouth. All I could hear was bombs. The timing couldn't have been worse, and I assumed she'd get the message, but when she didn't go away it became clear that I had no choice in the matter. Off went my headphones.

"Can we talk?" she said.

We had talks after I had stolen twenties from the cigar box that she used for emergency cash or when I had made bets with Raphi on who could spit farther by using our living room furniture as targets. I didn't know what she wanted to talk about now. Her shearling slippers were old and worn and as she shuffled to my bed it looked like she had stepped in roadkill. She patted the empty space next to her.

"I know you're stressed, baby. Your father and I take full responsibility." Her eyes filled with a glassy sadness. Everything about her settling somewhere new or far away. "I just wonder if we're doing right by you."

Was it a question or a statement? She patted my leg a few times. I thought she would continue speaking but did not. I imagined her standing up and leaving. I imagined myself sitting there in peace, playing my game.

"We don't say this enough, but we're really proud of you. You're turning into such a kind, mature young man." Her voice had a tremor that made my stomach lurch. Then she cleared her throat. The muted figures on my Xbox glowed—previews of various levels of the game, soldiers ambushing abandoned buildings with machine guns, crouching behind crumbling brick barriers.

"Okay," I told her.

She shook her head at the TV. "This stuff will rot your brain. I can't believe we bought you this garbage."

I told her it was more than that—a game of strategy.

She tilted her head and frowned.

"See," I pointed. "That's an assault rifle with a mounted chainsaw bayonet." I told her how it could deal melee damage, which was key for close range combat.

She looked at me worriedly. "Alright then."

The loop of action started over. We were back at the crumbling brick barrier, tossing a grenade over our heads. She stood up, kissed the top of my head, and walked out. She didn't look back before closing the door with a hollow click.

It's true that one time we went over to the Pottingers' for dinner. This was in September and my mother brought flowers and a veggie platter. Mickey greeted us at the door

with a salute and asked us to remove our shoes. "Please," he added with a deep bow. He wore track pants, a jewel green tee, and chunky gray socks. There was a natural Dad-ness to him, which was in part due to the socks, but also in part—I guessed—from helping to care for Jared. I had already considered the possibilities: Jared in a wheelchair, Jared with arm braces, Jared with some kind of voice machine to help him talk, swallow, think. I considered a scenario in which I was assigned a seat next to him at dinner and would have to spoon his macaroni, wipe his chin. No, thank you. Not in this lifetime, I thought, not *No_Mercy385*.

Our mothers greeted each other with excitement, their muted explosiveness like an underwater bomb. It was like they hadn't seen each other in years, though it had only been a couple days. On Sundays they took their regular walks around the neighborhood, both of their faces relaxed and undone. I'd seen them through the kitchen window in moments that my mother looked unlike herself. This version of her seemed soothed and glad. I didn't know what I was seeing then, the gradual undoing of things. I only knew that I felt uneasy, a little betrayed even.

The Pottingers' house was cluttered and smelled like bananas, though I didn't see bananas anywhere. Mr. Pottinger was in the kitchen wearing a long red apron that went down to his knees. He was poaching the chicken. My father said very little—just walked around the house showing everyone his teeth.

"Want to see my room?" Mickey produced two Cokes from the refrigerator and handed me one. The can hissed open.

"Sure."

On the way to Mickey's room, we passed walls that were covered in needlepoint. Roosters and bunnies and phrases like *Good Morning, Sunshine!* and, *Home, Sweet Home.* A cheerfulness that made my fists tighten. His room was dark blue. Dark blue carpet,

dark blue walls, dark blue bedspread. The curtains stuck out since they were checkered with red and white squares like dish towels, shut so no light would come in. The floor was covered in stray socks, jeans, long-sleeved shirts with the arms scrunched up like accordions. You couldn't walk without landing on a tighty whitie. The air was rank with French fries, and on his bed was a crinkled-up Wendy's bag. In the corner, a small table with a stack of books and an Xbox.

"You play?" I asked.

"All the time." Mickey turned on the TV and the menu to Battleground popped up.

I asked him his rank and slurped noisily at my Coke, fizz poking down my throat.

"Seven, halfway to eight," Mickey said. "You?"

I had to focus hard not to choke. How could this be? Until then, I was proud to be on level five. "Ten," I lied. "I'm on ten."

"Wow." Mickey glanced at the Xbox. "Wanna play a round? Show me your moves?"

"Nah," I shrugged. "I didn't come here to leak pro-tips."

"Well, I'll show you mine—" Mickey swiped a pile of clothes from his bed onto the floor. The density of the flannel and denim made a muffled thud, a hidden metal button clacking against the wood floor.

Mickey was a talented fighter but mainly his arsenal was huge with health at max. He possessed not one, not two, but three of the rarest and most lightweight armors any player could acquire. I sweat through my shirt as Mickey tore over cities in his tank, razed villages to the ground. His tongue poked out the side of his mouth and every time he made a sharp turn with the joystick, he jerked his shoulders in the same

direction. His entire body like a shadow for his avatar. When Mickey won, he tossed the remote across the bed and made little circles with his fists. A victory dance. How could someone who danced like that be on level seven?

"Not bad," I said.

"That's *nothing*," he said. "Level ten? You'd slay me."

When Mrs. Pottinger called us into the kitchen for dinner, our parents were already sitting at the table with full wine glasses and stained red lips. Mrs. Pottinger shouted for Jared to come downstairs and Mr. Pottinger sorted out cloth napkins. Dark half-moons had grown beneath my mother's armpits, and every time my parents took a sip of wine, Mrs. Pottinger hurried to pour them more. There was something taut in the air, like an invisible cloth pulling across the room. I didn't notice the mechanical whirring from the stove until the fan shut off and the kitchen emptied of all its sound. Then I could hear everyone's mouths as they creaked into smiles and swallowed their own spit.

Jared arrived like he had ropes cinched around his knees and elbows that drew them closer together, causing a jerkiness when he stood up and sat down. The first thing he did was walk over to me and shake my hand. "Jared," he said, and I nodded. He had the slight shadow of an incoming beard, and might have been in high-school. His eyes looked hyper, moving rapidly and unpredictably across the room like there was a ship sinking in his head and dozens of people were working to bail it out.

Throughout dinner, the adults directed the conversation in the worst ways. *So, you're a teacher, is that right? The kitchen remodel is tremendous. How did you cook the leeks? Why? What's wrong with them? Nothing—nothing's wrong.* Jared said things like, "Please pass the salt," and, "Please excuse me." I could sense my parents looking at me with eyes that wanted to know, why can't you be this polite? His fork trembled a little in his

hand, but he never once needed someone to cut his chicken or fill his water. His napkin was tucked into the collar of his shirt, and during the dinner table conversation, his face flickered and warped behind the curve of his water glass. He told a few jokes that I didn't understand, but made the adults erupt into honest laughter. I could never get adults to laugh. I could never get anyone to laugh. In trying to be funny I always ended up saying something cruel instead. It seemed to me like it was only when I wanted people to take me seriously—when what I was saying was not funny at all—that people found it laughable.

We passed the water pitcher to the left. Inside, ice cubes and lemons charmed the surface. Pink puddles bloomed beneath my steak. Hemoglobin, I thought, remembering biology. At some point, I lost track of what made me so worried about my mother and Mrs. Pottinger and my father and the rest of us. It was a good dinner. From the corner of my eye, I even saw my mother touch my father's hand, all tenderness and goodwill. I had to tear my eyes away from a sight like that. Something I'd never seen before. The good feelings lasted through dessert and then it was time to go.

Mrs. Pottinger packed Mickey his own lunch—it was known. His lunch always seemed to contain canned tuna fish and, much to others' envy, his own personal cup of Wendy's French fries. Supposedly, his digestive system was too fragile for cafeteria food. But Wendy's? We were suspicious. In Language Arts his stomach gurgled like he'd swallowed a radio.

"Weak ass bitch," someone once muttered. Everyone heard it except for the teacher. Mickey flinched like a cat sprayed with water. Tuna fish and French fries? I should have known—there is no magic in those foods. Later I would learn from my mother that his packaged lunches were so that he wouldn't have to sit in the cafeteria

with everyone else. The social anxiety alone caused him to vomit whatever he could get down in the first place. But how were we supposed to know?

The rest of us shoveled chicken nuggets and veggie fried rice into our mouths. The nuggets left ear-shaped grease stains on our paper plates and others at our table used their forks to stir together fruit punch and scrambled egg. We five were stationed around the end of a long table. Between Raphi and John, who could eat more cranberry-creamed-egg-mash? Soon we would find out.

"Make Flounder eat it." Melanie tapped the ice at the bottom of her cup, eyeing me. "Flounders are bottom feeders."

My eyes locked on my own greasy plate. I waited hoping they would find a new point of interest, a new target.

"Oh, oh," Raphi snapped a few times to get someone's attention. "Mickey—get over here."

Mickey was on his way to the juice bar holding two empty cups. It was unusual to see him in the cafeteria, but that day he had come to refill his juice in double portions. Red fruit punch haloed his lips.

"Mickey have you ever tried cranberry-creamed-egg-mash?" Raphi said.

Mickey paused, red-mouthed, and shook his head.

"Does he talk?" Melanie asked.

"He's an idiot savant," Raphi lectured. "Idiot savants don't talk."

"What's an idiot savant?" Chins asked.

Mickey's eyes darted back and forth between them, then landed on me and stayed.

"A genius, basically," Raphi said. "A genius who shits himself."

"There's no such thing as *genius*," John said defensively.

"Hey Mickey," Chins said. "Are you an idiot savant?"

Mickey looked at Chins, then back at me. "I've tested an IQ of 118." A long pause. "It's high-average." His eyes were wide and loony. If he would just blink, I thought. *Blink*. "I'm going to leave now." Then Mickey pivoted unnaturally on both his feet and marched away.

Once he left I felt something release across my chest, and the group broke into stifled laughter. I sipped what was in my cup.

"And if he's like that, can you imagine his brother?" Melanie said.

"Jared?" I said. "Total trip." Why had I spoken his name? I felt the pieces inside me rearranging, like a name could build a wall around a person.

"You know him?" Chins narrowed his eyes.

I shrugged.

"What's he like?" Melanie said.

I pushed some food around with a fork. I wanted to leave but also, I wanted to stay. I wanted to go back in time and eat the cranberry-creamed-egg-mash. "It was hard—" I said. "A hard thing to witness."

"What do you mean?" John said.

"Hard how?" Raphi pressed.

By the vending machine in the corner, Mrs. Heffenreffer stood solemnly, stabbing her Cup Noodles with a spork. A cook with stained clothes rolled a tray of bread rolls out from the kitchen and toward the salad bad. A pretty girl with long hair who I knew was a ninth grader whispered to someone and disappeared behind a column. And there was Mickey, an island in the middle of the room, hunched by the juice machine chugging punch.

"I went to his house one night for dinner," I said. "Parents forced me."

"What was it like?" John said.

"You really want to know?"

Everyone nodded. I looked down under the table and searched my hands.

"Mickey trapped me in his bedroom. Asked to see my you-know-what."

Melanie clutched John's arm. "No."

"Are you serious?"

"So it's settled," said Raphi. "Mickey's a homo."

"Are you really that surprised?" Chins said.

"What about Jared?"

I shrugged and Chins' eyes flickered.

"For once, can you not be a Flounder?" John said. "Tell us."

I knew what they wanted. I, too, had wanted it. Because of that, it was easy to hand it to them. It was easy to let my body give in—do the movements they so badly wanted to see. So I dropped my jaw, unfurled a slackness across my face. I brought a hand to my chest, let it flop over like a dead fish and wagged it around, slapping my thumb against my body.

"Wow," Melanie said.

"Finally." John elbowed Raphi. "Someone you can hang with."

Raphi looked disgusted and punched John hard on the arm. John gripped his shoulder, unhinged his mouth, screaming noiselessly.

When I got home from school that afternoon, my father was sitting on the couch watching Law & Order. "Sit with me," he said. "Grab two Millers."

I didn't ask why he was in a good mood. I just did as I was told—located the beers, their white, dewy cans, and sat down. One of the beers was for me. I could tell

because when he opened them in two swift gestures he put the first one in my hand. Both foamed and spilled a little onto the rug. I shifted in my seat to get paper towels and he grabbed roughly by the wrist. “No need.” He brought the beer to his lips and slurped the overflow. I watched, did the same. It fizzed bitterly down my throat. “Cheers,” he said and touched our cans together.

We sat there for a couple hours getting a little drunk and watching crime shows while my mother was out. At the time I didn’t know, but this was me participating in the celebration of something terrible. What I did know was that I had never felt so okay, and I didn’t want to break the spell. It wasn’t until years later that I put the pieces together—it had all been decided by that point. There had been a discussion earlier that day. The paperwork still needed to be signed and filled, but as for the rest of it, it was just a matter of time.

The next day, something was happening in the parking lot across from school—a group of kids gathered near the chain-link laughing and clutching their sides. I approached, fists in my pockets. There was a slight chill in the air, dry wind whipping and snapping at our faces.

Raphi, John, and Chins were all there. I recognized the shapes of their gaping, laughing mouths opening to a darkness—their necks craning toward the sky. Mickey was there too, standing farther away with his back to the group. As I got closer, I could see that at the center of the crowd was Melanie jerking her body around dramatically and grotesquely. She dragged one of her legs limply behind her, flapped her left hand at her chest. Mickey’s lips were drawn together tightly like a suture, his chin wrinkled into a knot. I thought he might have registered me in the corner of his eye but I couldn’t

tell—his pupils were darting frantically around the scene like a horse trapped in a barn fire.

Melanie's moans got louder. She began producing foamy spit in the corners of her mouth.

"You made your point," I said approaching. "Give it a rest."

But Melanie's body continued to spasm jerkily across the boundary of the lot, hair draped over her face.

When I looked again, Mickey was gone. My eyes caught his figure in the middle distance shrinking toward the athletic complex. It was only after he left that I realized my own disappointment—how I hoped he'd fight back. How I hoped he would do something, anything. Instead, he got smaller, crossed the baseball field and shrank into a dot.

I didn't have a plan in mind when I went running after him. The blistering heat in my gut could only be soothed by moving my feet toward him as fast as possible, shattering leaves in my path and leaving powder in cracks of asphalt. Shockwaves traveled through my legs, up to my head, turning my brain into a sloshing water balloon.

Mickey was sitting on the edge of the baseball field where the dirt turned to grass. He had seen me coming, I was sure of it, but he kept his head down. His arms were wrapped around his knees like a neat package, and his hands grasped at his bony wrists. He waited politely for me to catch my breath before speaking.

"What's your problem?" he said.

Any sense that might have existed of wanting to apologize snapped across my chest like a rubber band. There I was, an aggravated animal.

"Nothing," I said. "Nothing's my problem. What's your problem?"

Mickey pushed himself up using both his hands. "Get lost, or else." His voice had a tremor, and he lifted his fists nervously. I stepped toward him hopefully, then he dropped his hands and looked at his feet.

"Quit it," I said. "You're being a pussy."

Mickey's eyes met mine.

"I'm telling you. It's for your own good. You got to fight."

Breath held, he seemed to consider this. I couldn't have guessed what happened next, but Mickey drew back his right arm like a dancer. I thought he was about to fly away or do a jig or perform a pirouette but instead he rushed his fist into my face. Darkness, impressions. Light against shadow. My cheekbone was a sharp pain. I didn't know if my eyes were open or closed, but I felt my legs stagger back, my fingers reaching for the spot on my face he had hit. When his body came back into view, he was shaking. He wiped his nose with the crusty sleeve of his sweatshirt.

"Sorry," he said. "Oh, god."

I slipped off my backpack and dropped it at my feet. A small puff of dirt rose from the ground, and wind roiled through the trees lining the baseball field, a *shushing* sound that swelled.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't do that," I said.

"Do what?"

"Don't say you're sorry. You're not going to survive this place unless you start acting normal."

Mickey smoothed the wrinkles at the top of his pants, considering what I had said. My hands floated toward his shoulders and shoved. His body gave into mine like a rag doll. He blinked, surprised. His belly, like mine, pushed against his striped shirt.

"*I* told Melanie about Jared," I said. "*I* told her your brother is retarded."

Mickey looked confused. "But he's not."

"You don't get it, man. I'm dissing you. Watch—your mom's an old pig and you're a waste of space."

Mickey looked down again, solemnly this time, like he was searching the grass for an answer. When he looked up at me, his face contained renewed certainty, a happy light like an incineration. Then he stepped forward and drove his fist into my face again and again. At some point I hit the ground.

"I'm sorry." He repeated the words while swinging. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry." One for each hit or so.

Mickey was on top of me. I was face-up. Then, somehow, face-down. Fabric tightened around my neck and I coughed into the dirt. Sticks and grass blurred together with a wetness in my eyes. For a moment, it occurred to me that the grass and leaves and sticks were arranged in a way that were intentional. Some pattern was emerging and I knew I would never be able to see it, like the secret messages in those Magic-Eye books. A handful of brown and black leaves, wet with mud, was shoved into my mouth. I couldn't breathe. I choked and hacked on the stems. Then I forgot about intentional patterns. The whole thing lasted longer than I could take.

"Please." Mickey's voice shook. "*Please*."

I didn't know what he was asking for, but I remember thinking I would give it to him.

When Mickey's weight lifted from my body, air flooded my lungs. I rolled onto my back spitting toward the white sky. *Whooshing* sounds—an ocean in my brain—the blood rushing back someplace, and I knew without looking that Mickey was gone.

"You good, man?" Raphi passed me in the bathroom as I fingered the cut under my eye, rinsed it with sink water. "You look like you've been shat on."

For the rest of the day, I wore my hood and jerked away from open doors. Generous classmates held them for me, all the while seeming to lunge forward in threatening postures. Custodians lifted their mops like they were winding up to swing. The Halloween decorations in my neighborhood haunted me with special dedication like they were holding my name in their minds. Skulls and witches and gremlins, all those fifty cent omens of death.

I felt every atom of my body turning itself sick trying to expel me. I decided that I wouldn't allow myself candy that year—a commensurate punishment. As soon as I had been properly punished, this sickness would disappear.

At home I went directly to the shower so my mother wouldn't ask about the slice on my face or the mud on my clothes. I rubbed the bar of soap over my arms. My mind combed through the week, the year. It tried to locate how this whole mess began: with Mickey when he decided to go to school that day wearing some easily razzable wolfpack tee? Or with Melanie, who was always taken less seriously than everyone else, who wanted to be in-with-the-guys, to have that same terrible power. Or maybe it was the cranberry-creamed-egg-mash, or my mother's insistence, or Mr. and Mrs. Pottinger. Or maybe it began with my mother and father—how she was so desperate for structure, for a life, and how he was always resentful of abstract things like money and family and anything else that seemed to follow a natural rise and fall of fortune. Or maybe it all stemmed back to the moment I was born, when two people decided to make something out of nothing.

My parents orbited each other as usual that evening—two negative ends of a magnet, the same impossibility of contact. My mother was still dressed in her pediatric

scrubs, which were patterned with yellow teddy bears. Her arms made little circles as she rinsed a colander of steaming pasta under the sink. White vapor ascended to the ceiling like she was tending to the flames of a small pyre, a house fire between her hands. She sniffled. Allergies, or something else. I went to the fridge for a Yoo-hoo.

"Baby," she said. A dish clattered in the sink. "What happened to your face?

Elbowed during soccer practice, I told her. She pressed Bacitracin into the wound, stretched a Band-Aid over the bone. Meanwhile, my father was in the basement playing records, Phil Collins wants so badly for it to rain. 80s ballads, like those of Barry White and Peter Gabriel, were the most openly emotional aspect of my father. I didn't have to ask to know that I'd never be allowed down there with him. Not while the music was on. There were some things you just didn't let other people see.

On the phone, Mrs. Pottinger told my mother everything. Enough, at least. "He did *what?*" My mother's hands were shaking, tightening around her rubber gloves. After the call she sent me to my room where I waited for her. I felt ready. Whatever I was about to get, I deserved it. Go ahead, I thought. Best for everyone if you give it to me the way Mickey did. But of course my mother would never, and what I received was so much worse: the sound of her crying freely into her hands while she stood there in the kitchen for a half hour, the longest thirty minutes of my life.

In considering my mother, I sometimes asked myself, What could make a person so sad? Was it because of what I did to Mickey? Or what Mickey did to me? Maybe it was because of who I had become, and how I had cost her a friend. It might have been obvious then—the way boys start becoming something from the moment they hit seventh grade, earlier even. But I suppose there were other reasons why everything felt

so horrible, and it could have been because of something else entirely—something much bigger than any one person involved.

Upstairs, I sat on the carpet in front of Battleground. The joystick moved under my thumb with a familiar roll and snap, the round buttons warm and smooth under my fingers. It was the usual gang logged on. *Wrath_52_Attack* and *Bone_Breaker_01*.

No_Mercy385: hey guys

Wrath_52_Attack: howdy do

[*m_pottinger04* logged on and is in close range]

I gripped the remote. My hands slid over a thin layer of sweat. There was Mickey's avatar. His approached mine, then stood still, uncomfortably close and wearing all that armor.

No_Mercy385: switching levels

I directed my avatar through a nearby portal and landed in an abandoned barracks. No other players inside.

[*m_pottinger04* entered the barracks and is in close range]

His armored fighter stood there again, doing nothing. His pixelated, metal-plated chest moved up and down with the illusion of breath and I waited for something to happen. I waited for him to blow me apart. I knew the weapons he had, the kind of damage he could do. Game ending. And my own arsenal was pitiful. Just a torque bow, a bolo grenade, a rocket bomb. Blue light from the TV screen spilled onto the carpet and spread. And we just stood there for the longest time—neither of us making a move—as if we actually believed there was some other way to play this game.

ARCHIE'S PROOF

Statements	Reasons
1. In fulfillment of the requirements for a passing grade on my 8th grade Geometry final, I submit the following proof in which I explore the question of what makes love disappear.	1. Given.
2. My mom reclines on the couch with her feet up and a glass of iced tea in her hand. At this point her pregnant belly is as big as a rotisserie chicken. She says: a. "You haven't opened your backpack in a week." b. "You know, Archie. Homework is not *optional*."	2. This is why I'm sitting here at the kitchen table bothering to write this down. "Pose your own questions! Write your own proofs! They can be about anything! Not just geometry! I just want to see you apply the argumentative logic to your own interests!!!" This is how I remember you assigning our homework for Spring Vacation. And I admit—that was pretty cool, Mrs. Peterborough. I'm grateful to get a break from angles and rhombuses, and I'm also grateful for this fresh OJ which my mother is currently squeezing. a. She squeezes it herself ("exercise") and

c. "There's more to life than playing chess."	today she is letting me have a glass. b. This is because last week, my mom wouldn't stop talking about citrus, her craving. "I'd *kill* for fresh oranges." She has said this on four different occasions. My father comes home from work every day with a bag of oranges, shiny, sunburnt, plump. He drops them on the table for her. Just now, he got a beer out of the fridge. My mom said: "Oh, you don't think I'd *also* like to unwind with a beer?" She scowls at Dad and pierces an orange with her finger nail. Dad is taking a slurpy sip of beer. "Janine, you know if I could carry that child for you, I would." Mom scoffs. Just now, when I reached for an orange, she gave me a look. "Excuse me," she said. "Do these belong to you?" c. Mom is mean when she's pregnant. Which makes me wonder: Will my sister come out mean? d. Every day this week, Mom drinks her OJ. Which makes me wonder: Will my sister come out orange?

	i. Kidding, Mrs. Peterborough. Did you laugh? You have the best snort.
3. Science class can be helpful in terms of understanding natural phenomena, i.e. my family.	3. For example, Sir Isaac Newton really helped me clarify some things. When it comes to the laws of motion, there are three rules: a. First rule: An object (or family) will remain at rest (peace) unless acted upon by an external force (sister). b. Second rule: Force (sister) is equal to the change in momentum (familial decline) over time. In other words, the rate of change (familial decline) is directly proportional to the amount of force (sister) applied. c. Third rule: For every action in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction. (When my sister appears, I will disappear.)
4. But some things you can't learn from school.	4. I know because I've read these text books all the way through to the appendices for nothing. What is your raison d'être? Mine is to know everything so that I can counsel families like mine. I'd never seen my parents fight until now. The pregnancy

	makes my mom a grinch. My sister is already messing with us and she's not even in the world yet. *Having another child is a common but inadvisable approach to marital unhappiness,* says Google.com. Were they unhappy? Now I wonder. Was it something I did or did not do? Someone needs to tell them: unhappiness is just happiness with a stomach ache, like when you've eaten too many oranges and it takes some time to recover. "Give it time," I'll say to The Adults. "Don't do anything drastic like manifest another human life. At least check in with Archie first and ask if he wants a sister." a. My chess coach, Mr. Ostrager, comes over on Tuesdays for a game. Afterward, my parents are always offering him dinner, and he is always refusing. Once, while we were in the middle of a match, Mr. Ostrager went on and on about the importance of daily practice. Growing up, he practiced with sister, Bertie. Bertie played, too. I took a sip of juice. "*Bertie*?" I said. He nodded, then I captured his pawn. Then he captured my knight, I captured his bishop, he moved his

	rook. I asked if he even liked Bertie. That he should be honest with me. Without looking up from the board he said, "She's my sister. I love her." The whole thing was fishy, and after that, I watched him very closely.
5. Some things you can only learn by walking around in your backyard.	5. Two weeks ago I was watering some plans in our yard because Dad was at work and Mom was massaging her lower back with a heating pad. I discovered the following objects while spraying the ferns with a garden hose: a. A precious penny from 1959. b. A tennis ball, now dirty and smelling like armpits. Dad got it for me some years ago. This was in the B.C. era (Before Chess, as he likes to call it), when Dad still hoped I would be an athlete, maybe even a tennis star like him. c. An old sock. That night, I considered the relics and considered how they each represent one person in my family. Mom the precious penny, Dad the athlete, and me, walked on.

6. Art class is definitely not helpful.	6. "Think outside the box!" our art teacher demands. But she is always hovering by my shoulder as I make clay things that fall apart in the kiln. "Is that dog bowl, Archie?" When I tell her that it is a dish for collecting relics from the garden to better understand patterns of human behavior, she says, "OK!" and smiles with too many teeth. "For your next project, what if you tried making a cup, like Pauline?" I look over at Pauline who is pinching the brown clay with wet fingertips. I say that I will not make a cup like Pauline because Pauline's work is derivative. I say, this is me: thinking outside the box. And lastly, no one, not even an art teacher no offense can get in the way of my raison d'être, the pursuit of all knowledge, which I will achieve in whatever ways I see fit, i.e. harvesting relics. I need this dish.
7. Ultimately, some questions require independent field research.	7. I've resorted to the following informants: a. Jennings, the boy who sits behind me in French and has an alien-like mark on his face. He doesn't speak much, and always has some kind of Cheeto-red food coloring smudged around his lips. One time in class,

	I asked him why he has that alien-like mark on his face. He was using sharpies to draw on the back cover of the classroom textbook. Over his shoulder, I could see the picture: a dragon burning cluster of stick figures, all their mouths surprised into small O shapes. He turned to me and said the mark on his face is called a hemangioma. So I came right out and asked: "Do your parents love you less than your siblings?" He looked confused, so I gestured to the mark—purple and red like melted candy. "Because of your hemangioma," I explained. "How does the hemangioma make you feel?" I wanted him to know that his feelings were important—they meant more to me than the pursuit of all knowledge, my raison d'être. Unfortunately, he did not seem to understand this, which I realized as soon as his closed fist made forceful contact with my face. Now, Jennings can't go to Winter Formal. b. Mr. Ostrager taught me everything there is

	to know about chess. For example, some pieces on the board are worth more than others, but a good player does his best to protect them all. I look at some of my pawns that Mr. Ostrager has taken. They're lined up by his elbow. Crying my name. As he scratches his beard, one of my pawns tips over onto its side. "Archie," Mr. Ostrager says. "It's your turn, buddy." I understand that. What he doesn't understand is that one of my pawns is knocked over, so I reach over and place it upright. Then I move my bishop to E-5 and say, "Checkmate." He looks at me, then back down at the board. i. I had checkmated Mr. Ostrager. ii. "Wow." That's what he said. iii. That night Mr. Ostrager finally accepted my parents' invitation to stay for dinner. It was like a celebration. "Your son is very talented," he said as I shoveled mashed potatoes into my mouth. "He checkmated me in only fourteen

	moves." Mr. Ostrager poked his mash with a fork. "And I'm not saying this to get anyone's hopes up but with the right support, Archie could compete at a very high level. I'm talking Grandmaster title track." My father reached over and palmed the back of my head, "Nice work, son." My mother smiled behind her napkin. "Good grief." That's when I thought that maybe I would always have a special place in their hearts. Also, that I must never lose a game of chess ever again.
8. Said field research [see statement and reason #7] can be circular, at times, bleak. One must not allow this to discourage the scientific process.	8. Perseverance is important. I continue the search for knowledge despite setbacks. a. Like how yesterday, I asked my Physics teacher Mr. Meyer to consider the following trade: I give him a share of my future chess tournament prize money if he can answer my most important humanitarian question. Mr. Meyer said that he only knew the answer to some questions, and most of

	them were related to the study of matter in motion. More importantly, I should be focusing on formulas since I had failed the midterm. I explained to Mr. Meyer that my failing grade was due to the fact that I was fully entangled with my extracurricular essay on the rise of hermetic mysticism, which some people might say is, in fact, solving for x when x is WHO AM I? I also told him that my questions were indeed related to physics, as they investigate the nature of beginnings and endings. That's when he frowned then looked at his watch and told me to ask my most important question because he had a meeting. So I asked him what he thought—above all else, regardless of the particular constructs to which one may choose to subscribe, or dismantle, and excluding any circumstances in which one person cannot feel his or her true feelings and is thus self-alienated—makes love disappear? Then Mr. Meyer began to walk away from me in a way that was familiar—sort of slow and

	pathetic. Or maybe I was pathetic. Someone was pathetic. Then he turned around and said: "Curiosity."
9. Curiosity kills love?	9. Which means that now I'll stop asking questions. As it turns out, Jennings doesn't have any siblings. Do you, Mrs. Peterborough? You're so nice. I wonder if your mom was mean when she had you in her belly or if she ate oranges like mine or if she loved you even before you came out. Do you think she did?? Mom says my sister is inside her swimming around. This means that my sister has already beaten me in that she can swim and I cannot. At the YMCA pool, I tread water for thirty-two seconds before sinking all ten feet to the bottom. As always, Dad has his hands on his hips and a whistle in his mouth. He is teaching me how to use my body. He yells above ground, but his voice is muffled from the cool blue water in my ears. Down there, I feel like my sister. We're both swimming. Kind of. I wonder if she's also afraid to come out. Afraid to face all the cold, dry air, under those bright lights and stand before those two big

	adults we belong to. I guess I'd like to tell her this: our parents are strange. But that's okay! But maybe there's another way to look at it: a kid is such a great thing that you can hardly have just one. So when Jennings told me he was an only child, it did make me wonder if his parents stopped trying. Maybe he's a special case—maybe his hemangioma is a good thing that makes him worth *twice* the value of one non-hemangioma kid. Or maybe his parents don't see the mark at all. In conclusion, having any child *period* is deciding to have a child with a blemish, and that's the closest thing I have to an answer. That, and the fact that a kid is never just one thing, but lot of things all at once: an athlete artist, a chess player scientist, a business-minded ceramicist. He's a series of living questions, a wrench used to open something up, or partial credit on an exam when you don't know the answer and have to make a hopeful guess.

PERSONALITY TEST

Someone had said, Meet my friend Ruben, like you he's thirty-five years old, which could have also meant, Meet my friend Ruben, like you he is young but not that young or Meet my friend Ruben, like you he is tired of performing basic human behaviors such as eating, shitting, and taking out the trash, or Meet my friend Ruben, like you he makes all of us very uneasy with his lonesomeness, inviting himself over every year for our family's Thanksgiving and insisting on washing our dishes, on lingering around the house too long after pie, on using invented code names for our children, and on subjecting respectable adults to jokes that—when politics are on the table—involve a slapstick pantomime of stabbing himself or shooting himself in the head, so on and so forth. Naturally, I agreed to meet him.

The two of us settled on nine o'clock sharp outside the tiki bar on Wallace. He stood there in his black peacoat with the collar popped, snowflakes peppering the tops of his square shoulders. Two wicker torches flanked the doorway, and the flames revealed his face in this soft, pleasant, yellow wash. As I approached, I noticed that along his jawline were tiny, shallow acne scars and pulled down to his eyebrows was one of those humiliating winter hats with long braided strings and, on top, a god-awful yellow pom-pom. Immediately, I was in love. We shook hands, which felt oddly formal considering the hat, and then moved inside to drink.

The stools were lined up like kids in trouble. Upholstered in shiny black pleather. You could spin on them an entire three hundred and sixty degrees and it was possible to pick up some serious speed on your fourth or fifth revolution, but they squealed loudly when you did this, so I agreed to stop. The bartender wondered if we were out-of-towners. Guess from where, I said,

and he said, Up north? which was correct and thrilled me. 80s rock played dimly from somewhere. Ruben ordered two of something.

He said, It's true.

I said, What's true?

He said, You have a lovely smile.

This made me grin very widely. A different smile altogether.

He said, So what do you do?

I run webinars, I said. And you?

I sell dental equipment.

I told him that was very interesting.

The drinks landed in front of us, both with a coppery tinge and a twist hooked onto the side. Ruben sipped the drink, as I did.

He said, Do you date often?

I said I suppose.

He raised his eyebrows.

I clarified, Lots of first dates.

Oh?

I said, It seems weird for us to talk about this, doesn't it?

He agreed. Perhaps it was weird. So we stopped talking altogether. I took a big sip from my drink—so big that most of it was then gone and when I put it back on the bar I tried to hide how little was left by covering the glass with my hand. I propped my wrist over the top in a delicate show of femininity. As if my hand had landed there to rest or unwind. A hand was heavy

after all, and this one I had been carrying around my whole life. All that hand. I thought I was discreet, but of course the bartender saw. Bartenders always see.

I turned to Ruben and said, So are you a red wine person or white wine person?

Red.

Yes, I said, and gave my opinion on the fact that, due to his preference of red wine over white wine he and my mother would get along wonderfully.

Ruben sipped his drink with thoughtfulness.

I said, What about beach versus mountains?

Mountains, he said.

I said, It's beach for me but that's okay.

He said, We're both adults here.

I tried to figure out what he meant by that. Perhaps he meant that either choice, beach or mountains, was an equally adult preference to have.

I said, Do you have any?

Any what?

I said, *Blanks* versus *blanks*?

He turned his glass around in tiny circles. No, he said, and touched his neck. I don't think so.

That's okay! I said, and placed a hand on his shoulder, which was warm like a fresh loaf of bread.

He said, But I do know a personality test.

Test?

He nodded.

I said, Will you teach it to me?

He agreed to administer the test.

Do you want another drink first? I said.

He looked down at my glass, then at his. Okay, he said, and I ordered us two more.

Imagine a desert, he said.

I squeezed my eyes shut and whispered the words, *desert, desert, desert*. I was trying, I really was, but my mind buckled in half. A blush spread across my cheeks—I could feel it, the heat and fizz blinding me, accumulating behind the cage of my face. In ninth grade I played for my school's JV soccer team and suffered one season-ending concussion. Since then, this was the closest feeling to that. All muddled and hot and dizzy. Brain injury as foreplay.

He said, Do you see the desert?

Yes, I said. What time of day is it?

Does that matter?

I said, Desert is half sand, half sky. The color of the sky depends on the time of day.

Blue sky, white sky, black sky, whatever. He said the sky didn't matter, so I quit thinking about the sky. Also, life didn't matter.

What? I said.

All he meant was that I shouldn't worry about sustaining *my* life—for example, where I was going to get water, food, shelter, et cetera since this was not a game of survival, it was abstract. Hypothetical. A get-to-know-you-game.

I nodded.

Now that you have the desert, he said, picture a sphere and let me know when you have it.

I nodded. A moment later I said, Got it.

He said, What does the sphere look like? Be specific—color, size, material.

The truth was I wanted my sphere to look however *he* wanted it to look. A question stood behind the question of the sphere and *that* was the question I wanted to answer. I crossed one leg over the other and turned my face away from the light. The overhead fixture dumped a reddish tint over us both and caught his abbreviated gestures, the ways he sipped at his ice, kneaded that ugly hat in his lap. I admired how *at home* he seemed. Comfortable in his own body. There was something warm about sitting in the halo of that confidence, and for a moment I mistook it for my own.

Of note: Had we known each other in a past life? I once went to a psychic for guidance when I had nowhere else to go. "We're all connected," she said. "Our souls know so much more than our bodies. We've lived many, many times over." Maybe she was right and maybe if she were here, she'd make a reincarnation joke like how thousands of years ago Ruben was the caveman who shared my sheepskin. Next to a fire, our two shadows stretched against a stone wall. *Hu-man*, I said pressing my forehead to his. *Hu-man*, he replied. That kid-beanie stretched over his Neanderthal head. This was when darkness was darkness, before cities and power grids and The World Series.

How do *you* want my sphere to look?

He said, Oh, come on. That's not how it works. Your test, your sphere.

Okay, I said.

But my decisions didn't end up feeling like decisions at all—they were just the first things that came to my mind. So I gave the sphere reflective metal. Made it about yea high,

hollow. Nothing inside—sealed shut like a vacuum. I wanted the surface to be uninterrupted and smooth.

He said, A vacuum-sealed metal sphere?

Is that weird?

No, he lied. What else?

Nothing.

Anything special?

No, I said. The sphere isn't special, it's a sphere.

Got it, he said, backing off. He took a sip of his drink and looked up like he was reading something off the ceiling. What do you do for work?

Don't you remember? I said. *Webinars*.

Oh yeah, he said. On what?

Little bit of this, little bit of that.

Of course I wasn't going to tell him! My webinars were on tantric speed dating, manifesting your soulmate, studying the powers of Venus and the astrological laws of attraction. I'm not witchy or observant. If you want to know the truth, I believe in nothing, it's just the only thing these webinar women will pay for. After leading these courses for years I've found the group often concludes with the same takeaway. We ought to spend more time offline.

So, I said. What's the verdict on my sphere?

Well, he said. It's interesting.

(Interesting!)

Ready to learn what it means? He said.

Yes.

The sphere is you.

What?

It's how you see yourself.

I said, A reflective, hollow, vacuum?

He shrugged.

That's when I realized that there was something very dangerous about Ruben. I did not know him, and yet. I was willing to do pretty much anything to make it work. Because of this, there was an air already unkind between us. Ruben drummed his fingers on the mottled bar top, working over my test results in his mind. The bartender was pouring me another drink since I had ordered a third and Ruben asked if I was okay.

I said, I don't know. Tough sphere.

He laughed, and oh god. That laugh.

The bartender placed a new, full glass on a now damp and pulpy coaster, then slid it forward. I took it in my hands and relaxed to feel its cold and smooth weight.

Ruben asked if I was ready for part two.

I suppose.

So we're back in the desert, he said. And you sense a buzz in your back pocket. You pull out your phone and see that you're getting a call from an unknown number.

I said, Okay.

He said, Do you pick up?

I said, Probably, I'm in a desert, so.

He said, Don't worry about that.

I said, Don't worry about the desert?

Just—(he was getting annoyed)—just don't be so *literal* about this. This isn't real remember? It's all in your head.

Did he think I was an idiot? I looked down at my napkin. I had shredded it into three triangular pieces. It's all in your head, I told myself. I could feel myself wilt, sweat needling the back of my neck. Okay, I said. I'm sorry.

You don't have to be sorry.

I know—I said—sorry.

He drank his drink. We breathed. Then he said, So you do or do *not* pick up the phone?

I guess not.

He lifted his eyebrows and put back some of his drink.

I said, What?

Then he looked at me rather seriously and said, You really want to know?

I said, How much more of this test is left?

Only a couple more parts, he said. Next he told me to picture some flowers. Anywhere. He said, Any amount. Then tell me about them.

I thought that this part would be easy. I thought flowers represent vitality, originality, creative spaciousness, and inner life.

I said, There are thousands. Millions! The flowers extend like a carpet in every direction, toward the horizon in a three-hundred and sixty degree panorama. They are wild and blooming in a hundred shades of ROY G BIV. A carpet of multitudes.

He choked on his drink.

He said, That's a lot of flowers.

I said, Yes! And knocked back a gulp of my fresh cocktail. Yes, it is!!!

Damn, he said.

I asked if the flowers represented my creativity—my ability to manifest fortune.

Kind of, he said. They're your future children.

What? I said.

He nodded and drank more.

I excused myself to the bathroom. In the humming overhead light, I gazed into the mirror, watched myself stare back with as much objectivity as I could. What did my movements say about me? I waved my hands under the faucet but the motion sensor was blind, so nothing came out. I cursed, muttered. The anger I sometimes feel toward inanimate objects amazes me. The primalness of it. We all think we're so evolved.

A toilet flushed from the back stall and a polished looking woman with heavy curls glided toward the sink. When she extended her fingers under the faucet, water came pouring out on her first try like it had been waiting its whole life for her hands.

We exchanged partial smiles in the mirror. Julius had left me for a woman who looked just like her, but perhaps all women with bleached teeth look this way—faces shining with an antiseptic beauty.

She said: *Love* your poncho.

I looked down at the knitted object I was wearing. My mother made it for my birthday last month because sixteen years ago I mentioned that I wanted a poncho and she'd been knitting them for me ever since. This one I liked—it made me feel sturdy and protected.

Thanks, I said.

We shared the mirror as she unsheathed a dark, wine-colored lipstick, traced her mouth with it, and bit down on her lips. I pretended to mess with my hair as she fingered a fleck of red from the corner of her smile. It seemed that women like her had secrets they never shared. What is the lesson here? Why must they make things so much harder for the rest of us? For people like me and Julius.

Julius and I had been together for years. We had seen it all: the endless college days, three subsequent apartments—dingy yet expensive, a grand total of six different jobs, one recession, a net thirty-three pounds gained and lost, and two dead grandmothers. And those were just our twenties. Eventually, he found a woman with whom he had a "deeper connection," but the truth was she just knew how to pose for the camera—always turning a studied forty-five degrees from the photographer and placing a hand on her hip to create a bronzed toothpick of her bicep. He'd never admit that kind of stuff mattered when it did. Facing outward to the world with a sparkle and a snap. It felt like lifetimes ago. It felt like yesterday. "For Pete's sake," my mother said. "It's been *four* years." She thinks it's time for me to move on.

As I walk down the street to the corner store, I think *move on*. As I stop to refill my gas tank I think *move on*. *Move on,* as I lift the 2% milk off the grocery store shelf, *move on* as I brush my teeth in the morning, *move on* as I fold laundry, make the bed, *move on.* It's not like I disagree. I just can't do it. I won't. Maybe it's not even about Julius anymore—sensations like a habit, I tell my clients. Sensations become addictive and then *boom.* We're powerless to ourselves. *All those emotions*. Julius said I had too many.

The beautiful bathroom woman looked satisfied with herself at last. Then we showed each other our respective sets of teeth in the mirror. Then she left. I removed my poncho and

rolled it up into a tight ball, wedged it under my arm. Somehow, this exchange had exhausted me and when I'm exhausted my eyelids get heavy, making me look high on weed. It was happening.

From the dispenser, I tore a couple paper towels which hung there like a wide, dry tongue protruding from a dark mouth. I balled up the towels, wiped my eyes, my armpits. I was a small, metallic, vacuous sphere ready to impose on some unsuspecting fool millions of burdensome offspring. But I didn't even feel sexual enough to pull that off—*I* was about as sexual as a paper towel dispenser—offering itself up for anything with a heartbeat. I felt sick to my stomach. Maybe it was the bathroom odors, the small automatic air freshener attached to the wall that *phsst*-ed every minute, tossing up a cloud of mist. Mysteriously spicy. The sink drain crusted over with black mold. I examined my teeth, their vaguely yellow tint, and my aquiline nose, which seemed to cast an impossibly large shadow over my face. I examined my arms—their weird, unproportional excess. I tore off another paper towel, wet it under the faucet, and dabbed my neck. A small sigh escaped my mouth. I'd been in the bathroom for a long time. That's when I got a text from him.

U good?

How humiliating! My atoms were humiliated.

I rushed back outside to meet him but he already had his coat on and stood there with his collar sticking straight up, yellow pom-pom lobbed to the side, thumbs typing into his screen. I could see the check was taken care of, pinned to the bar with a heavy pen.

Sorry, he said. Something came up. Kind of an emergency.

I said, Oh. Is everything okay?

He said, Yeah. HVAC problems.

I glanced out the window to check the weather (pleasant), and decided not to ask about the particulars of these problems. I hated putting people on the spot, making them lie to me.

Annoying, I said. Looking at him made me feel dizzy again. Tangled in the head. I said, Welp.

He said, What?

Nothing.

Okay, he said. Good meeting you.

Ruben exited the bar with his hands stuffed in his pockets. His posture was dignified even though I could see him through the glass starting to jog. He was running toward his car.

I returned to my duplex that night, stepping into the loyalty of a dark and quiet house. Stairs squeaked all the way up to my room. I slipped into my sleep clothes which were right where I keep them, pooled at the foot of my bed next to a crusty coffee mug and a hopeful box of prophylactics. I languished over the covers. My retainer tightening around my top row of teeth. I considered texting him. *It was my sphere, wasn't it? My flowers? BTW I was in the bathroom for so long because I was getting to know a lovely female who will teach me how to also become a lovely female. I'm good r u good?*

When you think about it, nighttime is made for rumination. It mimics the mind and dream space—all its dark emptiness, quivering with questions: What's behind the door? What's under the bed? Why did I make that blue joke to the Uber driver when he offered me nuts? Why did I sleep with Todd? Why did I sleep with Bryan? Why did I sleep and continue to sleep for an entire year with that dueling pianos player who pulled my hair too hard? And then there was

Julius—the question of what *actually* happened—to which I say, I have no idea. We chased the passion of our first year with blind commitment: dog chasing car. Nothing has ever been so easy. Then I began doing things I couldn't stop—wearing leggings after he had explicitly told me that he doesn't like other people seeing my legs, getting a drink with other women my age I met in webinar—he hated when I drank. I said the wrong things during sex spoiling the mood, and he would push me off of him. I was relegated to the far edge of the bed where it was cool and empty. Loving him was learning the rules as I was breaking them. I didn't trust myself to know anything. *Babe*, he said before kissing my head. *I won't give up on you.*

Then he did.

In my webinar, Astrological Compatibility Pisces Women & Aries Men, I pressed my clients to be honest with themselves. I, on the other hand, couldn't keep the order of events straight or remember how much of the Julius story I had made up. I make things up, you know. Or Julius tells me I do. Now I'm starting to wonder, is he right? Could it be Julius who makes things up, not me? What I mean by that is, What the heck had I done that was so bad? I mean really—what had *I* done? What was I responsible for? More than anything in the world, I needed to know.

The blinds were up, and light from the boulevard traveled in abstract shapes across my blanket. A blanket knitted by my mother from the same yarn as the poncho. It's checkered with blue, purple, yellow. Colors of a contusion. My legs were burning hot. The covers were very, very heavy since I'd been using that weighted blanket I ordered online last winter. Also, multiple layers of wool afghans, some coats and scarves I'd piled over the bed to simulate the weight of a human being. If I could sleep crushed under the steel girder of an oil rig, I would.

It's not like I live alone exactly, but Wanda is no comfort. Wanda is the downstairs tenant, or rather, I am the upstairs tenant. We see each other in passing. She's always dressed from head to toe in some shapeless purple garment. A muumuu? I know she comes from a family of bricklayers, has fond memories of the Nixon administration, and hates the smell of marijuana. she rents out the top floor of the duplex to me for only $600. It's like having my own little apartment with a sweet little live-in landlord. Who am I kidding? She's not sweet. She's an old witch who rams her broom against the ceiling very time I step too loudly in the bathroom.

There was a clatter from downstairs—pots and pans, maybe. It was loud. So loud it vibrated the floorboards, jolting me into a standing position. The noise continued for a little while, like something heavy and alive had fallen into a garbage can and was trying to fight its way out. Wanda? She was an odd one.

I opened the door of my bedroom, called out: Hello? It was quiet again. Something told me the sounds I was hearing were definitely not Wanda. Another crash. Julius? He used to come over unannounced. He used to wake me up with sex before I even knew where or who I was. *Sorry* he'd say afterward, and things felt balanced for a couple days.

I grabbed the nail file from my dresser. It was pointy and dusted with white nail powder. I wiped it on my hip then held it out again, spoke into the darkness: Hello?

The walk downstairs was steep and I had to hold onto the walls because I was wearing socks and because the floor was slick and because I don't trust Wanda to remember my name let alone call an ambulance if I fall down and snap my spine. In a way, we are perfect for each other. Some days as I hunch over my computer in my bathrobe eating pickles from the jar, I can feel myself becoming her.

Hellooo, I said this in a voice that was trying at lightheartedness, communicating that I was a non-threat, presenting no obstacle in the heist. If he were a burglar, I would allow him to burgle. Take whatever he wanted from the shoe rack or the refrigerator. I wouldn't even call the cops. I would wish him well! Bring him chilled water even, pull out the couch and show him my wide variety bedside candles, let him stay the night.

By the time I was downstairs, the dark was so thick and so black that for a moment I thought I had gone blind. When I placed my feet down on the bottom floor, the wood went soft and granular. A cool mound of sand under my feet. Above me, sky. The roof?—gone, and the front door had been ripped off its hinges. In fact, no hinges. No walls. No house. I was alone on an oceanless beach. The moon beaming brightly like a billboard.

Wanda?

I removed my socks to feel the texture of the desert slide in-between my toes. Around me was all warmth and stillness. I thought, An impossible thing is miraculous! Then I thought, I'm not making any sense! It was true: my mind was broken. An expansive swath of earth just appeared on the ground floor of my duplex and still my biggest question was peripheral: Who cares enough to believe me?

I began to walk forward and somehow understood that I must cover great distance. A few times I glanced back and each time the house was gone. A great deal of time might have passed. Who knows.

Even if I wanted to, I wouldn't have been able to report exactly what happened. I saw lots a person would not believe. The tiki torches from the bar on Wallace, clouds the color and shape of giant purple muumuus, a mob of turkeys, all oddly intelligible—*Move on!—gobble, gobble—Move on!*—burying their heads in the sand. I ambled through a geodesic dome of heating,

ventilation, and air conditioning units whirring on high, a sound bath of *Om*. The bartender on the other side. He held open the door with that familiar look of worry. I know what people might. I'd flown off the handle. Gone berserk. Blown my top. Popped my cork. Hit the roof. And that's fine—I know what I saw. I don't need people, no matter who they are, to believe me.

Eventually, morning would come. Who would I be then? All parts rearranging—I wondered about my future and survival with the detached curiosity of a stranger. The sun ripened, an eyelid cracking open, and at last, I came upon it—a sick joke! My sphere, that small shining thing wedged into the earth. Wind brushing sand back and forth, grains tapping hollowly against the hard surface and in it, my reflection. The length of my face distorted through a bend of metal, my eyes, bright and searching. I looked really sad. But also, like myself.

A vibration emanated from my back pocket. I let it buzz buzz buzz, and when it stopped, something unhooked from behind my chest. A long yawn of silence and the sense of an imminent something. Who knows what or how much? The only thing I cared to do was sit and watch the sky change. Such a big thing! How could anyone say it doesn't matter?

ON THE NATURE OF THINGS

1.

On the day of the brunch, Cynthia prepared by pushing two fat pearls into her earlobes, tying a blue chiffon scarf around her neck, and driving a half-mile east to the salon for a blowout. The route to Lucile's required the use an access road which connected to Main Street then eventually the southbound interstate for twelve miles. Once she was off the highway, Cynthia found that she kept taking the wrong turn, driving slowly down the unfamiliar streets of Lucile's neighborhood, examining queer looking houses all with the same unkempt pulchritude, each with its number in a different place: door, signpost, mailbox, painted rock. It was no sooner that Cynthia identified Lucile's house that she began to feel she was edging a bit too close to an impolite tardiness, causing her great deal of relief as she pulled onto the toothy white gravel of house ninety-nine.

Lucile greeted Cynthia in a calm sweat. She had been cooking, Cynthia thought, noticing Lucile's apron covered in handprints of flour and wondering if her daughter was now the kind of person who baked, who grew their own produce, who pickled their own vegetables and, in repurposing old curtains made new clothes for hordes of orphans. That Cynthia had overdressed continued to bother her throughout the brunch, causing her an almost imperceptible anxiety that caused her to eat too quickly.

At the front door, Lucile initiated a brief embrace between them—a surprise to Cynthia, since, until three days ago, it had been a year and half since Lucile called. This had caused Cynthia irrational concern about the escaping smell of alcohol on her breath, pressing the mouthpiece of the phone to her chin. Cynthia had even covered her lips with her fingers as she spoke.

"Come in," Lucile said gently.

Inside, the air was thick. The furniture had acquired a smell of boiled potatoes and coffee. Lucile handed her mother a glass of water and stirred a bowl of raw egg, and began speaking idly of applying to MBA programs, as if they were picking up a conversation from yesterday, as if the past three years had not happened at all. Cynthia thought her voice had a strange lilt in it—one she recognized from Cynthia's teenage years, one she used when she wanted something or was about to disclose information that would get her into a great deal of trouble.

The brunch was one of false starts and dead ends. Red herrings and blank stares. A march between them in which all momentum building to something true was sidestepped due to some sense that they were approaching a landmine. There were moments when Cynthia thought Lucile looked like a child again, the deep pink of her cheeks and wetness of her chestnut eyes that flickered with a bright intelligence, but those moments were often interrupted by the growing sense that Lucile was building up to something, a treatise of sorts, and there was a horrid nausea born from being with Lucile in the presence of this secret. It somehow made Cynthia feel even further from her than she had in the past three years of radio silence. So, as they pattered over sherbet, Cynthia allowed herself the indulgence of feeling quite lonely, quite badly for herself.

Lucile gathered their plates and brought them to the sink, giving Cynthia the opportunity to clear her head outside with a smoke. From the front porch Cynthia gazed into the geranium bushes. Her eyes followed a black caterpillar traveling at a pace that seemed at once astonishingly slow and fast. From inside was the distant clanking of dishes and running water.

Soon every dish was clean and Lucile came outside to join Cynthia. They stood, it seemed to Cynthia, unnaturally close, both facing the road, allowing Lucile easy access to reach over and take Cynthia's cigarette from her hands, bringing it to her own lips for a drag. For a moment, Cynthia could picture it—their being mother and daughter again—and the possibility of it filled her with a silvery hope. The possibility of it made her want it more.

"I'm getting married," Lucile said.

"Oh," Cynthia said. So this is what Lucile meant to tell her. It was time for her to start a family, and she wanted Cynthia to be involved. A part.

"He's a good man. I don't expect you to attend to the ceremony." She passed the cigarette back to her mother. "There's no need. I know you hate that kind of stuff."

"What?" Was all Cynthia could manage. "What kind of stuff?"

"Parties. People. *Strangers*."

"Do you think I'm a child?"

Lucile rolled her eyes. "Please, Mom. Just do this one thing for me."

"This is a very peculiar way to act, Lucile. A very peculiar request to make of one's mother."

Lucile plucked at her blouse a couple times so it lifted off her skin, then adjusted it on her shoulders.

Cynthia could feel tears gathering in the corners of her eyes, but she meant not to show this to anyone. She blinked it away. "I suppose I'll have to honor that."

"Thank you," Lucile said, sounding relieved.

The truth was, Cynthia was angry at herself for not seeing this coming. How could she expect anything else? She had been a horrible mother, after all. The task of rearing children thrust upon her like a veiled award. Her ex-husband's idea. He had

divorced her once she got in the habit of locking herself inside her office for weeks at a time. Her children, whom she made few efforts to know, had developed minds of their own and forsaken her once they were old enough to walk to the store on their own, buy their personal packs of gum. It was all quite unfair.

"You think you're better than me," Cynthia said. "You and your father. You've always thought that."

"Please," Lucile said. "I wanted this to be a civil conversation."

"You don't want that." Cynthia scoffed. "Nevermind. Nevermind about me."

Lucile watched as Cynthia gathered her things, and when Cynthia opened the screen door to leave, walked to her car, began the engine, Lucile did not follow. She did not chase Cynthia down the driveway or wave her arms above her head to get Cynthia to stop the car. So she wouldn't attend her daughter's wedding. In truth, the fact that her daughter might have a wedding hadn't even occurred to her. Well, she thought. I suppose that now I'll just go on living my life.

Days later, Cynthia sat down at her typewriter to continue the conversation. Her novels were the places she could do that—fulfill the unfulfilled—and her family members appeared in the pages of numerous stories wearing the masks of cartographers, pilots, and clerks. Life was much more manageable this way. Relationships, much more appealing within the bounds of fiction. Why meddle with the events of life in a true, journalistic sense? It seemed as repulsive and pointless and frankly, Cynthia could not think of anything as unappealing.

Other female authors had professed how manageable it was to tackle both motherhood and writing, but Cynthia found it nearly impossible. Where was her time for inefficiency, daydreaming, and nothingness? Gone, and with it the art. In her

opinion, seventy-two years made her too old and too stubborn to re-invest in the concept of family. It was an antiquated and inherited idea she had worn it like a suit that never fit. When those ties fell away, she sent birthday cards, called on holidays, made limp arguments about visits—in other words, she did what she could to say she tried, then gave up. She did not dread solitude—the quiet tundra of each afternoon. It let her do her work.

Additionally, she was obsessed with the dead and all things dying, and fictional deaths allowed her to steal a fleeting glimpse of the afterlife. Rise from her desk for coffee, resurrected. Her current novel would be no different. The question was not *if* she would kill her character, but *how*. Often, their ends were stark, lonely, and sudden: a heart attack under a pear tree, hypothermia in a quiet January lake, the hot chaos of some factory fire. Such bleak ends, "inching on predictable," had been described as, "particularly rugged and nihilistic." The review was from the 1997 New York Times Book Review, and Cynthia had scoffed upon reading it, burned a cigarette hole through the name of the reviewer, and pinned it above her desk. "Quiet," "contemplative," "environmental," "slow." It was mostly true. In the place of plot, Cynthia sent her characters on their own observational tangents—hardly able to rest a kettle over the stove without considering the bend of some rotted oak tree, the shudder of its branch as it drummed on the window. From her typewriter, she could see the water moving. On the other side of the bay window, tides came in and out through a muddy inlet like shallow breaths into a circuit of little lungs. She chewed the inside of her cheek. Chapter twenty-three. There were plenty of ways to kill, but what was the *best* way to kill? Pneumonia? A hit and run? A heart arrhythmia? Cynthia's eyes flitted restlessly between the ocean and the page. There was a time, not now, when watching the blacktop of the water did not remind her of every book she'd ever written. For years

she'd nested in this carriage house, which was much in need of all kinds of repair: siding, waterproofing, an upgrade to the electrical system, the list went on and on.

The house remained a steady, fifty nine degrees year round, which would have been an issue for visitors if she ever had any. A blue wall phone that never rang—that she didn't even need, really—hooked onto the wall, its curly blue cord grazing the floor like the entrails of some sad and hunted thing, and the counter was littered with Ritz Crackers and sausages—foods she had been living on for days. The dry goods had come from her pantry, which was full of canned and boxed foods that could sustain her for stretches of time long enough to squeeze out a chapter. Stoli on ice, two bowls of cornflakes, a cigarette: the principal necessities of Cynthia's day. When she needed fresh air she cracked open the window, which would only stay ajar with something to hold it open: like a rotted encyclopedia or an old shoe.

The Japanese garden out her window lay preserved for months in the snow. The stillness of winter was interrupted only occasionally by some sharp and sudden movement: three teenagers she'd heard about who drove off an icy bridge and fell forty feet into the breakwater. Now that—*that* was an interesting way to die. She'd jot it down. In a few months, all darkness and load-bearing would give way to the bright stench of spring—lime zest and manure—glass from the windshield will washing up on beach, twenty miles south of the accident. A long, forgotten heat. And fall. Foliage would toss itself away, husks dropping from high places. Cynthia's novels paid a close attention to that relentlessness of life cycles, the inevitable death involved in the progression of seasons. Fans believed she wrote it with an existential frankness and animistic calm. *Nothing harmful*, one of her main characters once said, *can be in accordance with nature*.

Out her window, the shoreline receded with dusk, the narrow rivulets wetting the feet of loitering gulls, and Cynthia sat down and glared at the page, re-reading the words she had written.

2.

Carol refused to marry rich like her mother did. She hated the idea of unwanted company and idle conversation and even pretended not to hear Uber drivers as they made small talk at stop lights. The entire night of her book launch, she kept her head down and loitered by the wine bar with a plastic cup of Chardonnay warming in her hands.

It was the second week of her book tour when she gave the reading at a university bookstore in Peoria, Illinois. The event had gone smoothly except for a strange man in the rear who wouldn't stop laughing at moments not intended to be funny. For example, when the main character, a novelist named Cynthia, admits that she has fallen short of her own ideals as a mother and an artist. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" That's when he lost it. Carol's eyes flickered up, but she couldn't see where the laughter was coming from. She just wet her lips and continued reading.

On the bright side, the city of Peoria had pleasantly surprised her. The room was packed for her reading that night—an impressive turn-out, though, most of the attendees milling around the store seemed caught unawares. A few held her book up to the light like a specimen. College-aged blobs bundled in coats and scarves shuffled slowly between bookshelves, backpacks slung over shoulders, textbooks cradled in arms. Carol glanced over at the clapping moderator whose bushy ponytail puffed kinkily at the back of her head. She wore a shade of purple lipstick that Carol had never

seen before, and there was something about her that Carol envied—these women who run reading series, wear big earrings, and ask the questions. Carol unscrewed the cap of the dwarf sized water bottle and took a controlled sip, dribble raining onto her blouse. The water bottle had been provided by the bookstore, of course. There was no reason to ever bring your own to these sorts of things. "If you trust the world, it will provide for you," her mother always said. A dubious worldview at best.

It was ten days after the release of her third novel, *The Nature of Things,* and Carol had been leapfrogging across the country from hotel to hotel, leaving behind cities and untidy beds. She didn't mind flights—the casual miracle of sipping ginger ale thirty-thousand feet in the air, all the while George Clooney moving soundlessly on and off the index card-sized screen. Sometimes, there was even WIFI and an attendant who proffered two cookies instead of one. But on Carol's way to Peoria—or more specifically, when the plane touched down into Chicago—she felt a cold chill, like an icy palm pressing into her chest. "Hello?" she said, inexplicably. In the airport bathroom, she splashed water on her face, swallowed a Xanax.

Carol's mother had died over a decade ago, but her stepfather had passed more recently. Only three years gone. As far as she knew, her two siblings Joanie and Richard still lived in the nearby city of Champaign, Illinois. There, they had all grown up together. Carol hadn't informed them of her book, let alone her tour, or the fact that she'd be passing through Peoria. It was all a bit much. When her stepfather began declining all those years ago, the burden had fallen on the younger siblings to make arrangements, file paperwork for Medicare, pack up their mother's belongings, then his. It was all happening at a very inconvenient time—the book project just starting to really pick up. Phone calls illuminated her screen for days on end. She watched from the corner of her eye: the screen lit up and went black again. Another voicemail. Was she

supposed to answer the phone every time something went wrong? Living the writer's life, people would fall away from you. That was a given. But when Carol stopped to do the math, she was surprised to count three years since the funeral when she had last seen them. It wasn't out of cruelty. They had their own lives.

Her publicist suggested that, in college towns especially, they advertise Carol as a nature writer. It was bound to attract a crowd that could afford wool socks and $28.95 hardcover books. Only after it was too late—fliers in bookstore windows—did it make her clench her teeth. Sure there was *nature* in her novel, but it was secondary to everything else—a more psychological wilderness. There was nothing to be done about it now.

Carol placed the copy of her novel on the lectern and cleared her throat. "Thank you," she murmured into the microphone, her voice at once small and booming. The crowd broke into reluctant applause. The moderator, whose name was Layla or Lola continued to clap as she rose from her seat and floated to the standing microphone next to Carol.

"Thank you, Carol, for sharing that interesting, *interesting* passage," Lola said.

Carol drained the water from her miniature bottle. It was not Poland Spring but designed in a way to mimic the franchise. *Canadian Rivers*. She had torn off the paper and crinkled it into a ball, rolling it against the lectern for the duration of her reading. The little shreds of damp, white paper now stuck to her palm.

"Now we'll have time for a short Q & A. First question?"

A woman with short, spiky hair who was sitting in the third row lurched forward awkwardly, raising her hand.

"Yes, you in the blue."

The teenage girl who worked at the bookstore hustled toward the spiky-haired woman to hand her the cordless microphone.

"Hi," said the woman. "Thank you for your reading. I know this is your third novel, and I was wondering how you see it in relation to your others—how it might feel like a change or a step forward for you?" Strangers quietly passed the microphone back to the end of the row.

"It's not that often that I get asked about the evolution of my own writing, so thank you." Carol took a sip of water. "I suppose that in this novel, I tackled concerns that have been kind of cooking for years in my own mind." Carol heard her voice, giant and amplified, booming through the room like it came from somewhere else. It went on to explain Cynthia's self-deceptions. Her less than weird contradictions, her isolationist and hermetic tendencies. "It's the writer's mantra: *if I'm writing it, I'm living it*." The audience laughed a little. Outside, a posse of teenagers surrounded a light-up scooter. A shared cigarette passing between them, a tiny cherry glowing from mouth to mouth. "Cynthia's issue is that the writing has become both the problem and the solution. It staves off this anxiety that she's never truly arrived. Like she's never *inside* her own life." The teenagers laughed noiselessly on the far side the glass. A girl holding the cigarette stomped it out in a thin patch of snow. "Of course there's a hypocrisy there—Cynthia's isolated herself from everyone, and even as she waxes poetic about the natural world she is afraid of engaging with it directly." The boy on the light-up scooter pushed off as the other teenagers disbanded. "Through her writing we see her idealizing a kind of vitality she'll never find, which she blames on the fact that she's a writer. So I guess… to answer your question…" Carol made a face at the audience, and they laughed. "Exploring these ideas in my fiction felt like a step forward because, well.

I think I convinced myself to switch careers!" Laughter ballooned over the audience, a kind of physical release expanding throughout the room.

"Thank you for your question," the moderator said. "Do we have another one? Yes, you, sir." She pointed to a bigger man sitting in the farthest row wearing a tweed hat. From where he was sitting in the room, Carol assumed it was the laughing man. Once he took off his hat, Carol could see herself in his eyes and mouth. Richard? He looked heavier than Richard, redder in the face, and too bearded. Then again it had been three years. One very long winter. The shop girl walked peacefully to the back row, as if the dozens and dozens people in the audience were not waiting on her. Then the microphone passed through the hands of numerous audience members before landing in the possession of Richard or the man Carol likened to her brother. Once the microphone was in his hands, he did not stand up, but Carol could hear his lips press against the metal mesh of the microphone. "First of all, I'm really looking forward to reading the book."

"Thank you," Carol said. Her heart thrummed.

"So, Cynthia lives in coastal Maine, like you."

"That's right," Carol said. "I always tell my students: don't be shy about borrowing material from your own life."

There was some murmuring in the row. The shop girl had mouthed something to the man that Carol could not hear. The man, seeming slightly disoriented, gave her a curt nod and stood up. "I'm supposed to stand," he said into the mic, causing a wave of piercing feedback to travel over the room. Once he rose from his seat, Carol could tell that he was rolling a toothpick between his teeth and was still wearing his coat. "And the main character is also is a writer?"

"Unfortunately for her," Carol said. Laughter again, attendees using the rupture as another opportunity to adjust in their seats.

"And she's alone. And she says here on page six that the idea of family is *antiquated and inherited*."

Carol laughed a little. "Yes, she does say that." The coincidence struck Carol as remarkable: that a man who looked so much like her brother would mention this.

"So, why do you think this way?" There was a strained, gravely sound to his voice. "What happened to you?" Then he passed the microphone back to the small shop girl, who looked sort of stunned. The cafe clerk in the back of the room mumbled a price to a student pointing to a scone.

"Oh," Carol leaned forward in her stool. "Let me be clear. This is a work of fiction. My characters' opinions do not reflect my own."

"But I think they do—" He shouted without the microphone.

"Richard?" Carol squinted and leaned forward in her chair. "Is that you?" Carol's face flooded with heat. She was mortified by the idea that she might not recognize her own brother, and worse, that this entire audience would be there to witness this failure.

Heads swiveled to the back of the room where the man was seated. Some murmuring over shoulders. "Oh!" the moderator said. "How wonderful. Do you two know each other? What's your name?"

The man stood up and removed his hat. "Name's Mike." He tugged on the bottom of his coat. "Does it matter?"

Carol folded her hands. "I'm sorry, but no. Cynthia isn't me. She's invented. Like everything else in these pages."

"Wonderful," the moderator said. "Thank you for your observations, Mike. We have time for one more."

The moderator wrapped up the Q & A by thanking Carol and directing attendees to the section of the store where her books were available for purchase. When Carol stepped down from the elevated platform and walked to the signing table. Scanning the faces of the crowd, she saw the back of the man's head—his tweed hat—pass through the atrium, exit the store, and disappear onto a peopled sidewalk.

For the rest of the evening, Carol continued to see Richards. In her taxi back to the hotel, a man with his jawline driving the next car over—a green Volkswagen beetle—was stopped with them at the red light. In the Marriott lobby, the concierge Carol had asked for an extra toothbrush was about to finish his shift. His small, gold name tag engraved with the name *Richie*. He was shuffling through the drawers now trying to find one.

"Sorry," he said, hands moving through an unseeable place behind the chest-high counter. "It should be in here somewhere."

"Forget it," Carol said. "It's fine."

"I can call someone who might know."

"That won't be necessary."

"We have floss if you—"

Carol was already walking to the elevator. She could feel the hurt in his eyes without even looking, how he watched as she waited for the descending moons.

It had become a ritual these past ten days: sliding the keycard into the door handle, waiting for the little rectangle to turn green, walking inside her hotel room and grabbing a nip of Jack Daniels from the minibar. Carol showered and rubbed the brittle pebble of soap over her bare, untoned arms. She set an alarm for the morning—the

drive north would be two and a half hours. She planned to meet up with a writer friend in Chicago whose novel had just been translated into three different languages. There would be time for a quick lunch.

The light of the TV kept her company, though she preferred it mute. Blues and reds flashing soundlessly across the dark bed. Now what? She wondered about Chicago, her next reading. The possibility of more Richards. The thought of reading the same passage again made her shudder. Perhaps she would choose a different section, but when she tried to think of which, she couldn't even remember if her book was written in sections, or what her book was called or what it was about.

3.

That winter in Chicago, the sky got dark at three. Shadows tilted and arced across the bookstore floor, over the boots of feather-hooded customers who had come inside to escape the wind. All of them radiating a cold, moving up and down the aisles with buckled limbs and stunned expressions.

The morning the shipment arrived, Clee didn't consider what could be inside—as usual, she signed for it and stacked other boxes and books on top for the store managers to deal with. The register was a good gig. Clee got to see what everyone was buying, to sit back and sip at her hot, diner coffee, flipping back and forth between open computer tabs of The New Yorker and The Chicago Tribune. Occasionally, a customer walked by to purchase a book and Clee would help. A wordless commercial exchange passing between them. At the end of the day, when the last customer left, Clee locked the door and went to close out the cash register. Amy, her co-worker, had been on the floor all day, restocking and shelving. Now she was sorting the bookstore's mail—bills,

promotions, junk—while wearing those big over-the-ear headphones and mouthing the words to some song she knew by heart.

Like all the other employees at the store, Amy was in her early twenties and somehow occupied an entirely different universe than Clee. How could five years of age make such a difference? When she first started working there, Clee zeroed in on one of the guys, Whit, who looked the oldest and most substantial of the bunch. After all, he could facial hair and even more promising, he knew how to trim it. One day, when the two of them had passed each other in the stockroom, Clee heard his voice. How it wavered with the same naïve music of a teenager, and she did not stop to introduce herself.

"Ah!" Amy was standing over the package from that morning holding a box cutter. Flaps of the box sticking straight up. "The new Polaski book." She pulled out one of the blue and white hardcover books. On the jacket was the image of a few wild flowers frozen in the surface of a cracked pond.

"The Nature of *Things?*" Clee laughed. "Shitty title."

"It's not shitty," Amy said. "It's *abstract*. Low-concept."

"It's vague."

"Whatever."

"Now we get to be the ones to shelf them all."

"It'll take two seconds," Amy said.

"Don't do that," Clee said.

"What?"

"Don't say something is going to take two seconds when it's obviously going to take longer. It's juvenile and lazy."

Amy began to stack the books three at a time on the counter.

At some point in the past few years, Clee had begun to feel she had no time left. Perhaps it was due to her pace of life since moving to Chicago seven years ago, an urban agita taking hold. No time to spare. She had already wasted four of those years writing a novel that had revealed itself to be going nowhere. And now what? Clee resented her day job at the bookstore, which she supplemented by writing copy for diet yogurt cups, home delivery bed sheets, and antimicrobial underwear. She had moved to the city to become a writer. Now she was a writer only in the way she dressed—black turtlenecks up to her ears, witchy cloaks down to her heels, as if the more decisive her writerly persona the sharper and more urgent her words would become. All she had to show for it was a draft of a low-brow novel curled up in her recycling bin. An exorbitant amount of credit card debt. A small but nevertheless inconvenient drinking problem.

"Oh, wow," Amy said, snapping a book shut. "This is the signed batch."

Clee walked to the box and grabbed one. It was heavy and smooth, and she wondered how her book would feel—that shitty draft of hers—printed and bound. The title page was elegant and clean, and Clee ran her fingers over the messy lines of Carol's signature. Then she took the book with her back to her seat and slipped it into her tote bag.

"What are you doing?" Amy asked.

"I'm keeping one," Clee said.

"You mean stealing?"

Clee ignored this.

"You're going to hate it," Amy said, clearly annoyed at Clee's indiscretion. "Goodreads says it's for nature lovers. You don't even like going outside to get a cup of coffee and we live in fucking *Chicago*."

"I like free things." Clee said, narrowing her eyes.

Amy scoffed and carried an armful of books to the display window. "There," she mumbled to herself, laying them out in neat little stacks.

On the ride home, Clee slid the book out of her bag, smoothed the cover, and opened to the first page. *The Nature of Things,* by Carol Polaski. At first, she began to read it mainly to spite Amy—rich, blonde, happy Amy, who grew up in River West and whose writing had just received a prestigious award from some counsel in London. Who cared? Clee had read bits of her work before. The story she'd read was all whimsy—centered a union of construction workers whose job it was to pin up the night sky. One line had stuck in her head: "The rain tasted cerulean."

Clee's body swayed with the gestures of the subway, and within the first few pages of the Polaski book, something latched. A teenager in platform sneakers sat across the aisle texting, and a performer with a portable speaker system was box stepping and tossing his body into handstands in the center aisle as the train hurtled forward at full speed. Despite the spectacle, Clee fell into the novel. It gave her that buzz she'd only had in college during moments of marijuana-induced conversation with her roommate when she felt completely known and seen.

At home, she found herself carrying the book into the kitchen to make tea, clutching it on the toilet as she was pissing. The prose crackled, and the protagonist was tragically and beautifully ruthless in her practices, carving out the time for her writing no matter the cost. A hard-working misanthrope destined for solitude. Was this the cost of pursuing anything with rigor?

Both the author and the main character lived somewhere quiet, by the sea. In other words, the opposite of Chicago. Maybe there was an imaginative evolution to be

found in getting outside of the oppressive concrete structures of the urban world. Or maybe writing had nothing to do with the city at all, nothing to do with Logan Square. She came to realize mid-way through the novel that it was titled somewhat ironically as it was not so much about the natural world as it was about the nature of writers turning away from their human needs for no knowable reason. Once we knew what we lacked, why couldn't we just reach for it? Cynthia was functioning in her own damning, self-reflexive bubble. Like her, like Clee, some people just disappeared.

At midnight, buried in the darkness of her bedroom, Clee finished the novel. It ended with some graceful, unexpected paratext—an excerpt from the *character's* novel—that left Clee reeling with ideas. Then she closed the book and placed it down beside her with exasperation.

She spend the next hour scrolling through the apps on her phone. The empty message inbox. The droll Facebook feed. The Instagram stories of women she had known in high school drinking rosé and filming their clean white tennis shoes as they walked down the sidewalk. In one of them, her sister Fiona carried a pail of oats outside to the stables.

Fiona lived in Wyoming with her two horses, five chickens, three children, slobbering dog, and husband. She grew her on basil and chopped her own wood. Clee had learned all of this on Facebook. The two of them didn't talk much—just "liked" each other's posts from time to time. Something about her life both repelled and attracted Clee. She wasn't sure if it was because of the pastoral aesthetic or the madhouse of company—all those animals and people. Clee had made a different choice. She had locked herself away in the dungeon of the city to achieve a career she was not achieving. It seemed far too impossible to do both—to write while surrounding yourself with the mess of other people's existences.

Clee grabbed the book again, ran her fingers over the cover then flipped to back page to look at the author's photo. A glossy, black and white simulacrum. Half of the author's face was obscured. Her sleepy gray eyes, her smile, was almost loving, like she didn't know or didn't care about the terrible draft in Clee's recycling bin, all the foam cups of ramen on her windowsill, the bits of pot and tobacco sprinkled here and there next to her pipe, the black smear of makeup under her eyes. Around her room were miniature jars filled with rose colored goo—partial attempts at her own homemade remedies for wrinkles, seasonal affective disorder, and constipation, all concocted from the surplus beets that had been arriving weekly in her CSA. Carol's hair was piled on top of her head like a bird's nest and her chin rested on the back of her hand. The hand looked tired, maybe from months of writing. Clee knew how it was. Or she at least knew the pain of writing a bad novel. But she could sense, by looking at Carol's photo, that there was a profound difference between the two of them. Carol was in touch with language the way that farmers are in touch with the land—directly, physically. She probably wrote by hand. Fetched water from a wellspring, threw wood into an iron stove, walked around indoors and outdoors with equal discernment, calluses forming on the soles of her feet.

From bed, Clee could see outside, the heavy clouds that threatened the city with snow. Pedestrians stayed close to the buildings to keep warm, eyes glued to their feet, arms rooted into deep pockets small white dogs attached at the end of a leash and pausing to lift one leg and expel an arc of piss. The air inside Clee's apartment was still and warm and her winter boots lay on their sides by the door. Brown and white smudges dried against the wood flooring. Clee picked up her phone from the counter and noticed her fingers maneuvering through her phonebook, landing on Fiona's name, and for the first time in months, texting her sister.

hey fi

Her sister replied immediately: *is everything ok?*

Everything is fine. Just thought I'd say hey.

hey! It's almost 2 am

Clee thought about what to type next, but then Fiona sent another message:

you sure everything's ok?

Yeah Clee sent. She began to type a long paragraph apologizing for not being in touch. Then she paused and deleted the entire thing.

A bubble of Fiona's three typing dots sprouted on the screen, then disappeared. Then, a moment later: *I'm just about to hit the hay.*

Same Clee wrote.

Clee flipped through some other apps, an article she'd been saving for later.

Are u still in Chicago?

Yup, Clee wrote. *Chi town forever*. As soon Clee she sent it, she realized her sister was not acquainted with her sarcasm.

Glad you're liking it!! Let's talk more about this sometime

Sure. Clee's armpits slid with sweat.

It's a good idea.

Clee placed her phone face down on the nightstand and took a hit from her bowl. A new energy moved through her, and though it was the middle of the night she got up to make a cup of coffee. She showered, organized the kitchen, cleared her desk, scraped her life from the inside out. There was writing to be done, but first. She had to clear space. The Polaski novel fit in a perfect gap on her bookshelf. The smudges on the floor had started to bother her, so she got a sponge and some Lysol from under the sink. As she scrubbed the crud, she imagined herself on some shore, or near the mountains, or

Fiona's backyard. Feet in the grass, open sky. Somewhere she could finally feel alive, where she could be someone's sister and start writing a book of consequence.

That night, Clee flipped open *The Nature of Things,* to the final page, to the passage in paratext that she had marked:

> In her old age, it had come to Catherine's attention that all things of the mind were like water. As one thing came into view, it was swept downstream, followed by another: everything eventually taken on its way. It was how Catherine had come to understand her own longing. For years, she sought retreat: first in the countryside, then by the seashore, later in the hills. It was not until sometime (much later in life) that she understood this longing as directed, not toward the mountains and saltwater, but at the self in those spaces. She longed for that true freedom afforded by stepping into one's environment rather than scratching at its shell. Perhaps, more than anything, she longed for a peace of mind that came from renewal, from keeping within what basic precepts were enough, and from banishing all distress to ultimately deliver herself, not to any life, but to her own.

MOTHER

This is your youth: a time when you are free from the self-reflexive tendencies of womanhood. When your mind is soft, but you do not yet feel vague. That will come later. Before that, there are things to survive such as nighttime, such as falling asleep in your mother's bed which is far too large. You will lie in the space where a father used to lie. She is a patient woman who allows you to sleep by her side for the first thirteen years. Sage smoke lingers under the hood of an oversized lampshade. Someone, a bereavement counselor, recommends that people like her burn it in the house. The smoke contorts in the air like it is writhing in pain. The smoke, you think, looks like a person.

During these years, she takes every piece of advice she gets. She fills the house with plant life, drinks hot teas of the peppermint and kava variety, avoids songs in the minor key. She walks around the apartment at a zombie's pace, wielding a smoking torch and muttering some Catholic prayer. It is the only prayer she knows. You watch, cross-legged on the bed, biting your nails. "Don't do that sweetheart," she says. "Bad for your teeth." The sky has fallen and somehow she cares about teeth.

At night, wrapped in a pale yellow sheet, you will dream about depth—how it's expanding around Earth even when you can't see it, even now. You will dream about water, about getting lost in an expanding grocery store—giant robot squid chasing you down the frozen foods aisle. Mostly, these dreams are scenarios in which you are searching for some other good guy, Mom or Dad preferably, but you are able to make do with just about anybody. Even the most irritating. Foy Peal, for example, the seventh grader at your bus stop with halitosis who always plays the victim. Your mother hugs

you, and in that fuzzy space between dreaming and waking, you do not feel your body but know it is being held. Her hair smells like sleep and the fan that spins and wobbles overhead matches up to the rhythm of her breathing every eight counts, then falls behind. Her snore rattles softly in her throat, then grows in volume until it revs like a chainsaw. Every time you wake her she is frightened. Panicked. "OH," she says. "OH MY." It angers you how there is no peaceful way.

As a young woman, you will look back on that closeness with skepticism, wonder if it truly existed. This closeness is hard to fathom even though it was yours. Other equally far-fetched realities include the immortal jellyfish, eagles that mate while airborne, sea cucumbers that can eat through their feet. Such closeness will vanish from your life slowly, quietly, and without ceremony. You will not find it again until you are a mother yourself, when you can be, when you choose to be, when you are lucky enough that both are the case.

Middle school will tear through you painfully but quickly, like a stomach flu. One day in seventh grade a boy named Luke will press a cloudy, blue stone into your palm—one that resembles the cataracted cow eye that your science class dissected. "For you." This is the boy who stares at you during assembly, who is a bit too interested in NASA, whose father has a high-up job at HBO. That last part is irrelevant, except that status and wealth are always more important to you than you want them to be. He calls the stone lapis lazuli, and you recognize it, also having visited the gem rack at the Natural History Museum gift shop. "Why?" You hold your hand open. "Because I like you," he says. "And I forgive you." Confused you ask him what you have done wrong. "Nothing yet," he says. "It's for later, when you tell your friends about this and make fun of me." For the rest of the day, the stone hides in your pocket, warming as it presses against your thigh. You keep it a secret, determined to prove him wrong, and for some

reason, to remain in his favor. Like a sudden and unexpected earning that you refuse to give up.

However, you and your mother will not keep secrets—it is not part of your contract—so that night, wrapped in the dark of her room, you will tell her about Luke and the stone eye. "He called it forgiveness." She is silent for a long time and just as you wonder if she has fallen asleep, she inhales sharply and says that you should give it back. The room submerged in a prickly dark, her voice sounds scraped with some secret she has stowed. Your muscles grab, the covers suddenly too heavy. Why did you always have to tell her what you were thinking? As if she is some gatekeeper. Without realizing, you have begun believe that you need the stone more than you need her. "It's just a stupid rock," you say, and wonder if her tightening grip means that she too wishes someone would offer her forgiveness in the palm of their hand. There might be a million bad things she has done. So many reasons for penance. "Give it back," she says again. But you stop speaking, pretend to drift off, and then drift off.

A few days later, you will lose the stone. For one fiery moment, you blame her. Inside, your chest clings a sudden sadness before it releases like a long exhalation. In school, you are not able to look at Luke in the eye, the way he stares like he knows you lost it. Like he knows you told.

You will be sixteen the next time this happens—stumbling into someone's favor—a moment when your mother is trying all sorts of tactics to meet new people. She attends figure drawing classes, tango nights at the YMCA, even church. Alex Dobson, a boy in your class known by everyone simply as "Dobs" (you will never meet an Alex who actually goes by Alex), is a welcome distraction. He meets you online late at night. It is a ritual of yours: speaking to boys through your computer screen, sometimes until sunrise. They confide in you during the early morning when your eyes

are chalky from lack of sleep. It feels good, gorging yourself on the clandestine intimacy of these talks, the low-hanging fruit of vulnerability.

This time, don't tell your mother. The secrecy is easier to maintain. After all, she's going on dates with men you've never seen and who have names like Chaz and Phillipé and Klaus. Occasionally, your mother catches up on the phone with her friend Mary, a born and raised Long Islander who speaks so loudly into the phone that from across the room you can make out every word. "He could be right under your nose," Mary shrieks. "You never know where Mr. Right is hiding." Mary's version of Mr. Right sounds ominous, and you wonder what there is to hide.

Your mother comes home from tango night and collapses on the couch. She is too tired and sad to eat the sandwich you made her. A match, fury, lights inside your belly. Why does Mary give her so much encouragement? There is the possibility, after all, that she will never find anyone ever again. Did Mary, the idiot, not realize this? After all, Mary is not there every day watching cartoons until midnight, waiting for your mother to stagger through the front door and reject the plate of spaghetti, the plate of pancakes, the plate of chicken nuggets. Finding Mr. Right isn't supposed to be easy, but are you supposed to watch as she kills herself trying? "*Eat*." You say. "Eat and go to bed."

Alex Dobson keeps you company online while your mother snores in the next room. Twelve thirty. One o'clock. Two o'clock. Latin class: the time and place for catching up on sleep. The midterm will stump most and include a question requiring the test-taker to translate the phrase: *auribus teneo lupum*. You will not know the meaning at the time, "to hold a wolf by the ears." Instead, your mind will be stuffed with file cabinets of Alex Dobson facts: that he scored so low on the PSATs his parents put him on medicine, that if he had to choose between mountains and beach he would choose World of Warcraft, that if he could have dinner with one person dead or alive it

would be those guys who wrote the Matrix, that his little sister believes her dinner vegetables have thoughts and feelings like humans.

This will go on for some weeks, the never-ending song of high school. You pass each other occasionally in hallways but never say much. "Looking good today." An instant message sprouts from your computer screen as you sit folded like a pretzel on your couch finishing your math homework. You know your reason for not speaking to him in school—a fear of breaking some spell. But what is his reason?

Eventually, men will pop up in your home. Your mother never brings them over unless they are serious. Serious means no debt, no drugs, no divorce. She professes to trust men as long as they have kind eyes and hold doors, but the truth is that she only trusts widowers. If they are invited over to the house, it is for occasions as wholesome and heartbreaking as Tea or Dessert. It seems that having even the most meager romantic assembly requires Macy's-Thanksgiving-Day-Parade levels of coordination. She cooks lasagna and boils fresh mint. You meet these nice widowers in their chunky knit sweaters purchased at the Gap and genuinely like each of them. Her eyes light up when they touch her arm. Her laughter jumps when they make a corny joke. "Did you hear about the guy whose entire left side was cut off?" She shakes her head encouragingly. "*He's all right now!*" Your mother tosses her head back and cackles. Then she glances at you to measure your response. "Get it sweetheart? All *right?*" You get it. And eventually, these men do too: that being with your mother means being with a woman who will never love them as much as she loves her daughter. One by one, they see themselves out.

You will sneak out approximately six times to meet Dobs in front of the Zabar's on Broadway. The first few times, you kiss in front of a large wheel of cheese on the outside of a frosted window. He places a palm on your chest at the same time as an

ambulance rushes past you. Your heart races, though you won't know if it is because of the ambulance or the hand. A giant manchego supervises from nearby.

In school, you will feel sorry for the other girls—girls who shuffle from class to class with coats wrapped tightly around their waists like they're sliced down the middle and trying to hold themselves together. You, on the other hand, have a secret vitality that no one can touch. This occurs to you on World Peace Day, when your school's administration erects three peace poles all inscribed in various languages. Hundreds of students gather in the gymnasium for assembly and sing songs in French and Swahili. "Wow," you mutter. The music strikes you like a human hand. You are moving through the world openly, projecting beauty onto anything that will stand still. A stick. A table. A glossy gym floor. A song performed by the eighth grade class. It's because of your shared bond with Dobs, you assume—glittering and singular and true. You have found something true. It imbues you with a secret strength. One to wield throughout your days, in every bite of tomato sandwich, in every icy sip from the water fountain, in every dinner dish you scrub. "What are you doing?" Your mother shouts over the sound of your vacuuming. "Yeah!" You cheer. "Vacuuming!" She leaves you alone. With every push and pull of the machine, you check your hips to the side like a Ricky Martin backup dancer. A voice in your head repeats the affirmation: *It's* me *he wants. It's* me *he wants*. Knowledge of this sends electricity through your brain, your chest, providing unnatural measures of energy for additional tasks you would normally begrudge: calling your grandmother, completing an extra credit assignment, flossing.

Some Thursday night, Dobs will send you an instant message: "Saw you at dismissal. I don't like u wearing shirts like that." He is referring to your green, scoop-neck blouse. Your favorite, though that is irrelevant. "LMAO," you reply. "I'm not kidding," he types back. You ask him the glaring question, "Why do you care?" "b/c,"

he types. “Ur my girl.” The small blue font thrums in your eye sockets. Perhaps you were harsh about the shirt, and you apologize. It surprises you—how nice it feels to be treated like an extension of someone else. Like an ambassador from the far-off country of The Committed. “It’s okay.” His words appearing under yours. “You’re okay.”

You will wake that night with a sense of unease, the red dashed numbers of your radio clock striking poses into the early morning. For days, the green blouse hangs over the back of your computer chair like a problem you need to solve. You can’t bring yourself to throw it out or place it back in your dresser, but staring at it makes you feel hollowed. One evening, your mother comes in to say goodnight and picks up the shirt from the chairback. “Is this the blouse I got you from the First Avenue street fair?” You nod. “This shade of green is so beautiful on you.” Then she folds the shirt into quarters, slides it into your dresser, and says, “I love your beauty.” You cringe when she offers things like this. Nevertheless, you store them away—phrases to resurrect on your worst days.

Defiantly, you will wear the green blouse to school the next day. You figure it is only a matter of time before Dobs begins ignoring your IMs. You are not entirely surprised when he is spotted lingering in hallways, dripping all over Rosha Snyder, the heiress to some overseas franchise as well as a formerly well-regarded team in the NFL. The two of them are egregious and public with their displays of affection, sharing an umbrella in light rain, lap-sitting in the cafeteria, feeding each other cucumber coins. On your way to the bus stop, you pass them, their linked arms, and you lean harder into the wind, coat cinched too tightly at your waist.

At home, you will be so upset that your mother takes your temperature. You spill the whole story over dinner: Zabar’s, the scoop neck shirt, the cucumber coins.

"Waste of your time! You don't need people like that. Listen, you *don't* need people like that." She always knows when to play good cop, when to play bad.

Music will return to your life in the form of a six-part choir. Four men and two women configured in a half-circle, standing on the stage of an auditorium made from cinder and brick. Each member of the singing group looks stiff, hands peeking out at the cuff of those silly academic robes, but they sound like a small orchestra, all violins and cellos. It's convocation—you have enrolled at some middle-of-the-road University. This time, you can't blame the effect of the music on the coercive hypnotism of some crush. The next logistical step is to cram as many music department classes into your schedule as you can, and when the school orchestra recruits, you decide to learn the bass. The physicality of musicianship satisfies you in unexpected ways—the wide strings leaving calluses on your fingers, the low vibrations traveling through the wide wooden chamber and into the floor, the sole of your timekeeping foot. Like your mother, you always had a thing for rhythm.

Your college years are the best years of your life—that's a thing people say—but you can never shake the feeling that you're doing an impersonation of your own life, that you're just tapping at the surface of something never meant to crack. When you get mono your sophomore year and stand up too suddenly, you faint forward into your desk. A goose egg grows on your eyebrow in a matter of seconds. "I'm fine," you assure your mother on the phone. Of course, she cannot see you, wrapped in three sweatshirts and a winter coat, clutching a small trash can between your legs. You ice the bruise on your forehead with your roommate's frozen pot brownie. "I'm fine," you repeat. "You don't have to come." "But no one is there," her voice breaks. Is she crying? "No one is there and you just *fainted*."

Your mother boards the next available train. It runs express to and from New York City with tracks that hem the southern boundary of the university campus. It will carry you home on the holidays and shuttle high school students in droves during accepted students' weekend. You hit your stride junior year when a sorority that is supposed to be kind and body-positive asks if you want to join. "We need a critical mass," says the girl with serious teeth. You are not sure about this, but when it is said and done, you need people to study around, to drink sugary wine with, and that is all.

Soon after you declare a major, your mother will call with news from back home: she has found herself the right company. A man who pays his bills and dances merengue. You take the train home for Thanksgiving to meet him and as soon as you walk inside, the apartment already looks and smells different. Stranger shoes by the front door, neat on the welcome mat. "I've heard so much about you," he says, extending a hand that you shake. "Likewise." By the microwave there is a Keurig now. Your mother is stirring the beef stroganoff and making everyone individual servings of herbal tea. Husks of K-cups glut the trash can. Moments later, the man clogs the toilet, causing the bathroom to flood. "It's fine!" he shouts over the sound of forceful plunging. "Nothing to worry about!" When he finally comes out, the bottom six inches of his slacks are dark with wetness and he is nearly purple from embarrassment. Remember. Your mother will be a patient woman. She deals plates onto the table and lights candles. She sets an example of seeing and accepting people for all their virtues and imperfections. Over dinner, she mentions your shared interest in journalistic photography. This provides a kind of conversational worry stone. Something to turn over in your palm all the way through dessert.

After he leaves, you and your mother will sit together in semi-natural silence drinking turmeric green tea. Outside, night forces your eyes to generalize—the shapes

of buildings across the street flattening vaguely against an already flat sky. Fire escapes, barely visible in the spillage of kitchen light, delicate, as though cut from lace, wind down paint-chipped brick. Shapes of men and women pass through the small yellow windows. Shapes that pour their wine, wash their hands, stand curiously still for minutes at a time.

She will ask you what you think of the man. In her voice, you will hear the ache for approval, how cruel it would be to shrug your shoulders the way you want to. She sips at her tea with puckered lips, once red, now a paler rust after some hours of wear. This feeling is hatred: for the power she has given you, for the way she places you across from her future, an invisible happiness arranging itself on the table like a card castle, calmly asking if you'd like to blow it down. "He's great," you say, not dishonestly. "Really great." Your mother cracks a small smile like she's trying not to laugh. "I think so, too," she says. I'm fortunate to have found him." After all, he has what your mother calls *character* having survived great loss, having been devout to a woman in sickness. And the fact is, he is good. You know this soon enough. "I love you," she says, but you know what she really means: "I love him, though never as much as you." "I love you," you reply, but she will know what you really mean: "I love you, though never as much as you love me." Perhaps this is the way all mothers and daughters have loved since the beginning of time.

The wedding will be held in springtime in a narrow, bumpy hard, just large enough to fit twenty wooden folding chairs. A house, the bright, raw color of a peeled peach, crouching beside a manmade pond sealed over with a layer of neon green slime. Intimate, your mother calls it. No doubt. The town is provincial, secluded, and blooming in three colors during the warmer months. This is always how you imagined upstate. There are two gaping holes in the ground beneath your flats where the FOR

SALE sign has been temporarily uprooted. After the wedding, the house is going on the market. Something related to stocks and bonds and—there's not much money right now. "But who cares about all that?" Your mother says. It's April. "I'm so happy."

Just hours before the ceremony, you will notice a small rip in her dress that exposes her knee in the shape of a wilted South America. "Mom!" You are startled by the sound of your own voice. "What happened?" She looks down at the tear—"Oh!"—and begins to laugh. "I suppose it snagged on a barb. Good thing I shaved!" She makes a face. "Now hand me my bouquet."

By then, you will have acquired a college degree in addition to paralyzing levels of student loans. To top it off, your major—Anthropology of Music—is arguably the most impractical of options. Your twenties are spent arranging pop-up music tables in various public school classrooms, speaking in improvised melodies, teaching children about whole notes and quarter notes, about tapping the triangle, blowing into the recorder, raking the guiro that is shaped like a fish. Children are never quiet when you tell them to be. They carry on full conversations with fingers up their noses, roll the strikers of the wooden ridges, hum-scream into multi-colored kazoos. Classrooms blend together with their circular rugs and harsh fluorescent lights.

One girl stands out—a six-year-old named Olive—who has a particularly small bladder. She always has to pee. This is an ordeal since peeing makes her miss her mom, who apparently invented some elusive pee-time song that no one else knows. Olive sobs unless an adult agrees to watch her and make sure she doesn't fall into the toilet. "Olive," you say. "Why are you so afraid of the toilet?" She replies over the sound of her own tinkle: "Why are *you* so afraid of the toilet?" Sure, she's mocking you, but that fighting spirit will serve her later in life. It makes you love her. After flushing and washing her hands ("To the entire alphabet," you remind), she wipes them dry on the

front of her purple shirt and looks up at you. “How many oceans are there?” “Hmm,” you think hard about this. “Four? Five?... Four.” She nods and weasels past you.

At least children will know that respect is something earned, not given. You will like them more for it. Their curiosity about the world seems opposite to the men you’ve dated. Men who arrive at restaurants with a puzzling air of certainty, guessing at your dinner order, wrong every time. “The lemon glazed salmon? No—the oysters with pearl tapioca.” You never want the small, clean, feminine meals they hazard. “Pork loin,” you tell the waiter, “with an extra side of potatoes.” You enjoy what satisfactions you can control (such as food) after having been hungry for years, though not in your stomach. “I feel empty,” you report to a therapist who you do not continue to visit. “Empty-*depressed*?” The therapist guesses. “Empty-*angry*? Empty-*confused*?” She continues attaching the word “empty” to different emotions, all of which you feel more or less, but not with enough sting to claim. “Just empty,” you say, the leather couch squeaking as you adjust the bottom of your coat. It is January. The bluest month according to some journal. Rife in failed resolutions and regret—a natural kickback from the force of Christmas and New Year’s, December’s nostalgic purge. Clutching your scarf on the sidewalk and heading for the two train, you shuffle past Zabar’s, past those giant wheels of cheese. For a moment you feel like a teenager again, only this time bored by your sadness.

In addition to a job working with toddlers and pre-K, you will have a small but regular paycheck and health insurance that covers catastrophic injury. When you ask the insurance agent on the phone what qualifies as catastrophic, she replies, “If you’re hit by a bus, for example.” “If I’m hit by a bus?” “Or a car.” “What use is that? I take the subway.” “Cheer up,” she says. “This is New York City. It could happen at any moment.” Months later, you think back to this exchange after getting clipped by a taxi

on your way to Gristedes, falling backwards, and fracturing your wrist. This happens in May, just in time for your ten year college reunion. You saunter along the repaved paths of the university grounds with an arm brace and sucking down the IPA you acquired from Nebby—another member of your sorority who had volunteered to bartend the reunion despite the fact that she lived in substance-free housing way-back-when. "Making up on lost time?" You send your voice above the clatter—something about reunion and its lively spirit of second chances has turned you playful. "What?" She squints to hear better. "Oh—" she says, "the time? It's eleven twenty-eight!", and hands you some bottle.

This unremarkable school in this unremarkable town in central Connecticut will look entirely different—the buildings you slept in, cried in, fooled around in, all torn down. Glossy, sharp exteriors, bulletproof elevators and airtight windows are erected in their places. The grime and decrepitude of the old campus, quickly erased. The train, which you have almost forgotten, clatters nearby beyond the boundary of some dark trees. The 10:21. Your wristwatch confirms the time of the New York City direct line. It is the train your mother rode home after helping you move in, after holding a wet cloth to your forehead to cool the blaze of your mononucleosis, after coming to see each of your orchestra performances—the University stage so much bigger than the high school stage, though neither losing their luster.

As you sit on the concrete steps of the campus center, cold will seep through the threads of your jeans, numbing your thighs. In the distance, graduates huddle together under white tents, between the tiki torches spangling the dark, muddy fields. The tenor of their voices pop and fly above the offbeat thumping of different songs. Then, someone beckons you from a place you cannot see. Behind. A tall man with an unevenly charming face. It's like a chipped dinner-plate. Steven, he calls himself,

vaguely recognizable as he lowers himself onto the stone next to you. He holds a gold can that, by the way he rattles it, you can tell is nearly empty. Examining his sunless face, you estimate that he had been an artist or at least a smoker.

"I remember you," he says and takes a swing from his can. "What happened to your arm?" When you tell him about the taxi, he cringes as if he is watching a movie of events unfold before him. "It's okay," you assure him, demonstrating how you can open and close your fist. "I'm a lefty." "Funny," he says with a sharp laugh, a puff of air. "Me too."

A few hours later, the two lefties stagger into a dark, rented dorm room undressing. Silent, except for the clatter of shoes kicked into a corner, knocking against the thin plaster wall. Outside, the party continues appearing muted, a colorful light show tracking the belly of a canopy enclosure like a flashlight trapped under a palm. Above you, Steven acrobatically avoids your injured arm and takes great care to protect you from pain. For two years you have ignored your body. The idea of sex having occurred to you only on occasion (for example, when passing a stranger with pervy face piercings—a gauge in his lip or eyebrow, another stranger with remarkably symmetrical features, and another sitting next to you on the bus with his hands folded, clean fingernails) but never guiltlessly, as though sex were someone to whom you owed a phone call. A jittery thrill returns to your body, somewhat painfully, like blood to a sleeping limb. Steven gives your shoulder a soft bite and when you reach for his chin expecting a coarseness, it is smooth like a woman's, though not unpleasantly. He feels like a new house, all familiar rooms in a different order.

When all is said and done, you will lay on top of the covers in some half-light, overjoyed to have executed a task you feared to have forgotten. Who cares if it was "good" or "bad"? He will ask if you want to go downstairs. "For a cigarette." He pulls

out a pack of Marlboros when it hits you. "Political Science!" You shout at him the way enthusiasts shout at Jeopardy. "You were a Political Science major!" Reclining on the pillows triumphantly, you cross your arms over your bare stomach. You *knew* he wasn't an artist. Somehow, this makes everything okay. First, you dated a painter, then in your mid-twenties, a writer. Artists, you will come to believe, are impossible to keep at a safe distance. They are always trying to close some gap.

You will expect the whole affair to end that night, but the next day when you board the train to New York City, there he'll be—one hand stuffed into his pocket, the other thumbing some message into his phone. Who is he texting? A girlfriend? A wife? He mentioned a job in the city, but lost you after "on Wall Street" since you don't care—or don't want to care—about all that. In daylight, he is still the charming, clean-shaven, pale-faced financier. Happy to see you, insisting you share the trip back. You talk intermittently throughout the ride into New York—more and more, vertical concrete structures appear out the window until that's all there is. No sky. The two of you share interludes of silent mechanical rocking. You gaze through opposite windows. You exchange numbers. You give it time. You go on a few dates in which he buys you drinks the price of movie tickets; you learn each other's apartments, the names of each other's family members; you find each other easy to be around except when angry—you have a tendency to get quiet, he has the tendency to slam doors; you resent how he regards the smallness of your life including your job, your closeness with your mother, asks if you're going to "live like this forever"; he resents how you scowl each time he climbs the stairs to the roof to smoke. ("Can't you just quit?" "It relaxes me." "It's bad for you." "So is caffeine. Would you give up coffee if I gave up cigarettes?" "That's different." "How is it different?" "Don't be an idiot.") Time passes fast and slow; an underwater dash. Businesses in your neighborhood shut down and are replaced by co-

working spaces and Juice Generations. In springtime, teenagers roam the avenues in cut-offs. In a way, you also feel seventeen but when you stop to do the math you realize that you were almost done with high school by the time these seventeen-year-olds were born. To them, you must look fully-cooked. Maternal, even, if they could see the inside of your purse, which contains a small bottle of mouthwash, a checkbook, a bag of cashews, the provisions of life there *just in case*.

Steven finds a big-enough one-bedroom near the subway—no broker's fee, a bay window—and the two of you move in together. You always thought that living with someone was a kind of pre-engagement. After all, who would be masochistic enough to fuse the muscle and bone of two lives if they weren't absolutely certain? Your mother agrees. "Are you *certain*?" This makes you angry, the doubt in her voice. "As certain as a person can be," you reply. "Does he make you laugh?" This is the only thing she ever seems to care about, and now she won't drop it. "He's lighthearted enough." "That's not what I mean," she says. "Does he crack you up?" Sometimes, your mother can be a real pain in the ass. "It's happening, Mom. It's already decided."

Eventually, certainty has its way with you. Your arguments with Steven get worse until speaking is a thing you avoid altogether. When he informs you of his Christmas bonus, you look at him plainly. "That's money out of the pockets of good people," you say, and he turns his back on you and shuts the door. Overnight, he leaves his starched suit hanging over the tufted lounge chair. As he snores, you stare at the flat, dark, outline of the blazer—a man's second skin. Something a snake sheds. Headlights shine through the cracks in the curtain and your eyes follow the tiny circular lights moving slowly across the wall. Your bedroom, a depressed disco. You don't want to care about the snake skin, but you do. You can't help it.

The four year mark will creep up on you both. How fast time moves after the age of thirty-five. You are still teaching children with attention deficit disorder how to stroke the guiro, calling your mother every Sunday asking her to send you photos of her new painting (she's experimenting with perspective in that one, light in the other), and finding yourself tangled in the bed sheets of a bartender named Ryan because you had to find a way out—you just had to—and couldn't up and end things like an adult.

After the messy, desperate fracture, Steven will move into a studio somewhere in lower Manhattan (finally, closer to work), and you will discover surprising comfort in the routines of solitary worship. A church in your neighborhood flies a rainbow flag and hosts wine tastings. You attend the less popular Tuesday night services. There, you can find a pew alone where no one hears you botching the prayers. Sundays are for the real believers. Young, devout couples clutch each other's elbows, so happy and plain. Why couldn't your mother raise you with a healthy fear of God? When you press your palms together, it's hard to shake that feeling that you're fake. You are trying to remember how to pray, but the problem is that you never knew. These are the things you do know: that people call each other names, say things they don't mean. They have opportunities to leave dignified, whole, and ultimately turn them down. You won't tell your mother the whole story.

One week later, you will discover that she is also keeping a secret. She has known about her illness for a year—one *entire year*—shocking, since she has presumably never kept secrets in the past. By the time she can no longer hide it (medicine causing nausea, confusion, irritability on the phone), your stepfather will softly mention that the two of you ought to comb through her will and testament, help her get things in order so that "everything is right."

You consider what is needed to ensure everything is right.

The first time you visit her after finding this out, she asks how you take your tea.

She knows: milk, no sugar.

Why is she pretending not to know? *Mom*, you think. *Why are you pretending not to know? Is it your t——?* That word no one will speak? You wake up every morning for weeks, pressing the pads of your fingers into the puffy bags under your eyes, feeling for the cushion of age and lack of sleep. People have been telling you all your life that you look like your mother. Only now, in your distress and her sickness, do you agree.

In your exhaustion, kindergarteners simplify into shapes, moving rapidly around the room, washing their hands for ten minutes at a time or no minutes at a time, shouting out the names of their boogers while a rumba plays from the Bluetooth speaker. *One… two and… three… four and..* You do not care. You feel sorry for how things ended with Steven. And for your mother, who last week confused her bread for butter and tried spreading it over her chicken. Using her knife, she rubbed the dry, spongy sourdough over the white meat, frustrated that it wouldn't melt. "That's bread, Mom." A flash of embarrassment across her face, then laughter. "How funny am I!" She exclaimed, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

You wish you were a child again climbing into her bed, holding her tightly the way girls hold their mothers before womanhood and desire. Back then, when the bed was a place for mothers and daughters. You can still see her pacing the room with the burning torch—sage smoke bending over you, over your grief. Her voice recites the words: *Our Father, who art in heaven.* The radiator sizzles, spits, and chokes on itself. *Hallowed be thy name.* You remember grief. You remember it sharply, though it is only partially visible now, like the sliver of moon between dusty blinds. *Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth, as it is in heaven.* You remember those bed pillows used for dreaming, for hitting—pillowcases wet with strings of your saliva. Pale yellow sheets

wrapped too-tightly around the two of you. *Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses*. Where had those sheets gone?

Or maybe you don't want to be a child again, you simply want your mother to be known by another child.

It is one way to capture her in time—for your daughter to be a witness to your mother's immensity. You want to bring someone else to the ledge of the Grand Canyon. You want to say, "Do you see how big this is? Don't ever forget how big."

You will leave Steven voicemails for a month saying you're sorry, that you need a re-do, but he does not pick up. "I wasn't right in the head," you reach. "I needed time. My mother is sick. I miss you." You can hear yourself flailing in the blank silence of his answering machine, but you cannot stop. "Please." It occurs to you that this is begging.

You stand naked in the bathroom, staring at yourself in the medicine cabinet mirror. A cracked mug rests in the soap divot. The dishwasher has been broken for a week; no calls made to the landlord. You cup your breasts and lift them a few inches higher, but the truth is they never looked like that, you are making yourself sad for nothing.

Three sharp knocks at the front door. Hopefully not the downstairs neighbor back to complain about the ceiling leak. You slip on a shirt and walk to the front door. Outside on the doormat is a bundled basket of cheese and charcuterie swaddled in a cloth like an infant child. *From Steven*, the card says. *Hoping for your mother's recovery*. Perhaps this is when the idea comes to you, though you cannot be certain. Now more than ever, in your mother's illness, you need to push your life forward. Big decisions are best when left to cook, so you wait a year. After a year, no longer.

At forty, you will get yourself pregnant with sperm from a bank. By then, your stepfather has begun coordinating your visits to your mother in their uptown

apartment. She will react to your globe shaped belly each time like it's the first time she's seen you all swollen like that. Her eyes close, palm rests over your taut skin as if you were a crystal ball. "Your mother is a fighter," the doctor says. And it's true: she can still get around the city on her own without an escort, ride the subway, refill her MetroCard. The same doctor assures you and your stepfather that for the time being, it's safe to leave her alone in the apartment. "She's truly impressed us all here at the hospital. We've never seen anyone make such a comeback." The doctor is smart and lovely and you want him to hold you. "Especially after a grand mal seizure like the one she had last month." You imagine the doctor doing all kinds of kinky things to you. Flipping you over, fucking you so hard that your body breaks and crumbles into a thousand pieces that scatter all across the hospital floor and melt into some tidal wave capable of wiping out the entire neuro-oncology wing. Pervert. What's your problem? He's a nice man—a professional—and your mother is dying. Every day, she forgets a new word like there's a dictionary in her head from which she has to offer some lexical sacrifice. In return, another few months of life. On Tuesday she loses *conundrum*. On Wednesday, *specifics*. Thursday, the entire nation of Argentina.

The baby girl will not look like you—her dark brown eyes and cheesy grin—but then again, in a certain light, with her mouth agape and drooly cheeks, you see the resemblance. That stupid, hungry, bring-on-the-breast milk attitude. You hope that she is different—that she finds people in this world she trusts and loves who are not her mother. Surprisingly, you do not feel guilty for bringing her into the world (warming, warring, wasting) as it is. You feel redeemed when you look at her, the closing of some loop. And for the first two years of your daughter's life, your mother is healthy enough to love her, to watch her in the playground, to sneak her Little Debbies before dinner though she never did this for you. There forms a particular wordless intimacy between

them. They laugh for all the things they cannot say. Your mother looks at your daughter, smiles, and it's like she has arrived. A bright cabin light turning on behind her eyes—a traveler returning to the safety of her face.

Often, the three of you visit the park together. There, your daughter hands your mother strange, found objects, which they hold to the sun to examine—a glittery stone from the sand pit, a dry, transparent leaf, a detached butterfly wing. The granddaughter straddles the grandmother's knee. The granddaughter's small hands open like flowers, pinching her grandmother's skin, tissue paper thin, blue veins extending across the forearms like a subway map. "Wrinkle," the granddaughter says. "Stone." "Leaf." "Wing." Testing out the words. She does not yet know if the words are good or bad; they're simply what she sees.

One day in July when the three of you are at the park, you and your mother have the moment you need. Your two-year-old is digging her fists into the sandbox, and, in all honesty, you're off somewhere else, pondering bologna—How is it made?—when a hand reaches for yours and squeezes. You look down and see your mother's veiny fingers covering yours, that gold bracelet she has worn since the dawn of time, still shining and polished. You don't look at her face but you can imagine what it's doing: mouth tightened into a restrained smile. It's that look she gets when her cloud of confusion breaks. When she understands exactly what's going on, and you squeeze back.

Your mother will die on a Friday with her shoes on and a kettle warming over the stove. Your stepfather is visiting his friend Bernie who lives across town. The next-door neighbors are the ones to hear the kettle squeal and they wait eight minutes before calling the police.

Why do people own things? More importantly, why are you getting so upset? A coat is not your mother. A book on Victorian architecture is not your mother. A huddle of boxes nagging you from the corner, waiting to be dealt with, is not your mother. You will get to these things eventually. Any day now. You're waiting to feel less like a walking nerve ending. For weeks, a phrase keeps falling out of your mouth—to doormen, taxi drivers, cashiers. They ask, *Which floor? How's the FDR? Paper or plastic?* You tell them that she was alone. They hesitate. *What was that?—plastic?* Three weeks pass, then three months. A jewelry box, two cases of china, a few crates of clothing including your father's college diploma, report cards, photographs. You see it. You see it.

An old friend calls, offers to visit and help get things in order, but you tell her the apartment is in no condition for guests. Some lazy Sunday when you cannot procrastinate any further, you finally open the case of china, unpack the bowls and plates, stack them inside the cabinet. You pry apart the box of clothing, choose what to donate, what to keep and hang, what to keep and store. You stretch out on the living room carpet, stomach down, tumbling through invented narratives that unfurl from your father's polaroids. You spend minutes at a time with each one. Your daughter crawls over your back and hugs your neck. "That's Grandpa," you say and loosen her chokehold. "Wasn't he handsome?" She blinks and jams a thumb into her mouth. You pin two photos to the corkboard nestled between the spice rack and the refrigerator then lift the lid of the jewelry box to find a familiar looking stone, blue and cloudy white. Holding it in your palm you remember Luke, the boy who gave it to you twenty-nine years ago, the kindness he offered at such a young age, and how your mother wanted you to be free of it. Forgiveness—this gift that breathes down your neck, spots

you across the room, keeps score. You don't know why, but even then you wanted it. A thing so beautiful that cannot change.

At night, you tuck your daughter in, kiss her forehead, squeeze her against you. Her breath is warm and small like a baby animal's. But she is already a person. Even more of a person than she was yesterday when she asked to be in charge of the mail and to carry it herself all the way up six flights of stairs. She does not wish to sleep in your bed because of the nightlight on her bedside table—she *adores* it—a paper lantern with dolphins and starfish cut into the sides, rotating in quiet circles. "You don't have to be afraid," you say, but she isn't, and sleep takes her instantly. It's amazing, actually, and for once you think your wish will come true—she will be different—so much is different this time. But what do we ever really know? In the years to come, she might lose her patience and turn to God, develop a habit, or hit a dog with her car, or go blind by the age of thirty-eight, but there's no knowing. There's no knowing for mothers. As you stand to leave, the bed squeaks. Your daughter flinches, places a hand on the warm spot you left behind, a sigh escaping her mouth, moving upward like a question.